

A New Civilising Impulse? Society and the Stress of Immunisation

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La civilisation n'est pas encore terminée (Baron d'Holbach)¹

In his *Diversoria* Erasmus describe the conditions in a sixteenth-century German lodging house as follows:

Eighty to ninety people all sit together, the humble with the rich and noble, men, women and children without distinction. All get on with what seems to them necessary: one washed his clothes and hangs them on the stove to dry, another washes his hands. But the bowl is so spotless that another one is needed to cleanse them of its water. The scent of garlic and other strong smells swirl around, people spit here and there regardless, someone cleans his boots on the table. The food is then served. Each dips his bread into the common soup, bites a chunk off and then dips the rest in the soup again. The room is far too warm, everyone is perspiring, reeking, wiping the sweat away.

Reading this makes us feel quite queasy, which is what Erasmus wants to do: slightly disgusted, we turn from such conditions because we have a different behavioural code. Erasmus is here describing events from a transitional period, during which it was already possible to distance oneself from an older standard: an urban, courtly perspective was in the making, where one distanced oneself from the “uncouth”, the “vulgar” and the “crude”. Norbert Elias described this process in precise detail, as a slow, halting advance: “The proscriptions of medieval society still did not place any great restraint on the play of affect, social control was mild compared with what came later. There should be no spitting over the table, no eating with your mouth open, nor should the tablecloth be used to blow your nose; but everyone still helped themselves from a common dish, until here a new prohibition emerged that was indicative of a new stage. Slowly, new manners took root that were broadly

¹ “Civilisation is not finished yet!”

accepted by a particular time, and so became part of the psychic endowment of men and women. They became embodiments of society and of the soul”, as Elias put it.

In conversation Erasmus made this discrepancy plain: one speaker supposed that many of the guest had a hidden ailment. “Probably most of them have the Spanish illness, they have no more to fear than lepers.” “Brave people”, said another, “they laugh it off and don’t bother about it.” “But such courage has already cost many lives!” “What can they do? They are used to it, and anyone with a heart will not change his habits.”

Don’t we also hear conversations like this today? For instance the question: isn’t this all very exaggerated? Isn’t coronavirus just another kind of flu epidemic? Didn’t 25,000 people die of flu last winter, and isn’t the number of coronavirus deaths a lot less?

What is happening here?

Quite plainly, we are also living through a transitional period: the restrictions on leaving home, or the prohibitions on contact and firm closures, these are quite without precedent. Colds and flu, however epidemic they became, have never before prompted such a comprehensive response from governmental authorities.

Nonetheless, these behavioural constraints are not really new; until now they were only the practice in particular high-tech factories and some medical institutes, since such constraints are here vital to institutional functions. Now the entire society has gone into intensive care, where distance and social separation rule supreme. The lack of any general resistance to the imposition of new standards for social interaction suggests that most people already possess the particular psychic capacities – whether stimulated by images from hospitals, or by TV images from high-tech factories – that support acceptance of the new rules. The boundaries of shame and embarrassment have shifted massively; we feel ashamed and apologise whenever we accidentally break the rule on social distance. In this kind of environment resistance is futile, self-excluding. The longer these provisions hold, the greater the prospect of their becoming generally established and retained after the crisis has passed. This will then be another civilising impulse.

Norbert Elias called this the civilising process, and showed in the case of France how this was connected to the process of state formation. This process takes place at several levels, from the increasing control of affect when using violence, via table manners to speech conventions and diplomatic skill in dealing with power. The individual internalises socially sanctioned prohibitions; in social intercourse restraint of expressive impulse becomes the norm; the sociogenic shame with which it is associated becomes second nature. During a transitional period the expression of affect that had formerly been treated positively struggles with unpromising prohibitions and restrictions, sociogenic feelings of shame and embarrassment. The new behavioural code gradually imposes itself on men and women, becoming in time a constitutive element of the self.

This is a continual, self-renewing process, establishing new sets of behavioural norms; and Elias demonstrated that it was a social civilising process that worked in one particular direction. The biggest leap forward for the process occurred in the eighteenth century, when representatives of the Enlightenment had

brought optimism into the world. This marked a break with the Baroque period, in which the world was seen as a vale of tears imminently terminating in union with Jesus – an expectation that could not be realised too soon. Enlightenment optimism was by contrast born of knowledge of science and nature that made life itself the supreme value, an orientation that led to the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But this civilising process did not only mean the displacement of underlying raw force; it also involved a distancing from natural affect, an estrangement from Nature, as Rousseau noted.

Resistance not only to violence, but also to unanticipated and unwanted physical contact, has grown enormously and become a valid code in itself. During the nineteenth century, when Robert Koch discovered “tiny creatures” and identified them as the cause of tuberculosis, it was a fear of bacteria that brought about this social distancing. Bacteria are an unknown force, remaining an issue that is always capable of mobilising as a highly emotional topic. The sick were isolated, they were kept cool – an entire city of tents was set up within Berlin’s Charité, where the beds of those with lung disease were carefully spaced out. Suddenly bacteria were seen everywhere; research was extended to parts of everyday life, the struggle against germs became a social imperative. James Hobrecht organised a system of sewers for Berlin and linked even densely-packed workers’ districts to the network of piped water; no longer did you wash your hands in a bowl, but under running water. Fear and knowledge of hazards were coupled materially with sewer pipes and soap dispensers, and immaterially with rigorous standards of hygiene.

The struggle against the coronavirus seems to represent a further development of this trend: quarantine as the most rigorous form of physical distancing through spatial isolation; communication through immaterial contact, whether in writing, over the telephone or through social media that allows one not only to hear the other, but see them. Often wherever the body itself cannot be made to disappear a facemask is used, or at least one keeps well clear of others as in shops – a gesture that in many cases arises spontaneously. Queues become longer by a factor of three or four. Infringement of these new standards is met with black looks and sharp words; sometimes this prompts fearful, even panicked, reactions.

Civilising impulses propagate first among the upper strata, which sets standards in Court Society; they are then copied by middle and lower strata. In democratic societies it is mainly the middle strata that determines norms and from which new standards of behaviour spread. The rich elites of the economic bourgeoisie can no longer lay claim to being treated as the role model for others in the way that the aristocracy could. They secure their social standing through the figures in their bank accounts.

There is no courtly discipline in our democratic mass society; there is no compulsion to adapt to the standards of a trend-setting stratum, as there was in the courtly society of the eighteenth century. Civilisation proceeds onwards in spite of this, and other mechanisms set the new standards. It is not Louis XIV and members of the Court world who set the trend, but role models on TV, actors who work in a theatrical world in which particular standards are presented as norms – personal appearance, clothes, living space, cars, all clean, new and shining; but also ways of greeting and saying goodbye, turns of phrase and ways of speaking for different situations. And much more strongly than was possible during the Ancien Régime, formal administrative

measures have a more direct impact upon everyday life: when shops control the numbers allowed in at one time and paint markings on the ground to indicate where people should stand, put up posters about the new regulations, and introduce plastic shields between shop assistant and a customer, then some of this corresponds to the wording of regulations, and some to their spirit.

The hygienic standard that our refined sensitivity to cleanliness now requires is crudely defined; it fails to differentiate between the new dangers, and the millions of neutral or useful microbes. The standard is itself medieval. We have known for a long time that bacteria are part of our lives, but the relationship has begun to change. The human microbiome weighs several kilos, and it is estimated that 90% of our body's cells co-operate with bacteria, without which we could not survive. Medical and biological research has discovered here an unlimited field, and it is now being explored with enthusiasm. The fear of bacteria is slowly giving way to a more differentiated position; defending the immune system by keeping hazards at bay has been replaced by efforts to strengthen it. The first substantiated findings of these studies have established that the increase in allergies, rheumatic inflammation and auto-immune reactions can to a great extent be traced to our mania for cleanliness, and to poor diet. So far however we do not have a clear and general overview of the complex role played by numerous types of bacteria in our metabolism. Despite this, new standards are already appearing – too much of this bacteria and too little of another, deviations from a balanced standard are what now thought to be hazardous. Commercial profiteers offer anxious consumers not only minerals and artificial vitamin bombs, but also so-called probiotic foods that can balanced out deficiencies that have not however been properly identified.

Such reactions to violation of the implicit and burdensome prohibitions arising from incremental and disjointed efforts to contain the pandemic suggest the emergence of a learned defensive reflex relating means to ends in combatting a disease that is invisible, and which has not yet been mastered due to the lack of a vaccine. Affect, fear and anxiety play a role in the "incarnation" of the new norms.

The superego moves into other spheres. Violence has in this civilising process been increasingly banished from the public realm and become something to be punished. This is true especially of the second postwar generation, who have excluded it from private life and education. What was once the primary means of private punishment is now punished itself. This line of thought is perpetuated because proximity to another is now considered to be a danger.

Disembodied contact has become a new norm; those things that are part of personal contact become less important; gestures, signs, even physical means of exercising power in public life also lose their meaning. In particular, everything that appears on a screen is thought to be true. Voices and faces seem different; the impressive bulk of Helmut Kohl no longer has the same effect. A society that has gone into intensive care will not so easily revert back to its earlier state. The ubiquity of the measures used to combat the causes and the spread of the disease is new. They show the new importance assigned to health as a supreme asset, and also that the body has been rescued from danger with civilizing skill. That this is at the same time goes with alienation speaks to the ambivalence associated with this entire historical process.