

RESEARCH NOTES

Norbert Elias and the Civilizing Process: a reading group and a promising journey

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One of the most rewarding experiences during my time at the LAC has been co-organising the reading group “Norbert Elias and the Civilizing Process” with Eduardo Posada Carbó during the Academic Year 2018/2019.

Neither Eduardo nor I are experts on Elias, but we have tried to engage with his work and examine the possibilities of applying his theories to the Latin American context.

The reading group convened eight times during Michaelmas and Trinity Term attracting around 25 participants from different backgrounds. There was no need to attend all the sessions, but participants were expected to cover the assigned readings for the sessions they attended. It was particularly rewarding to see the presence of current and former LAC students.

All eight sessions were led by different scholars whose academic research relates in some way or another to the work of Norbert Elias or the broader topic of violence. In a given session, the guest speaker would open with a general reflection on the selected reading (normally an original text by Elias), which was then followed by an hour of round-table discussion.

The first two sessions were led by Andrew Linklater (University of Aberystwyth) and Stephen Mennell (University College Dublin). While the former has engaged with the link between Elias and IR theory, the latter is the general editor of the collected works of Elias in English, which are being published in 18 volumes by UCD Press. With a strong focus on Elias’s theories, both sessions paved the way for the following meetings.

Session three was led by Stathis Kalyvas (All Souls). We discussed his book *The Logics of Violence in Civil War* published back in 2000. Sessions four and five were led by two professors emeriti of the LAC: Alan Knight and Malcolm Deas. Session six was about the history of sports in Latin America and was led by Matthew Brown (University of Bristol). For the discussion, we drew on *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, one of Elias’ later books. Finally, we ended our Reading Group with a fascinating discussion with Ian Loader (All Souls), author of the book *Civilizing Security*.

The Reading Group was meant not only to strengthen our knowledge of Elias’s writings but to prepare ourselves for the workshop ‘The Civilizing Process in Colombia’ that took place on the 3rd and 4th of May at Brasenose College. On this occasion, Eduardo Posada Carbó invited a selected group of scholars working on Colombia. The objective of the workshop was to examine the recent experience in Colombia from a long-term historical perspective. Its final purpose was to identify a potential research agenda for the study of what Norbert Elias referred to as the ‘civilizing process’ – a set of transformations in social structures and human behaviour that help to control war and civil conflict.

The highlight of the workshop was Tico Brown’s public lecture titled “Close encounters of civilization with barbarism: The Colombians, especially during *la Violencia* at mid-twentieth century” held at the Latin American Centre. Margarita Garrido, another participant in the workshop, also held a public lecture at the Latin America Centre. The rest of the workshop was closed to the public, but open to those who participated in the reading group.

We ended the academic year with a final workshop on the “Civilizing Process” at the Latin American Society Association (LASA) Conference in Boston, U.S. On that occasion, Ana María Otero (Universidad de los Andes) and myself presented brief papers on possible ways of applying Elias’s approaches to our own research. It was a great opportunity to expand our research group to scholars

from all over the world. We all agree that it is worth both the time and effort to develop a research agenda based on the work of Elias.

Overall, the experience has been tremendously inspiring, and we hope to continue this journey next year with more exciting lectures, workshops and reading sessions. Stay tuned!



Malcolm Deas opened the 'Civilizing Process in Colombia' workshop that took place in the Old Library of Brasenose College on 3-4 May. To his right, Juanita León, Andrew Linklater, Andreza de Souza, Herbert Braun, and Jorge Orlando Melo. At the back, Matthew Brown, Juliana Tappe Ortiz and Miguel La Rota. The workshop was closed with a talk by the Colombian historian Jorge Orlando Melo, and some concluding remarks by Andrew Linklater (Aberystwyth).



Participants in the workshop 'The civilizing process in Latin America' that took place in the LASA congress in Boston. From left in the front row: Andre Jockyman, Jamie Shenk, Kiran Stallone, Juan Neves, Victor Uribe-Uran, Monica Serrano, Eduardo Zimmermann, José Antonio Aguilar, and Paula Alonso.