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Civilization as an aesthetic conception of society: Learning from Elias?

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Abstract

At a glance, the proposed paper aims to combine Norbert Elias' theory of civilization with his very own but less recognised symbol theory. His conception of the relationship between individual and society, integrated in his thoughts on civilization, seems to offer an excellent starting point for an understanding of the 21st century. Elias, like Georg Simmel, has taken a historical and philosophical perspective. But one has to ask if, after a barbaric and media-led 20th century, this perspective is still enough to understand the meaning of a contemporary age, or if there is more hidden in these sociologists' minds. By delving into a late symbol theory, those of Elias, and comparing it to an earlier theory, those of Simmel, the dichotomy of civilization and culture (specific to German tradition) may be of help in building an aesthetic conception of society. Therefore, the central questions of this paper are: Can such a conception of society (which firmly includes the individual/subject) be helpful in explaining a contemporary age, and what is Elias' contribution to such a concept? To answer these questions it is important to acknowledge that Elias includes culture in his analysis of the civilizing process. His foci on manners or *Weltanschauung* indicate the inclusion, and tie in his thinking to those of Simmel. The use of the term culture leads to an aesthetic conception and finally to symbol theories. Such a conception supersedes the current foci on technology and economy, and explains why Elias has to be considered as an essential thinker not only for the 20th century but also for the 21st century and its sociology as well.

Biography

Stefan Bertschi is a sociologist and scholar of literature, and was formerly a Project Manager at the Institute for Media and Communications Management, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. His latest research focused on tendencies and prospects within the mobile media culture. He is founder of [loginb.com](http://www.loginb.com), a research-based consultancy specialising in understanding social and cultural processes. Current interests include poststructuralist theory and cultural theory. Together with Peter Glotz and Chris Locke he edited *Thumb Culture: The Meaning of Mobile Phones for Society* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2005).