The barbarism of civilization: cultural genocide and the ‘stolen generations’

ABSTRACT

Norbert Elias suggested that ‘civilization’ involves the transformation of human *habitus* so that violence of all sorts is gradually subjected to greater and more sophisticated forms of management and control, whereas ‘decivilization’ encompasses processes which produce an increase in violence and a breakdown in the stability and consistency of on-going social relations. What remains unexplored is the extent to which ‘civilizing offensives’, the self-conscious attempts to bring about ‘civilization’, have revolved around essentially violent policies and practices. This paper examines the systematic removal of indigenous Australian children from their families, largely for the social engineering purpose of the gradual and systematic annihilation of Aboriginal cultural identity. At the time, these policies and practices were constructed by most observers as contributing to the ‘welfare’ of Australian Aborigines, and this intersection of welfare and violence raises the possibility that civilization and decivilization, rather than being different processes which may or may not run alongside each other, interpenetrate each other so that, under certain circumstances, societies are ‘barbaric’ precisely in their movement towards increasing civilization. It may also be possible to describe the move away from the systematic removal of Aboriginal children since the 1970s as itself part of a civilizing process, an increasing recognition of the human rights of Australian Aborigines and of the inhumanity of those policies and practices. The paper concludes by addressing the implications for theories of civilization and decivilization, as well as more generally for our contemporary understanding of what it means to be a ‘civilized’ modern citizen.

KEYWORDS: Elias; civilization; barbarism; Aborigines; stolen generation

*It is not a little characteristic of the structure of Western society that the watchword of its colonizing movement is ‘civilization’.*

(Elias 1994: 509)

*Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia?*

(A. O. Neville, in *Commonwealth of Australia*, 1937: 11)
Genocide and barbarism are concepts we generally associate with particular forms of violence, certain types of behaviour, events such as murder, massacre, torture, rape, mutilation, slavery, systematic beatings, planned and organized starvation or infection. These are behaviours and events which even their most enthusiastic participants would be unable to defend as being civilized or humane, as ultimately being in the best interests of their victims. In the more recent discussions of modern barbarism, violence and decivilization, the objects of attention are events such as the Holocaust, the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Khmer Rouge, Rwanda and Burundi, South Africa, the Ukraine, and so on (Bauman 1991a; Burkitt 1996; Chalk and Jonassohn 1990; de Swaan 1997; Fein 1993; Freeman 1995; Hobsbawm 1994; Mennell 1990; Miller and Soeffner 1996; Wallimann and Dobkowski 1987).

Particular types of organized violence thus figure as the barbarism which we are to contrast with whatever we might define as civilization.

In 1997, however, a report issued by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home*, pointed out that the official treatment of indigenous Australians throughout this century falls clearly within the terms of the UN definition of genocide, which includes the forced removal of children from their families with the express aim of the annihilation of a given ethnic, racial, religious or cultural identity. The HREOC report raises the relatively unexamined question of ‘cultural’ genocide, a form of state intervention into the lives of particular groups which was not clearly perceived as ‘violent’, and yet can be said to have at least attempted to have genocidal effects. Indeed, at the time it was presented as promoting the ‘welfare’ of individual Aboriginal children, with the scattered voices of dissent only gradually gaining the upper hand. Only in the last few years has it become more widely recognized how destructive, damaging and essentially genocidal a policy it was, and this recognition has sparked a remarkable dispute about whether there is a need for an expression of some sort of ‘collective shame’. Some political leaders, state governments, religious bodies and citizen groups have issued apologies for the state- and church-sponsored forcible removal of indigenous children and the effect this has had on Aboriginal individuals and communities throughout Australia. Others, notably the current Prime Minister, John Howard, have continued an abiding tradition in Australian liberalism and expressed varying degrees of regret while at the same time complaining about being forced to dwell on the unpleasantries of the past.

The case of the ‘stolen generations’ of Aboriginal children has a number of important implications for the political and moral debates within Australian politics and society, including the question of collective shame and the relationship of present generations to events in the nation’s past.² It constitutes, as Judith Brett suggests, ‘a direct challenge to Australians’ self image’ and ‘a blow to the moral self-confidence of modern Australia and its narrative of postwar progress’ (1997: 5). Robert Manne describes it as ‘the most important contemporary public issue of our time’ in Australian social and political life (1998: 54). A key question is also whether ‘genocide’
is even an appropriate term to use, given that what was being aimed at was the elimination of a culture rather than actual human beings.\footnote{None the less, even if we do not agree with Raimond Gaita that ‘If sterilisation of a people counts as genocide, then in my judgement, so too does the forcible, brutal and relentless taking of a people’s children for the purpose of making that people extinct’ (1997: 21), the minimum position we would still have to adopt is Brett’s, that we ‘can reject the report’s case for genocide, arguing that the forcible removal of children from their parents . . . is not the same as mass murder, and still find that the \textbf{Australian state has a serious case to answer}’ (1997: 5).} However, these are not the concerns of this paper. Rather, I will be examining the \textbf{ramifications and implications} of this case for Elias’s conception processes of civilization and decivilization, because his work is the most developed social theory of ‘civilization’, the central concept defining relations between European and indigenous populations wherever they encountered each other. I will do so in two respects. \textbf{First, the barbarism identified in this case was attempted, not only within a society whose members regarded themselves as civilized, but \textit{in the name of civilization}.} This was no ‘dark underbelly’ of modernity, state formation or civilization, it was an explicit and central part of all three projects. It was integral to processes of civilization, not the result of some other process of decivilization or barbarization. These policies and events were not the result of the \textbf{disintegration} of society and state, but precisely part and parcel of \textbf{processes of integration}. They thus constitute a particular form of barbarism \textit{explicitly within} civilization and the formation of modern citizenship rather than opposed to, ‘outside’ or ‘beneath’ them, and raise the question of the violent character at least of what has been called civilization ‘offensives’, and then possibly of processes of civilization and state formation themselves. This in turn puts into question much of the distinction to be found in both Elias’s later writings (Elias 1996) and in more recent discussions of his work, between ‘civilization’ and ‘decivilization’ (Mennell 1990; Fletcher 1995, 1997; Burkit 1996).

Second, the relationship between European and indigenous Australians has broader significance because it was \textit{centrally} one of a ‘civilizing project’. ‘Civilization’ was precisely the ‘watchword’, the conceptual and ideological banner used consistently to \textbf{characterize the difference between white people} – who possessed civilization, albeit to varying degrees – and \textbf{Aboriginal people}, who had to achieve it, again with varying degrees of recognized success. Civilization was colonialism’s most central organizing concept, quintessentially what imperialism and the colonial project was meant to achieve, and the degree of civilization spread over the globe the measure of its success or failure. It was also the foundation for citizenship in the modern nation-state, with the achievement of civilization the key condition for the attainment of citizenship rights. The story of the ‘stolen generations’ as part of a particularly Australian set of civilizing processes is thus an important example of the multiple meanings of the concept ‘civilization’, as well as the
multiple effects of the practices which emerged from its conceptualization, which need to be worked through systematically in relation to cases such as this one in order to respond to the more critical response of anthropologists, historians and other social scientists to the very idea of a ‘civilizing process’, and to sharpen the distinction between the conception of civilization in Elias’s as well as our own work, and the very politically and ethically charged way that concept has been used ever since the Enlightenment.

Apart from a few passages in *The Civilizing Process* (1994: 41, 461–3, 465, 509), we do not get a very clear sense from Elias himself that at the very time that civilization was developing in Western Europe, it was busily spreading itself over the whole globe in the most violent of ways, so that it is not unfair to say that the ritualized civility of European court society was built on the blood of murdered ‘primitives’ and bought with the land, labour and raw materials which marauding Europeans plundered from ‘their’ empires. In all of Elias’s discussions of the state’s monopolization of violence, there is little examination of what states actually did with that monopoly, in relation to both their own populations and those of the parts of the world they set about colonizing. Elias himself, for example, spoke of the ‘spread’ of Western civilization, the ‘transformation of Oriental or African peoples in the direction of Western standards’ (1994: 464), and the ‘integration’ of the rest of the world within European standards of behaviour as an essential element of the ‘civilization of the colonized’ (1994: 509) in a way which glossed over exactly how violent a process that really was.

Elias did recognize the ideological centrality of the concept of civilization to the whole project of colonialism, pointing out that this was its ‘watchword’, and that in addition to seizing land ‘it also became necessary . . . to rule people in part through themselves, through the moulding of their super-egos’ (1994: 509). But he always seemed simply to assume that this mode of rule was destined to succeed; he was able both to see ‘habituation to foresight’ and ‘the stricter control of behaviour and the affects’ as ‘instruments of dominance’ (1994: 462) and to observe that ‘this civilization is the characteristic conferring distinction and superiority on Occidentals’ (1994: 463, emphasis added). This suggests that he was persuaded of the *actual* as well as the *self-perceived* superiority of Western civilization, based on a supposed greater ability to manage their emotions and impulses, with far less attention paid to their instrumental technological and military superiority. A central aim of this paper, then, is to unpack the various ways in which processes of ‘civilization’ are simultaneously processes of *colonization* and to work towards an understanding of colonialism and decolonization which might be usefully and productively organized around the concept of ‘civilization’.

CIVILIZATION, DECIVILIZATION AND MUTUAL IDENTIFICATION

In *The Civilizing Process*, the relationship between barbarism and civilization was presented by Elias largely as mutually exclusive, one turning into the
other, with possible ‘reversals’ of direction. In one sense, *The Germans* (1996) continues this line of argument, raising the possibility that specific processes of state-formation produce either a ‘deficient’ process of civilization, or result in a clear process of decivilization encouraging the more widespread manifestation of brutal and violent conduct. He argued that the civilizing process ‘has two directions. Forwards and backwards’, and that ‘civilizing processes go along with decivilizing processes’, so that ‘the question is to what extent one of the two directions is dominant’ (1988: 183). The Holocaust, then, he presented as ‘a throwback to the barbarism and savagery of earlier times’ (1996: 302).

This is why Ian Burkitt concludes that Elias often falls into ‘the etiological myth of civilization,’ with a ‘surrender to civilization’s own self-image’, because he suggested that ‘what we call “barbarism” is something other than “civilization”’. ‘It is hard,’ writes Burkitt, ‘even for those sympathetic to Elias’s work, to come away from a reading of it with the impression that, when he refers to ‘civilization’ and the internal pacification of society, he does not see this as anything other than gradual progress towards the elimination of violent conflicts from the public spaces of western and, eventually, all other societies, that will one day be successfully secured’ (Burkitt 1996: 141). Burkitt argues that civilization should instead be seen as ‘an inherently ambivalent process, containing within itself the potential to unleash the forces it would label ‘barbaric’ on an unprecedented scale’ (1996: 142).

Generally this is fair comment. However, we should note that Elias’s position here was itself ambivalent, and it is unclear whether some weak traces of Burkitt’s argument can in fact be found in Elias himself, because he also raised the possibility that civilization and decivilization can occur simultaneously. For example, Elias made the point that the monopolization of physical force by the state, through the military and the police, cuts in two directions and has a Janus-faced character (1996: 175), because such monopolies of force can then be all the more effectively wielded by powerful groups within any given nation-state, as indeed they did under the Nazi regime. Pursuing a line of thought he had been developing since the 1970s (Wouters 1977: 448), in one of his entries to a German dictionary of sociology published in 1986 he argued for the reversibility of social processes, and suggested that ‘shifts in one direction can make room for shifts in the opposite direction,’ so that ‘a dominant process directed at greater integration could go hand in hand with a partial disintegration’ (1986: 235). Similarly, in *The Germans* he remarked that the example of the Hitler regime showed ‘not only that processes of growth and decay can go hand in hand but that the latter can also predominate relative to the former’ (1996: 308). In a critique of Kingsley Davis’s understanding of social norms, Elias commented that it emphasized the integrative effect of norms at the expense of their ‘dividing and excluding character’ and pointed out that social norms had an ‘inherently double-edged character’, since in the very process of binding some people together, they turn those people against others (Elias 1996: 159–60).
I would like to draw out three theoretical points from this ambiguity in Elias’s work in discussing the removal of Australian indigenous children from their families. First, Jonathan Fletcher has commented that there are three criteria for identifying the ‘directions’ of civilizing processes in Elias’s work: (a) ‘a shift in the balance between constraints by others and self-restraint in favour of the latter’, (b) ‘the development of a social standard of behaviour and feeling which generates the emergence of a more even, all round, stable and differentiated pattern of self-restraint’ and (c) ‘an expansion in the scope of mutual identification within and between groups’ (1995: 286). He goes on to suggest that ‘if a “reversal” occurred within one of them, a “reversal” would also be triggered, sooner or later, among the others, together forming a dominant overall process’ (1995: 290). My argument here, in contrast, parallels Burkitt’s in suggesting that the relation between these three elements of civilizing processes need not be very close at all, and that in fact we can observe the first two developing quite independently of the third, the expansion in mutual identification (de Swaan 1995). Burkitt comments that ‘long networks of interdependence in society can lead to a loss of mutual identification’, and that ‘sections of the population can then be persecuted, discriminated against, or even killed, while the central features of “civilization” remain intact’ (1996: 147). The history of European colonialism generally, and of the Australian ‘stolen generations’ in particular, shows that this is not merely ‘possible’, but exactly how Occidental processes of civilization have in fact proceeded, so that mutual identification has only started to become central to processes of civilization in the second half of the twentieth century. Before then, they were characterized precisely by a very narrow range of identification within the field of European culture itself, and Elias’s own reliance on the distinction between ‘simplicity’ and ‘complexity’ is one of the more important examples of that.

Second, I would suggest that Elias’s concentration on state-formation and social differentiation in his earlier writings requires modification, to take account both of alternative aspects of social organization which can have almost identical civilizing effects, and of the diverse, often barbaric effects of state-formation, indeed the violence and brutality lying at the heart of every nation-state (Renan 1990). This is particularly significant in relation to developing a less linear view of European history, to the ways in which we approach non-Western societies, and the relations between civilizations and cultures across the globe. The ways in which we might analyse civilizing processes outside Western Europe remains a badly under examined area of study. Central here is the question of colonialism and imperialism, the ways in which nation-states have established a brutal and violent relationship between their own ‘civilization’ and the supposedly ‘barbaric’ cultures of subjected peoples. This applies equally to the ways in which Europeans dealt with their colonized populations, the manner in which settler-colonies such as the USA, Canada and Australia based their civilization on an essentially violent and barbaric relationship with their respective indigenous peoples (for the USA, cf. Mennell 1997) and, indeed,
to the civilizing offensives within the processes of European state formation (Weber 1976).

Third, it is important to supplement, systematically, the concept of civilizing processes with that of civilizing offensives, to take account of the active, conscious and deliberate civilizing projects of both various powerful groups within societies and whole societies in relation to other regions of the world. Only then we will be able to develop a sense of the particular directions that civilization has been steered, rather than seeing it as a deus ex machina process which simply unfolds in automatic association with other processes of social development. What is being addressed here is the ‘automatism’ of Elias’s formulations, through the development of a sensitivity to the actual dissociation which takes place between different aspects of civilizing processes, especially when identification is absent, producing an essentially barbaric form of civilization which has made so many people so profoundly disappointed in its claims, to the point of rejecting the concept altogether (cf. Hinz 1997). This in turn raises the question of the normative dimensions to our understanding of civilization, and whether it is in fact possible to work with a ‘value-free’, ‘scientific’ conception of civilizing processes.

FROM ‘DYING RACE’ TO THE ‘HALF-CASTE PROBLEM’

From the very beginning of regular contact between Europeans and indigenous Australians, there was a fundamental ambivalence in the relationship. The initial form which this ambivalence took was an opposition between conceptions of Australian Aborigines as either ‘noble or ignoble savages, “soft” or “hard” primitives’ (Attwood 1992: iv; Baudet 1965; Mulvaney 1958). After the British took possession of the continent in 1788, however, this contrast was overlaid with another tension between the official concern to define Aborigines as British subjects entitled to the same rights, obligations and protections as any inhabitant of the British Isles, and a desire to acquire and profit from the land they lived on, which in turn demanded their dispossession and, in the face of resistance, elimination. Much of the early history of European colonization of Australia, from 1788 to around the middle of the nineteenth century, is marked by a vacillation between these two positions, but the second was by far the most dominant, so that it is difficult not to see the first period contact between Europeans as fundamentally genocidal, organized around the concept ‘Exterminate all the brutes’ (Lindqvist 1996), with the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines only the most obvious example (Barta 1987; Lindqvist 1996: 117–20).

Around halfway through the nineteenth century, however, the humanitarianism embedded in the attempt to define Aborigines as British subjects had modified to a different kind of accommodation with the hunger for Aboriginal land, to take the form of a sort of regretful sorrow about the obvious physical superiority of Europeans over Aborigines. Although
Aborigines did chalk up a number of wins in their battles and skirmishes with European settlers treating them as no more than inconvenient vermin, the desperate ruthlessness and brutality of armed settlers as well as gradually increasing numbers of police officers on horseback meant that they were more often the victims of massacres and slaughters. European diseases had a devastating effect, and Aboriginal fertility also declined dramatically, often from a sense of sheer futility about what was happening to their land and culture. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the dominant position in both official discourse and practice, was that the Aborigines were a ‘dying race’, and this was based on the notion of the essential ‘fragility’ of Aboriginal culture in contact with Europeans (Brantlinger 1995; McGregor 1997). Aborigines were defined as simply ‘weak’ in the face of the robustness of the European way of life – militarily, technologically, economically, culturally, socially, and physically. Some Europeans were distressed and dismayed that this should be so, and it bothered their Christian consciences, but did nothing about the sense of its inevitability. Extinction was thus simply a matter of time, so that the most Europeans could do was to ‘smooth the dying man’s pillow’ (Bates 1944), pursuing what Pat O’Malley has called ‘gentle genocide through a program of enforced eugenics, understood by state officials to be a program hastening what was believed to be the fulfilment of an inevitable but distressing process’ (1994: 52).

Towards the end of the century, however, the picture changed dramatically and new conceptual and practical concerns emerged in relation to the position of Aborigines within Australian social life. Not only were ‘traditional’ Aborigines not dying as quickly as anticipated, but as European settlement spread across the continent, so did contact between Europeans and Aborigines, including sexual contact, which of course had its inevitable consequence – children. This sexual contact was relatively prolific in itself, and the resultant mixed-blood population itself was also very fertile, so that by around the 1890s European Australians were becoming increasingly agitated about what came to be defined as the ‘half-caste problem’; ‘there was a growing realisation,’ writes Russell McGregor, ‘that the descendants of a dying race might continue to haunt a White Australia for generations’ (1997: 134). Particularly in the Northern Territory, the spectre of half-caste Aborigines outnumbering whites was raised by politicians and bureaucrats with increasing intensity as the twentieth century progressed, as was a general threat of social disorder and social, moral, cultural and physical degeneration – not the least of the problems was simply venereal disease (Austin 1993). By 1936 Cecil Cook, the Chief Protector in the Northern Territory, was writing, ‘My view is that unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black’ (Commonwealth of Australia 1937: 14).

Rather than being able to safely quarantine Aborigines into the category of ‘Other’, to treat them as barbarians whose only relationship to
Civilization was historical, the reality of interbreeding between Europeans, Asians and Aborigines threatened the very boundaries and character of civilization itself. Everything that civilization was meant to have achieved, the distance that was supposed to have been placed between the present and the past, was thrown into disarray with the cultural and biological hybridity characterizing the ‘half-caste problem’. Mixed-bloods were said to inherit the ‘vices’ of both races and few of their virtues, and they were regarded as representing precisely those forms of behaviour which the civilizing process was meant to have overcome, the ‘repressed’ of modern civilization – idleness, nomadism, emotionality, lack of discipline and productivity, sexual promiscuity, poor bodily hygiene, and a group rather than an individual orientation. As Andrew Lattas has summed it up, ‘Aborigines were often constructed as prisoners of unreflexive bodily desires which they could not control or satisfy’ and Aboriginal society as ‘characterized not by the disciplined freedoms of the mind, but by the violent passions of the body’ (1987: 43, 55).

**The ‘Final Solution’: Rescuing the Rising Generation**

There were essentially two elements to the resultant ‘civilizing offensive’ on the part of both State and Church, both aiming to protect as well as advance civilization by eliminating Aboriginality in this hybrid form from a ‘White Australia’ completely. The first was to try and regulate the cause of the problem, the sexual intercourse between whites and blacks, through a system of governance of Aboriginal movements and relationships contained within a legislative apparatus concerning the ‘protection’ of Aborigines constructed between the early years of the twentieth century and the 1930s. As Pat O’Malley puts it:

In general Aboriginal people throughout most of Australia have been subject to an extraordinary degree of regulation, perhaps being one of the most governed people on earth. Legislation such as the Native Administration Act 1936 of Western Australia (for which parallels existed in other states) gave the Chief Protector of Aborigines direct control over Aboriginal peoples’ sexual relations, social relations, marriage, geographical mobility, residence, employment, income, property ownership and management, education, custody of children – even over where they could camp and what the law referred to as their ‘tribal practices’. (1994: 48)

The strategy adopted was to try and quarantine both white and so-called ‘mixed-bloods’ from ‘full-blood’ Aborigines, so that the latter would continue down the path of extinction undisturbed, preferably relatively slowly to give anthropologists time to pursue their studies. The former, on the other hand, would become absorbed into the white population, both biologically but above all socially and culturally. In contrast to the widespread
negative views of miscegenation, there was strong support among Australian scientists and administrators for the view that Australian Aborigines were of essentially the same racial stock as Europeans, and that the differences between them were social and cultural rather than biological (McGregor 1997: 162; Tindale 1941). Cecil Cook, for example, spoke of ‘colour of the mind’ and wrote, ‘where the coloured individual is “white” in all but colour very little conflict is likely to take place’ (in McGregor 1997: 162). Cook’s notion of ‘breeding out the colour’ was thus aimed more at the perception of people of Aboriginal descent among Europeans, who would not accept non-whites, than at what he regarded as the real difference between Aborigines and Europeans, which he constructed in sociological terms.10

Second, there was already a particular social technology in place to deal with problems of social discipline among the degenerate convicts and working classes (van Krieken 1992), and this was what was also turned to in responding to the ‘half-caste problem’. The concept of ‘rescuing the rising generation’ had been central to European church and state agencies’ policies in relation to the children of the poor and the working class since the sixteenth century, and was a central element of the modern State’s conception of the intersection of family life and liberal citizenship. The removal of Aboriginal children was thus largely based on pre-existing philosophies, policies and institutional practices concerning unacceptable, ‘problem’ groups in all the Western European countries and their colonies, so that it is possible to chart the parallels and affinities between the racism of removing Aboriginal children for their Aboriginality, and the class ideology underlying the removal of non-indigenous children for the immorality and viciousness of their impoverished surroundings. The significance of this is not a claim that there was some sort of equitable distribution of state violence between indigenous and non-indigenous families, but that it indicates a certain degree of isomorphism between ‘race,’ ‘class’ and ‘gender’, that anxieties concerning the rapid reproduction of half-caste Aborigines on the border between white and black cultures in many respects followed the same logic of governance underlying the fears of the equally sexually dangerous and prolific non-respectable working class, especially women, on the fringes of the metropolis (Stoler 1995).

The strategy adopted here was simply to remove Aboriginal parents’ common-law rights over their children and to make the state the legal guardian of all children of Aboriginal descent, to be removed at will and sent to a mission, a child welfare institution or to be fostered with a white family if sufficiently light-skinned. The legislation enabling this was introduced in relatively weak form between 1905 and 1909 in all Australian states, strengthened around 1915, and further reinforced in the 1930s, by which time the situation could be described as follows

Virtually any child of Aboriginal descent could now be taken forcibly from his or her family and placed in a government institution to be
trained in the ways of ‘white civilization’ and ‘society’. The Commissioner of Native Affairs, not their parents, had total control over their lives until they reached the age of twenty-one. (Haebich 1988: 350)

The actual number of Aboriginal children removed from their families is unclear, partly because the records kept were patchy, with no accounting for Aboriginal children sent to homes not specifically designated for Aborigines, some were removed ‘unofficially’ and placed in the care of church agencies or individuals. Also difficult to quantify, as Peter Read reminds us, were ‘those who went away to white people for a “holiday” and did not return’ (1983: 8). Rowena MacDonald suggests that in the period 1912–1962, ‘probably two out of every three part-descent children spent some of their lives away from their parents as a result of the policy of removal’ (1995: xiii). The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (henceforth HREOC) report sums up its estimation for the period between 1910 and 1970 as lying between one in three and one in ten, and points out both that ‘not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal’ and that ‘most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children’ (HREOC 1997: 37).

This assertion of legal guardianship by the state over all indigenous children only ceased in the 1960s. The primary and overarching concern was to ‘solve’ the ‘half-caste problem’ by breeding out colour of both body and mind through this programme of social engineering, and in this sense the removal of Aboriginal children meshed with the first strategy of controlling sexual relations and reproduction among adult Aborigines. This was certainly the most strongly articulated argument in the writings of the politicians, administrators and anthropologists central to the development of the various forms of legislative and administrative action, and remains continuous from the writings of Baldwin Spencer (1913) in the early years of the century, through those of J.W. Bleakley (1929), A.O. Neville (Haebich 1988) and Cecil Cook (Austin 1990; Chief Protectors in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory respectively) in the 1920s and 1930s, to those of anthropologists A.P. Elkin (1952; McGregor 1996), Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1952) and politician Paul Hasluck in the 1950s and 60s.11 ‘Absorption’ and ‘assimilation’ into the ways of ‘civilization’ were the key concepts around which this discourse was organized. In 1936 a conference of the leading authorities in Aboriginal affairs declared its belief ‘that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth’ (Commonwealth of Australia 1937: 3). By the 1950s this kind of conception had been replaced by one more organized around the notion of citizenship, and in 1950 Paul Hasluck told the House of Representatives that ‘Their future lies in association with us, and they must either associate with us on standards that will give them full opportunity to live worthwhile and
happily or be reduced to the social status of pariahs and outcasts living without a firm place in the community’ (1953: 6).

Within this second conception of ‘citizenship as assimilation’, it was also possible to regard the state’s and church’s intervention into Aboriginal family life as advancing the ‘welfare’ of the Aboriginal population as a whole, by posing a stark and uncompromising contrast between membership of the European community, on its terms, and exclusion from civilization itself. Aboriginal culture and its way of life, especially once it had encountered European civilization, was presented by Hasluck and almost every other administrator in Aboriginal affairs as inherently flawed, fragile and basically worthless, producing only illness, disease, drunkenness, filth and degeneracy in the ‘thousands of degraded and depressed people who crouch on rubbish heaps throughout the whole of this continent’ (Hasluck 1953: 9; cf. Read 1983: 20). Aboriginality was constructed simply as a ‘primitive social order’ composed of ‘ritual murders, infanticide, ceremonial wife exchange, polygamy’ (Hasluck 1956: 2), so that for Hasluck and most white Australians the permanent elimination of Aboriginality from the fabric of Australian social life was synonymous with civilization and progress itself, a crucial element of the truth that ‘the blessings of civilization are worth having’.

For many years past, people have been rather nervous of using phrases about carrying the blessings of civilisation to the savage for fear that they might be accused of cant and humbug. The world today, however, is coming around again to the idea that inevitable change can be made a change for the better. We recognise now that the noble savage can benefit from measures taken to improve his health and his nutrition, to teach him better cultivation, and to lead him in civilised ways of life. . . . We know that the idea of progress, once so easily derided, has the germ of truth in it. (Hasluck 1953: 17)

The inexorable destruction of Aboriginal culture and society was thus meshed with a humanitarian concern for the welfare of indigenous Australians; ‘Europeanisation is inevitable,’ wrote the Berndts in 1952 (p. 275), making the only practical concern one of how to execute it most kindly.

CIVILIZING OFFENSIVES AND CIVILIZING PROCESSES, BEYOND CULTURAL GENOCIDE?

While highlighting the extreme moral limitations of contemporary civilization, genocide is nevertheless an intrinsic expression of that civilization. Genocide is most likely to occur when men and women refuse to extend the benefits and protection of their societies to strangers whom they cannot or will not trust.

(Rubinstein 1987: 297)

This history has a number of implications for theories of civilization and
decivilization. First, the sheer anxiety surrounding the threat posed by cultural and racial hybridity indicates that in this context, processes of civiliza-
tion were themselves part of the construction of a homogenous view of citizenship which denied mutual identification with those who stood
outside it or appeared to fail to go along with it (cf. Young 1989). It was this
organization of citizenship and identity as ‘Australian’ around Aboriginal-
ity as its negative opposite, as primitive barbarism in opposition to white
civilization, which itself underlay barbaric, uncivilized responses to indigen-
ous Australians. As Peter Read has put it

The whites were so convinced of the rightness of their own way of life
that they excluded all the others. So deep was the idea of the worthless-
ness of Aboriginal society . . . that hardly anybody, from the highest level
of administration to the lowest, got past the old irrelevancies that they
respected or were friendly with certain Aborigines . . . Most of the
officials did not arrive at the . . . recognition of the existence of New
South Wales Aboriginal culture, let alone . . . to acknowledge its validity.
(1983; 20)

If civilizing processes are organized around a self-perception of oneself and
one’s group – the ‘we-image’ – as ‘civilized’ without a corresponding
identification with the different humanity of others adhering to different
civilizational standards, it is accompanied by aggression and violence
towards those who remain uncivilized, largely because of the threat they
pose to the fragility of the achievements of civilization, and it is this aggres-
sion which then underlies the associated civilizing offensives.13 The state
monopolization of violence in fact involved the exercise of that violence on
groups seen to lie outside the prevailing standards of civilization, so that
civilizing processes involve not simply the reduction of violence and aggres-
sion, but their rearrangement.14

This is why Alvin Gouldner once complained about Elias’s work that vio-

lence had not been eliminated in contemporary civilizations, it had simply
been transformed from explicit ferocity to ‘passionless, impersonal cal-
lousness, in which more persons than ever before in history are now killed
or mutilated with the flick of a switch . . . where killing occurs without per-
sonal rancour and the massacre of nations may be ordered without a frown’
indigenous children is that Gouldner’s argument is even more powerful
than his own example suggests, because it applies to a wider range of other
‘civilizing offensives’ involving a broader variety of types of violence. The

 crucial dimension which appears to underlie the elimination of these types
of violence, these versions of cultural genocide, is the possibility of mutual
identification (de Swaan 1995), or at least some reduction of ‘disidentifi-
cation’ (de Swaan 1997).

An important manifestation of this has recently been the ability on the
part of non-indigenous Australians to read or hear the stories of family dis-
mantlement, of children being told they were going on a ‘holiday’ and
never seeing their parents again, of the sheer anguish of hearing that your mother has died before you have been able to see her after 30 years, and being able to feel a degree of empathy with that anguish. The experience was described by one witness at the HREOC inquiry as follows:

The issues are growing up not knowing any family history, growing up at school and being asked to bring photos of your family, and you can’t do it and the teacher says, ‘Why can’t you do it?’, and you’re forced to stand up and say that you don’t have any family and people turn around and look at you in disbelief, that you couldn’t not have a family. (HREOC: 276)

It is only now, in the late 1990s, that more than a handful of non-indigenous Australians can read testimony like this with an emotional response which includes a recognition of the experiences of the human beings uttering it, some ability to ‘stand in their shoes’ and imagine what such an experience might have felt like. As Robert Manne puts it, it was European Australians’ ‘incapacity to grasp the depth of suffering of Aborigines [which] lies at the heart of the harm they inflict (1998: 60). The striking aspect of the discussions of Aboriginal affairs, by the vast majority of academics, politicians, journalists and administrators alike until very recently, utilizing the logic of ‘assimilation’ (Bauman 1991b) and ‘universal citizenship’ (Young 1989), is the sheer disgust they felt and expressed for whatever they understood as Aboriginality.15

Elias was trying to understand such developments, to develop a sense of what it was about the way our social relations are ordered, and have developed in the long term, which may make it possible to move beyond the mere ‘civilization’ of barbarism to its genuine elimination. His theory of civilizing processes is above all concerned with the problem of when and how civilization takes place, an analysis of the extent to which we have come to treat each other more humanely, precisely in order to identify how we might continue such a change into the future and live with each other with neither ferocity nor callousness. A large part of his motivation in writing The Civilizing Process was precisely to come to a better understanding of the brutality of the Nazi regime, since ‘one cannot understand the breakdown of civilized behaviour and feeling as long as one cannot understand and explain how civilized behaviour and feeling came to be constructed and developed in European societies in the first place’ (1996: 444–5).

In other words, Elias argued that barbarism and civilization are part of the same analytical problem, namely, how and under what conditions human beings satisfy their individual or group needs ‘without reciprocally destroying, frustrating, demeaning or in other ways harming each other time and time again in their search for this satisfaction’ (1996: 31). The problem is to make both events such as the Holocaust and other less obvious examples of ‘modern barbarism’ such as the removal of indigenous Australian children, understandable as the outcome of particular social figurations and processes of socio-historical development, as well as also
being able to explain what it was about the development of modern state-societies which generated organized critical responses to organized violence of various sorts (Elias 1996: 445). What is analytically, practically and politically important, then, is precisely the distinction we make between what is done in the name of civilization as part of particular civilizing offensives, and a *decolonized* civilizing of human social relations which recognizes a variety of ways of being civilized, and organizes its conception of civilization around the ability to identify with those we decide to make the object of our civilizing offensives, despite their differences from us.¹⁶ This makes it important both to understand exactly how cruel and violent civilizing processes and offensives have been since the Enlightenment, as well as how easy it is for barbarism to be contained within our current conception of civilization, and to devote considerably more thought to the ongoing decolonization of both the theories and practices of contemporary civilization.

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NOTES

1. This is a revised and extended version of a paper first presented at the Amsterdam Norbert Elias Centenary Conference, *Organized Violence: The Formation and Breakdown of Monopolies of Force – Conditions and Consequences*, 18–20 December 1997. I would like to acknowledge the University of Sydney’s support through the provision of a Conference Travel Grant and an Extended Research Secondment, during which I was able to undertake the further research for the elaboration and reworking of the paper. Thanks also to those who commented on the paper, especially the person—whose name eluded me—who made the very valuable point about the possibility of ‘carnivorous’ identification.

2. For an excellent general background, see Rowe 1995. A useful discussion of the question of national remembrance and amnesia can be found in Renan 1990, and Benedict Anderson’s commentary on Renan (1991: 199–203).

3. The jurist Pieter Drost (1959), for example, found this section of the U.N. definition ‘incomplete’, ‘deficient’ and ‘far-fetched’. Preferring to restrict genocide to ‘mass murder’, he argued that ‘genocide is collective homicide and not official vandalism or violation of civic liberties. It is directed against the life of man and not against his material or mental goods. The protection of culture belongs primarily to the province of human rights...’ (p. 11).

4. See also the discussion in Manne 1998: 61–3.

5. As Michael Hinz has argued recently, ‘It is to be hoped that the debate around the concept of civilization can be joined directly – without ‘advocates’ – by members of those groups who have in the past been judged in terms of the ‘civilization-wildness/barbarism’ scheme – so that it is not yet again only the supposedly ‘civilized’ who determine the ‘civilizatory differential’ (1997: 61). For only one discussion of the ‘colonizing’ dimensions to European state formation, see Weber 1976.

6. For an earlier but more general version of this argument, see Breuer 1991.

7. Bernard Kruithof (1982) was
probably the first to use the term ‘civilizing offensive’, but it was Herman Franke who argued in 1988 that ‘The concept “civilizing offensive” stands in a relation of tension with Elias’s theory of civilization. It refers, after all, to goal-directed human activities, while the theory of civilization pays attention precisely to the unintended development of social processes’ (p. 108). See also the discussion in van Krieken 1990.


9. The dynamics of the situation in Australia were different from those in Indonesia analysed by Stoler (1995) because of its character as a settler colony.

10. There were divergent policies adopted in different States relating to the extent to which miscegenation between half-caste females and white males was discouraged or encouraged. The Queensland position was to emphasize the drawbacks of this approach, and to segregate half-castes as much as possible, but the Northern Territory and Western Australia were unwilling to fund this type of approach and were more keen on outright miscegenation (Commonwealth of Australia 1937: 20).

11. Paul Hasluck was Minister for Territories between 1951 and 1963. The Berndts did subsequently change their position and distanced themselves from Elkin’s views on this question.

12. See also Bauman’s (1991b) discussion of the logic of assimilation.

13. For a discussion of this issue both more generally and specifically in relation to the responses to Turkish migrants in Germany, see Waldhoff 1995.

14. Perhaps this is not so apparent in Elias himself because he did not spend much time on the relationship between the civilized and those defined as uncivilized, except in The Established and the Outsiders, which raises the problem of relationship of this study to the rest of his work.

15. Paul Hasluck is one of the more significant examples here, because of his ability to bind up his disgust with a supposedly urbane liberal tolerance and an inclusive conception of citizenship. For the period 1911–1939 in the Northern Territory, see Austin 1997: 10–17, and on disgust generally, see Miller 1997. Elizabeth Povinelli (1998) cautions against too optimistic an assessment of changes in official understandings of relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, although her reform not revolution’ position make it difficult to see what changes would escape her critique, as well as glossing over the complexities of the ‘governmental’ logic of Aboriginal affairs (cf. O’Malley 1996 and Attwood 1989).

16. Iris Marion Young calls this ‘a concept of differentiated citizenship’ (1989: 251). Of course, it is arguable whether we should really rely on the concept ‘identification’ at all, or follow Jessica Benjamin’s (1995) arguments concerning an ‘intersubjective orientation’ and use the idea of ‘mutual recognition’ instead, acknowledging the destructive, ‘cannibalistic’ forms which identification can take. There is a growing literature on the politics of recognition which could be utilized in this respect (e.g., Gutman 1994; Honneth 1995), but there is not the space to tease this argument out here, so I have stayed with identification’ (Yeatman 1996).

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