

# The problem of American habitus

From Stephen Mennell

How is it possible to write about ‘American’ habitus in general, when the United States is socially, geographically, ethically and politically so diverse? “The USA”, it has been observed, “is not a country, it is a continent”. The social forces and social processes shaping the habitus of Americans are multifarious. There has not, for example, ever been a single elite in the USA as a whole that has succeeded in monopolising the social “model-setting” function to the extent that was common in the history of many Western European countries. Even so, I have attempted in my book *The American Civilizing Process*<sup>1</sup> to generalise with great caution about some major historic influences. My model for the book as a whole was Norbert Elias’s classic *The Civilising Process*<sup>2</sup>, but for the delicate task of delineating the major elements of American habitus, Elias’s *The Germans*<sup>3</sup> has been an equal inspiration: in it, he conceptualises the development of German habitus in terms of subtle balances rather than crude dichotomies and contrasts. For the development of American habitus, I nevertheless advance a bold central proposition, on which I shall subsequently elaborate. My thesis is that *the central historic experience shaping the social habitus of Americans is that of their country constantly becoming more powerful relative to its neighbours*. This has had long-term and all-pervasive effects on the way Americans see themselves, on how they perceive the rest of the world, and how others see them.

## Habitus and power relations

The process of Americans becoming ever more powerful in relation to their neighbours began almost immediately after the first European settlements in North America in the early sixteenth century. At first glance, that may seem to be at odds with the popular perception of the social character of Americans, whose manners are generally seen to reflect the egalitarian character of American society. But a distinction needs to be made between the development of internal power relations and external power relations with the peoples of neighbouring societies. The connection

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1 Stephen Mennell: *The American Civilizing Process*. Cambridge: Polity 2007.

2 Norbert Elias: *The Civilizing Process*. Translated from the German by Edmund Jephcott with some notes and corrections by the author. Revised edition. Edited by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell. Oxford: Blackwell 2000. (= *On the Process of Civilisation*. Collected Works. 3.)

3 Norbert Elias: *The Germans*. Power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Edited by Michael Schröter. Translated from the German and with a preface by Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell. Cambridge: Polity 1996. (= *Studies on the Germans*. Collected Works. 11.)

between the two is not initially apparent, but becomes clearer in the later phases of the development of American habitus.

In the earliest days of English settlement in North America, society was indeed relatively flat. The settlers included very few members of the upper class of the parent society in England – no aristocrats or members of the gentry to speak of. The early elite consisted of university-educated clerics and lawyers, along with merchants – people who would have perhaps been considered prosperous middle-class at home. But equally, few members of the very poorest strata made the journey across the Atlantic. In spite of that, the settlers did bring with them the acute status-consciousness of English society, and in the course of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a fairly considerable colonial gentry emerged, consciously modelling itself on the English gentry. After Independence, this gentry was largely eclipsed – except in the slave-owning South, of course. The agrarian republic that Alexis de Tocqueville visited in the early 1830s represented American society in its most egalitarian phase, the age of Jacksonian Democracy. Tocqueville pictured at length the relatively easy and informal manners to be seen in the relations between men and women, masters and servants, even officers and other ranks in the army. In a telling comparison with Britain, he wrote:

“In America, where the privileges of birth never existed and where riches confer no peculiar rights on their possessors, men unacquainted with each other are very ready to frequent the same places, and find neither peril nor advantage in the free interchange of their thoughts. [...] their manner is therefore natural, frank and open.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, English people encountering each other by chance were typically reserved, from fear that a casual acquaintance – struck up when travelling abroad for instance – would prove an embarrassment when they returned to the rigidly demarcated social boundaries at home.

Yet the later nineteenth century, the Gilded Age of rapid industrial growth and the formation of vast fortunes, was in America too a period of intense social competition, as waves of *nouveaux riches* battered down the gates of the old social elites. This is well depicted in the novels of Edith Wharton. Status distinctions became more marked, manners books sold in large numbers to people who wanted to emulate not just the ways of the old upper classes America, but also the manners of the European upper classes<sup>5</sup>. There were even attempts to introduce the practice of chaperoning, though not with much success – egalitarian traditions still retained some force.

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4 Alexis de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*. With introduction by John Stuart Mill. Translated from the France by Henry Reeve. [1835–40]: 2 vols. New York: Schocken 1961, i, pp. 202–230.

5 Arthur M[eier] Schlesinger: *Learning How to Behave. A Historical Study of American Etiquette Books*. 2<sup>nd</sup> printing. New York: Macmillan 1947.



This period may seem an aberration. With some fluctuations, the twentieth century saw the trend reversed, and ‘informalisation’ became dominant<sup>6</sup>. It is not just a matter of easy ‘have a nice day’ manners; it also extends to relations between the sexes<sup>7</sup>.

It is important to stress that, although the connection is no doubt indirect and complicated, this trend of informalisation ran broadly parallel to trends in the distribution of income and wealth in American society which, from 1913 until the last decades of the twentieth century and with some fluctuations, became relatively flatter compared with the Gilded Age. Today, however, we are living in a new Gilded Age, when in America (and to a lesser extent in Britain) the income and wealth of the top one per cent in particular has increased astronomically, while the poor are becoming poorer and the standard of living even of what the Americans call ‘the middle class’ (which includes skilled manual workers in steady employment) is static or falling.<sup>8</sup> Nor are rates of social mobility as great as is commonly believed: a recent study shows them to be lower in the USA (and in the UK) than in Canada, Germany and the four Scandinavian countries<sup>9</sup>. I have spoken of the disparity between perception and reality as “the curse of the American Dream”<sup>10</sup>.

I cannot point to any evidence that the factually gross inequality of American society is yet reflected in a distancing in everyday manners. In the long term, manners tend to reflect the power ratios between people, and more egalitarian manners are generally taken as an index of a widening circle of “mutual identification”<sup>11</sup>. But the late Leona Helmsley’s notorious comment, that ‘paying taxes is for little people’, is only one bit of the abundant evidence of a callous disregard by the American rich for the welfare of the poor and middling sort of people. What prevails may not be

- 6 Cas Wouters: *Informalization. Manners and Emotions since 1890*. London, Los Angeles: Sage 2007. (= Theory, culture & society.)
- 7 Cas Wouters: *Sex and Manners. Female Emancipation in the West, 1890–2000*. London, Los Angeles: Sage 2004. (= Theory, culture & society.)
- 8 The work of the French economist Thomas Piketty and his collaborators – see, for example, Anthony B[arnes] Atkinson; Thomas Piketty: *Top Incomes over the Twentieth Century. A Contrast between English-speaking and European Countries*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press 2007, – has been especially valuable in shedding light on long-term trends in the distribution of income and wealth in Europe and the USA. See the fuller discussion in Mennell, *American Civilizing Process*, pp. 249–265.
- 9 Jo Blanden, Paul Gregg and Stephen Machin: *Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and North America. A Report supported by the Sutton Trust*. London: Centre for Economic Performance 2005.
- 10 Mennell, *American Civilizing Process*, pp. 249–265.
- 11 Abram de Swaan: *Widening Circles of Identification. Emotional Concerns in Sociogenetic Perspective*. In: *Theory, Culture and Society* 12 (1995), Nr. 2, pp. 25–39; Stephen Mennell: *The Formation of We-Images. A Process Theory*. In: *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Edited by Craig Calhoun. Oxford: Blackwell. 1994, pp. 175–197.

a widening circle of mutual identification among all strata of the American people, but rather a kind of “*upwards* identification”<sup>12</sup>: the American myth-dream of equality is actively promoted through the fostering of “patriotism” – meaning American nationalism – among the middling and lower strata, but uncaring attitudes prevail among many of the powerful towards the large numbers of disadvantaged people. Their lot is still seen by many Americans as being ‘their own fault’ – those in need are widely viewed, in an attitude that we used to consider characteristic of the nineteenth century, as “the undeserving poor”.

Egalitarian manners in the contemporary USA are perhaps becoming an instance of what Marxists call “false consciousness”. An alternative interpretation may, however, be derived from Cas Wouters’s explanation of the apparent egalitarianism of manners *within* the British upper class at the end of the nineteenth century. The British elite tended to look askance at the apparent boastfulness and overt status striving of their American counterparts. Wouters argues that the boundaries of the British elite, especially those of London “Society”, were so clearly defined and universally recognised that those who belonged to it had no need to assert either their standing among fellow members or their superiority over those who did not. Such clear boundaries were absent in America: the USA differs historically from many countries in Western Europe in that it never had a single national model-setting class that succeeded in monopolising the moulding of manners and habitus. Today, however, the irony is that Americans today form a clearly defined elite for the world as a whole, and that their strong we-feelings as members of that elite diminishes the need for overt expressions of “superiorism” *within* the USA. If that is indeed one consequence of a common American “patriotism”, it is not without precedent. At the height of British world power, Benjamin Disraeli looked to the working class for the preservation of the British empire:

“the people of England, and especially the working classes of England, are proud of belonging to a great country, and wish to maintain its greatness – that they are proud of belonging to an Imperial country, and are resolved to maintain, if they can, the empire”.<sup>13</sup>

### **A Smouldering Ember: the Legacy of the South**

America never had a nobility, but it had in effect several competing aristocracies. Among these, Massachusetts, with a passing footnote to Quaker Philadelphia, still looms too large in Europeans’ perception of what shaped American social character. In New England, certainly, there took shape something like the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, an elite of educated professionals and merchants. To them, and to the pressures of commercial and professional life, can be attributed to a certain extent

12 My thanks are due to Johan Goudsblom for suggesting that term.

13 Benjamin Disraeli: Speech to the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations at the Crystal Palace, 24 June 1872.



the egalitarian strain in American habitus, not showing open disdain towards their fellow citizens, even if they were inwardly confident of their superior education, understanding and feeling. Visiting the USA in the 1830s, not long after Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau<sup>14</sup> commented upon the great cautiousness that was entrenched early and deeply in Northern people; she described as ‘fear of opinion’ something very similar to what Elias<sup>15</sup> termed the habitual ‘checking of behaviour’ in anticipation of what others would think. She thought she could distinguish Northern from Southern members of Congress simply by the way they walked:

“It is in Washington that varieties of manners are conspicuous. There the Southerners appear at most advantage, and the New Englanders to the least; the ease and frank courtesy of the gentry of the South (with an occasional touch of arrogance, however), contrasting with the cautious, somewhat *gauche*, and too deferential air of the members from the North. One fancies one can tell a New England member in the open air by his deprecatory walk. He seems to bear in mind perpetually that he cannot fight a duel, while other people can.”<sup>16</sup>

Which brings us to the other great rival aristocracy, that of the slave-owning South. From the Constitution’s coming into force until the Civil War, Southerners held the lion’s share of political power in the Union. The reference to duelling among them is highly significant. As Norbert Elias<sup>17</sup> argued, in nineteenth-century Germany the quality of *Satisfaktionsfähigkeit* – being judged worthy to give satisfaction in a duel – became a principal criterion for membership of the German upper class. And although the greatest plantation owners may have been more conscious of looking towards their counterparts in England or France, the more appropriate comparison is between them and the Prussian *Junkers*<sup>18</sup>. One similarity is that they both provided a large part of the officer corps of the national army. At home, they both ruled autocratically over a *Privatrechtsstaat* – they had the right to adjudicate and enforce their judgements on their own estates, with little or no interference by agencies of the government. State authorities did not intervene in relations between white masters and blacks, whether during slavery in the antebellum period or during the long decades of the Jim Crow laws and lynching between the end of Reconstruction (in 1876) and the interwar period. Nor did they intervene in what is now

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14 Harriet Martineau: *Society in America*. 3 vols. London: Saunders & Otley 1837, i, p. 10.

15 Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, p. 70.

16 Martineau, *Society in America*, p. 145.

17 Elias, *The Germans*, pp. 44–119.

18 Shearer Davis Bowman: *Masters and Lords. Mid-Nineteenth Century United States Planters and Prussian Junkers*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993.

called “black-on-black” violence. This absence has cast a long cultural shadow to the present day.<sup>19</sup>

But neither were white-on-white quarrels very much the business of state authorities. The social arrangements of the Old South were also associated with the prevalent code of “honour”, and questions of honour were commonly settled by the duel<sup>20</sup>. Many European travellers, from Harriet Martineau to the great geologist Sir Charles Lyell, were astonished by its prevalence: it was remarked that in New Orleans alone, someone died in a duel on average every day<sup>21</sup>. The code of ‘honour’, in its various forms in Europe and America, has been widely discussed. Roger Lane<sup>22</sup> contrasts the Southern “man of honour” with the New England “man of dignity”, who would very likely take a quarrel to court rather than fight a duel. The propensity to litigation through the legal apparatus of the state is a function not only – not mainly, indeed – of culturally conditioned individual dispositions, but also of the degree of internal pacification and the effectiveness of the state monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in a given territory. Yet the difference between the codes of “honour” and “dignity” is associated with different personal and emotional styles: the Southerner, like the *satisfaktionsfähige* gentleman of the *Kaiserreich*, displayed a “hard”, unemotional style; it has been suggested that a legacy of this can be seen in the hard, speak-your-weight-machine delivery of many American military spokesmen today.

Other competing elites deserve to be mentioned – the relatively autonomous social elites of many American cities in the past, the plutocracy that arose after the Civil War and today exercises overwhelming economic and political power. Perhaps we should also mention the significance of Hollywood and the heroes and heroines of popular culture. But I want simply to return to the point that in our perceptions of America past and present, the New England model plays too large a part, and its rival from the South far too little – something that is of great importance given the massive shift in the power ratio in favour of the South since about 1970.

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- 19 Lynching, mainly of African American men, declined after the 1920s, but did not die out until the 1960s; county by county in the South, there is a high correlation between the incidence of lynching in the past and that of homicide at the present day (Steven F. Messner, Robert D. Baller and Matthew P. Zevenbergen: *The Legacy of Lynching and Southern Homicide*. In: *American Sociological Review* 70 (2005), Nr. 4, pp. 633–655). It is significant that by far the greatest use of the death penalty occurs in those states and counties where vigilante activity and lynchings were most common in the past, and a very disproportionate fraction of those executed are African Americans.
- 20 Bertram Wyatt-Brown: *Southern Honor. Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1982. (= American history.)
- 21 *America through British Eyes*. Compiled and edited by Allan Nevins. New edition, revised and enlarged. New York: Oxford University Press 1948.
- 22 Roger Lane: *Murder in America. A History*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1977. (= *The history of crime and criminal justice series*.) pp. 85–86.



Nor is it a matter merely of rival social elites competing with each other for influence as if they were political parties competing for votes, with some people voting wholeheartedly for one party and other people for another party. More important, the conflict between different models seems often to take place *within* the habitus or personality make-up of individual Americans, with first one influence and then another seemingly incompatible model manifesting itself in their behaviour. That seems particularly evident in a gentleness and consideration towards people who are known personally, but a hard and unsympathetic attitude to those who are known only at a distance, more abstractly as it were, whether within the USA or beyond its borders.

And there remains one great irony about American manners and habitus. If the USA has not, to the same extent as many countries of Western Europe, witnessed the formation of a monopolistic model-setting upper class, it can also be said that today America and Americans serve as just such an upper class for the rest of the world, including Europe. It was not always so. As Allan Nevins pointed out, until around 1825 British visitors to the USA were mainly working and middle-class people, especially businessmen, who tended to speak with respect of the manners of the social equals they met. After 1825, however, more upper class and professional visitors arrived from Britain, and there is in general a more marked note of condescension in their reports about what they saw and the people they met. Subsequently, this trick of perspective was further complicated by the changing balance of power between Britain and America. By the inter-war years of the twentieth century:

“For the first time, the great majority of British visitors showed themselves distinctly respectful of the rich, powerful, and exceedingly complex nation beyond the seas. During the period we have described as one of Tory condescension [1825–45], the travellers have tended to look down on the Americans; during the later period we have described as one of analysis [1870–1922], they tended to look at the United States with level gaze; but now they frequently tended to look up at America!”<sup>23</sup>

Today, some Americans think of the widespread appeal of American popular culture, and the constant emulation of American styles – from clothes to food to speech – as a form of “soft power” wielded in the American interest. It may be as well to remember, though, that the *ancien régime* bourgeoisie desperately aped the courtiers – but that did not prevent them resenting the aristocracy. Nor did it prevent the French Revolution.

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23 America through British Eyes, pp. 403.

### The formation of the American state and empire

There is a tendency – especially among Americans – to think about the United States as if it were an emanation of the human spirit, as if its existence and its constitutional arrangements were a bloodless product of the Enlightenment, John Locke, the genius of the Founding Fathers, and the pure democratic spirit of ‘No taxation without representation!’

In fact, the formation of the territorial unit that we now know as the USA was a bloody business, not at all dissimilar to the formation of states in Western Europe. If we look back a thousand years, Western Europe was fragmented into numerous tiny territories, each ruled – that is, protected *and* exploited – by some local warlord. Out of the patchwork, over a period of many centuries there gradually emerged a smaller number of larger territories. It was a violent “elimination contest”<sup>24</sup>. It is a mistake to see the process as driven by “aggression”, as if the personality traits of individual warriors were the determining force. That would be to fall into the same trap of a one-sided cultural explanation as the “pure Enlightenment” account of the USA’s origins. In an age when the control of land was the principal basis of power, a peace-loving local magnate could not sit idly by while his neighbours slugged it out: the winner, who gained control over a larger territory, would then be able to gobble up the little peace-loving neighbour. War and “aggression” thus had a survival value. The process was Janus-faced: as larger territories became *internally* pacified, the wars *between* territories came to be fought on a steadily larger scale.

In fact Elias hit the nail on the head when he drew a humorous comparison between medieval Europe and westward expansion in nineteenth-century USA: “To some extent the same is true of the French kings and their representatives as was once said of the American pioneer: ‘He didn’t want all the land; he just wanted the land next to his’”<sup>25</sup>. One difference between the two continents is that the struggle for territory after the beginnings of European settlement was initially driven exogenously by conflicts between the great powers back in Europe, as much as by rivalries endogenous to North America. In the early stages, the process somewhat resembled the struggle for territory in nineteenth-century Africa. Most of the early wars there were branches of contemporaneous wars in Europe, whether the Anglo-Dutch wars, the War of the Spanish Succession, the Seven Years War or whatever. Through these contests, first the Swedish colonies and then the Dutch were eliminated, and later French and Spanish power was broken. The various Indian tribes were also involved in these struggles as allies of the European powers, and were simultaneously engaged in an elimination contest amongst themselves. Gradually, however, the struggles came to be shaped much more by endogenous forces, and especially by the logic of “wanting the land next to his”.

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24 Elias, *Civilizing Process*, pp. 263–278.

25 Ebenda, p. 312





This is not the place to retell the story of how American Independence came about, except to say that the taxation to which the settlers did not wish to contribute without representation arose from the costs of military control over a much larger territory after the effective elimination of the French from Canada and the trans-Appalachian region. But there is another side to the story besides this familiar one. The British had intended to reserve the Ohio Valley for their Iroquois allies, but settlers were already pressing westwards. As has been recognised at least since Theodore Roosevelt wrote *The Winning of the West* (1889–99), the War of Independence was also a war over the control of conquests. The colonials were also colonisers.

I shall not dwell upon what has been called the American Holocaust<sup>26</sup>, save to say that westward expansion at the expense of the Native Americans was driven by the pressure of land-hungry migrants pushing forward in advance of effective federal government control of the territory, in contrast with policies followed in the settlement of Canada and Siberia. The scenes with which we are familiar from the Western movies are a glamorised version of a process of conquest and internal pacification.

Americans sometimes point out that they *bought* much of their territory rather than conquering it by force of arms. That is certainly true of the Louisiana Purchase, which in 1803 doubled the federal territory. It arose, however, out of a particularly favourable conjunction in European power politics, when it suited Napoleon to be rid of extraneous responsibilities. It is also true that another huge acquisition of land took place when the United States paid Mexico for a vast swathe of territory. But that was only after it had impressed upon Mexico that this was an offer it could not refuse, by invading that unfortunate country and sacking its capital city. “Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States”, as President Porfirio Díaz later remarked. Ulysses Grant, who served as a young officer in the Mexican War, regarded the war as “one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory”<sup>27</sup>.

There is no point in moralising about this and many other episodes. My point is not to denounce ‘bad men’ for what happened; that would be to fall into the same trap of individualism that infected the Bush regime’s view of the world. My point is rather that American development was as a whole a relatively unplanned long-term social process. It is one instance of what Norbert Elias<sup>28</sup> encapsulated in his couplet

26 David E. Stannard: *American Holocaust. Columbus and the Conquest of the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press 1992.

27 Ulysses S. Grant: *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*. New York: Smithmark 1994, p. 37.

28 Norbert Elias: *The Society of Individuals*. Edited by Michael Schröter. Translated from German by Edmund Jephcott. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell 1991. (= *Collected Works*. 10.) p. 64.

From plans arising, yet unplanned	Aus Plänen wachsend, aber ungeplant,
By purpose moved, yet purposeless.	bewegt von Zwecken, aber ohne Zweck.

On the other hand, the balance between the “accidental” and the “intended” tilts towards the planned pole as one party gains a great power advantage within a power ratio<sup>29</sup>. The interplay between the two can be seen in the acquisition of the first United States Empire in 1898, which followed neatly on from the “closing of the frontier” declared in the 1891 census. It was not an accident that the completion of westward expansion led smoothly into the acquisition of overseas territories, including the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and, for a time, Cuba<sup>30</sup>. They marked America’s re-entry into world politics. The United States invaded the Philippines, with British support – the American fleet sailed from Hong Kong – because both powers feared that either Germany or Japan would do so if the USA did not. In a sense the wheel had turned full circle: the expansion of British North America had begun with wars that were overseas branches of European wars. But it was a really a spiral, not a circle, because now the wars were beyond the contiguous territory of the United States.

The Monroe Doctrine of American overlordship in the western hemisphere is a similar story. In 1819, the British proposed a joint declaration to oppose Spanish recolonisation of South America. In the event, John Quincy Adams, as Secretary of State, insisted on its being in America’s name alone. But there was no question of its applying to Britain’s subsequent seizure of the Falkland Islands – the USA did not then have the power to prevent it. By the early twentieth century its power had greatly increased, and the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine was used in justifying numerous American military interventions in Latin America throughout that century. By the early twenty-first, what I have called the “Dubya Addendum”<sup>31</sup>, propounded in the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States*, declared that the USA had the right to intervene against its opponents anywhere in the globe, and came very close to claiming for the American government a monopoly of the legitimate use of force throughout the world. In other words, in terms of Max Weber’s definition of a state, the present regime has come close to declaring the USA a world state. In some ways, indeed, the USA does now act as a world government<sup>32</sup>. It claims extra-territorial jurisdiction for its own laws in many fields, while itself refusing to be bound by the corpus of international law that most other countries accept.

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29 Norbert Elias: *What is Sociology?* Translated from German by Stephen Mennell and Grace Morrissey. With a foreword by Reinhard Bendix. London: Hutchinson 1978. (= *Collected Works*. 5.) pp. 71–103.

30 Warren Zimmermann: *First Great Triumph. How five great Americans made their country a world power.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2002.

31 Mennell, *American Civilizing Process*, pp. 211–212.

32 Michael Mandelbaum: *The Case for Goliath. How America acts as the World’s Government in the Twenty-First Century.* New York: PublicAffairs 2006.



Its military expenditure is now as large as that of all the other countries in the world combined. It has in effect garrisoned the planet, dividing the entire globe into US military commands. It now has military bases in two-thirds of the countries of the world, including much of the former Soviet Union.<sup>33</sup>

Yet there is another side to the coin. Historically, the USA always had what was in international terms a low “military participation ratio”<sup>34</sup> – in other words, it normally had a very small army in relation to its population<sup>35</sup>. After each war – in the War of 1812, the Mexican war, the Civil War, the war with Spain, the First World War – its military establishment fell back to very low peacetime levels. But, for the first time, that did not happen after the Second World War. By 1961, in his famous farewell address to the nation, President Eisenhower warned his fellow Americans against what he christened “the military-industrial complex”<sup>36</sup>. His warning was not heeded. In effect, America has, ever since the Second World War, fought a series of ‘splendid little wars’<sup>37</sup> that have had the latent function of keeping its economy going and feeding the congressional pork-barrel process.

### **Functional de-democratisation and diminishing foresight**

The mention of pork-barrel politics is a reminder of the continuing populist “pressure from below” within American society. One of the most complex and apparently self-contradictory trends within globalisation is that the pork-barrel process – defenders of which see it as a key component of democratic politics – is entirely compatible with very greatly increasing inequalities in the key power ratios both within the USA and between the USA and the rest of the world. “Pressure from below” works effectively when it is also aligned with the economic, political or other inter-

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33 In 2004, it had bases in 130 out of 194 countries; see Chalmers Johnson: *The Sorrows of Empire. Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*. London; New York: Verso 2004.

34 Stanislaw Andreski, *Military Organization and Society*. With a foreword by Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Routledge 1968. (= International library of sociology and social reconstruction.)

35 Menzell, *American Civilizing Process*, pp. 240–244.

36 Dwight D. Eisenhower: *Farewell Address to the Nation*, 17 January 1961. In: *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: United States General Printing Office 1961, pp. 1035–1040.

37 The phrase ‘splendid little war’ was used by John Hay (subsequently US Secretary of State) to describe the Spanish–American War of 1898. In a letter to his friend Theodore Roosevelt, he wrote: “It has been a splendid little war; begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit, favoured by the fortune which loves the brave. It is now to be concluded, I hope, with that firm good nature which is after all the distinguishing trait of our American character.” Quoted from Hugh Thomas: *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode 1971, p. 404.

ests of powerful players on a higher tier of the American political game.<sup>38</sup> Whether responsiveness to local interests within America is entirely appropriate when the US government claims to be acting in many respects as a *world* government is questionable: what about responsiveness to the interests of the rest of the world? Sooner or later, the rest of the world may begin to articulate a modern version of “No taxation without representation”.

More generally, I want to argue that increasingly unequal power ratios tend to promote shortsightedness in economic and political policy-making.

A key component of a civilising process, according to Elias, is the spreading social pressure on people habitually to exercise foresight. This arose out of what he referred to as “functional democratisation”, which he viewed as a dominant trend in increasingly complex and more closely integrated societies. His assumption seems to have been that, others things being equal, longer “chains of interdependence” would involve relatively more equal power ratios between each link in the chain. Corresponding to the integration of more and more people into an ever more widespread worldwide network of interdependence was “the necessity for an attunement of human conduct over wider areas and over longer chains of action than ever before”, with commensurate standards of self-constraint<sup>39</sup>. In order to play their part at their own node in a nexus of interdependences, individual people have acquired the social skills to anticipate all sorts of dangers, from breaches of social codes that cause embarrassment, through the dangers of economic risk, all the way to dangers to life and limb. The effective exercise of foresight involves trying to anticipate the unanticipated, foresee the unforeseen – to deal with the side effects or unintended consequences of intended actions.

Processes of functional democratisation were certainly a marked feature of the twentieth century, which witnessed an astonishing sequence of emancipation struggles: of workers, of colonial people, of ethnic groups, of women, of homosexuals, of students, and so on. But what if, while the ‘horizontal’ expansion of chains of interdependence is marked by functional democratisation, at the same time there is a growth of (so to speak) ‘vertical’ chains marked by *increasingly unequal* power ratios between the links? What if, in other words, there is also a trend towards functional *de*-democratisation, with greater concentrations of power in the higher reaches of American society, and in the higher reaches of the world hierarchy of states? Is it not likely that the result will be *diminishing foresight*?

Examples are not hard to find. America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 will doubtless go down in history as one of the most spectacular and counterproductive instances of lack of foresight. It is not merely that the American government invaded because it had the military means to do so – the external constraints were limited – but that

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38 See Elias’s ‘Game Models’ in: Elias, *What is Sociology?* pp. 71–103.

39 Elias, *Civilizing Process*, p. 379.



its policy making was infected by a high level of fantasy, and its military power advantage meant that there was inadequate pressure to test its assumptions in advance against reality, to make them more “reality congruent” in Elias’s phrase. Power, as Karl Deutsch<sup>40</sup> remarked, is “the ability to talk instead of listen [and] the ability to afford not to learn”.

### **Conclusion: America through the one-way mirror**

If I am right in arguing that the central experience running right through American history is that the power ratios between the Americans and their neighbours swinging steadily in America’s favour – even if the pendulum may for the first time be about to swing the other way – there are important consequences.

When some people have a large power advantage, the experience affects in quite specific ways how they perceive themselves and others. This can be seen at every level from the microcosm – the partners in a marriage, for instance – right up to the macrocosm of international relations. The principle can be derived from Hegel’s<sup>41</sup> discussion of the master-slave relationship, but its relevance struck me through the findings of a study of a Dutch refuge for battered women and of their violent partners. These were marital relationships with a very unequal power balance, and the authors<sup>42</sup> found that the women took much more notice of their men than the men did of the women, and that the women were much more attuned to their men’s wishes and needs than the men were to theirs. When the women were asked to give a character sketch of their partner, they could do so with considerable precision, nuance and insight, while the men could not describe their wife’s except in terms of clichés applicable to women in general. It appears to be a general characteristic of the unequal power ratios in established–outsiders relations that the outsiders “understand” the established better than the established do the outsiders. This appears to apply to the grandest-scale established–outsider relation of all, between the US superpower and the rest of the world. Billions of educated people outside the USA know an immense amount about America, its constitution, its politics, its manners and culture; all these are extremely visible to the rest of the world. But it is as if they were looking through a one-way mirror:<sup>43</sup> they cannot see the observers behind the

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40 Karl W[olfgang] Deutsch: *The Nerves of Government. Models of Political Communication and Control*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe 1963, p. 111.

41 Georg W[ilhelm] F[riedrich] Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated from the German by Arnold V. Miller. With analysis of the text and foreword by John N. Findlay. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977, p. 111.

42 Bram van Stolk and Cas Wouters: Power changes and self-respect: a comparison of two cases of established-outsiders relations. In: *Theory, Culture and Society* 4 (1987), Nr. 2–3, pp. 477–488.

43 For the analogy of a one-way mirror, I am indebted to Johan Goudsblom: *Stijlen en beschaving*. In: *De Gids* 152 (1989), pp. 720–722.

mirror, and when they look in that direction they see only their own reflection. A mass of survey evidence suggests that Americans do not see out at all clearly, and tend to think about the “outside world” if at all in stereotypical and indeed Manichean terms. (As always, there are of course large numbers of Americans of whom this is not true: we are speaking of general tendencies and differences in averages between Americans and, in particular, Europeans.) They tend to think and talk about themselves in terms of a national narrative based on the “minority of the best”. That is sometimes coupled with an account of the rest of the world derived from a “minority of the worst”: there is always “a horrendous foreign enemy at hand to blow us up in the night out of hatred of our Goodness and rosy plumpness”.<sup>44</sup> And perceptions matter: “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”, as George Herbert Mead famously remarked.

The financial crisis of 2008 *may* prove to be an historical turning point. It looks as though it may carry away not just ‘casino capitalism’ but the ideology of market fundamentalism too. Somewhat more definitely, it is likely to mark a stage in the decline of the USA as a world power *relative* to a number of other countries. Western banks have been rescued from the consequences of their unfettered greed by those of countries that adhered to more traditional banking practices, and by the sovereign wealth funds of countries such as China and the Gulf states. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, one of the great champions of globalisation, stated his expectation that the same would go for manufacturing corporations during the coming recession. And,

“once the smoke clears, I suspect we will find ourselves living in a world of globalisation on steroids – a world in which key global economies are more intimately tied together than ever before.

It will be a world in which America will not be able to scratch its ear, let alone roll over in bed, without thinking about the impact on other countries and economies. And it will be a world in which multilateral diplomacy and regulation will no longer be a choice. It will be a reality and a necessity. We are all partners now.”<sup>45</sup>

This prediction seems to presage a return to dominance of the trend towards functional democratisation, at least in relations between America and the wider world. Even if that proves to be the case, it is not without dangers. Because of people’s strong emotional identification with their country – Americans’ *we*-feelings appear to be especially strong – national decline may produce “complex symptoms of disturbance [...] which are scarcely less in strength and in capacity to cause suffering

44 Gore Vidal: *Imperial America. Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*. London: Clairview 2004, p. 6. The terms ‘minority of the worst’ and ‘minority of the best’ are taken from Elias’s classic discussion of the social functions of gossip. Norbert Elias and John L[loyd] Scotson: *The Established and the Outsiders*. Revised edition. Edited by Cas Wouters. Dublin: UCD Press 2008. (= *Collected Works*. 4.)

45 Thomas Friedman: *The Great Iceland Meltdown*. In: *New York Times*, October 19, 2008.



than the individual neuroses”<sup>46</sup>. This may have alarming consequences. Examples of ‘national hubris’ in the past have included Germans’ reactions to defeat in the First World War and the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in the Suez crisis of 1956, and as long ago as 1960 Elias spoke of the growing hubris of the great powers even then<sup>47</sup>. The military supremacy of the USA will no doubt endure for another generation, and its power position in the world has enabled it in certain respects to continue to live in the 1890s. But that makes it especially dangerous now that in many other ways its relative power is declining. Its behaviour since the humiliation of the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 is a good example of what Thomas Scheff<sup>48</sup> calls a ‘shame-rage spiral’. If decline brings with it further humiliations, triggering further twists of the shame-rage spiral, the USA will become a rogue state that the world has to manage. And a final thought: perhaps the cultural legacy of the South, the smouldering ember of the code of ‘honour’, will make that more likely.

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46 Elias, *The Germans*, p. 19.

47 Norbert Elias, *National peculiarities of British public*. In: *Essays II: On Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity*. Dublin: UCD Press 2009. (= *Collected Works*. 15.) pp. 230–255, 239–42, 249.

48 Thomas J. Scheff: *Bloody Revenge. Emotions, Nationalism and War*. Boulder: Westview 1994.

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