

Animal Suffering and the Civilizing Process

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ADRIANNA KAPEK-GOODRIDGE, MAR 31 2023

This article is part of a series on process sociology, which was compiled and edited by Alexandros Koutsoukis and Andrew Linklater (before his untimely passing).

Can humanity consider itself civilised when analysing people's attitudes to non-human animals? This question is particularly evident when looking at human supremacy over the natural world and indifference to animal suffering that have persisted over many centuries. In the West, the right to exploit animals was initially justified through the Judeo-Christian tradition that maintained the notion that animals do not have souls (Swabe 1999). It was further established by the perception that humans alone were created in God's image, therefore the concept of treating animals instrumentally was perceived as part of the divine plan (Midgley 1984). Yet, the main Christian doctrine ignored numerous texts and teachings that required a more considerate approach to animals. For example, a passage from Genesis (1:26-28) was interpreted as the main source of human right to rule the natural world: *Let them have dominion over the fish in the sea, and over the birds in the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth*'. Although such a selective textual interpretation of the Bible has been widely criticised, the anthropocentric[1] worldview prevailed.

Stemming from this notion, centuries of compassion shortcomings towards animals and their suffering ensued. Therefore, this article considers and analyses shifts in European approaches to non-human animals throughout the centuries by using Norbert Elias' theory of the civilizing process. It extends Elias's arguments on the development of civilized sensibilities towards the natural world and human-animal relations. Key debates on the moral status of animals, transformation of European legislation, rise of environmental activism, and activities of animal welfare non-governmental organisations (NGOs) form the main argument of this article – that people's attitudes to non-human animals are ambivalent more than ever before.

The Invisible Cruelty of the European Civilisation

Norbert Elias (2000) argued that changes in behaviours of European societies that took place from 1500s to modern-day era were facilitated by demographic shifts, urbanization and the pacification of public space through state formation. Therefore, these shifting social relations, while pushed in a specific direction, transformed the psychological make-up of the individuals. Such changes occurred in the last five centuries, alongside monopolisation of organised violence and domestic pacification.

These shifts allowed for the development of new sensibilities, such as growing aversion to violence and brutality, as well as an increase in experiencing embarrassment, and were illustrated by people's growing sense of repugnance concerning disease and bodily functions. As a result, the individuals altered their emotional and psychological composition alongside their behaviour due to a shift in the balance of power between external social constraints and internal self-constraints. This newly found self-control was accompanied by changes in personality structure, which resulted in the development of sensitivity to witnessing and performing violent acts, as well as in the establishment of regulations and organizations with an aim to prevent them.

In this regard, the development of the civilizing process can also be illustrated by people's changing attitudes to radical forms of punishment, such as the death penalty, very often performed publicly by strangulation. However,

Animal Suffering and the Civilizing Process

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many violent acts did not actually cease to exist but were 'pushed behind views' (Elias 2000). Consequently, they could no longer offend individuals sensitive to such sights. Therefore, the aversion to violence that resulted from new self-restraints was developing in parallel with the containment of offensive acts. These new rules of social contract allowed European societies to self-proclaim their 'civilised' status.

The Rise of New Sensibilities in Civilised Societies

Elias considers the importance of nature and non-human animals only to a small extent, mostly focusing on European societies and their approaches in relation to each other (Elias 2000). A few references to non-human animals can indeed be found in Elias's work, such as the manners of meat carving or the annual burning of cats in sixteenth century Paris (Elias and Dunning 1986). However, the civilizing process, changing attitudes, growing aversion to brutality and suppression of offensive acts can also be translated into people's shifting approaches towards non-human animals over the centuries.

This correlation can be firstly illustrated in Keith Thomas's account of early modern England in the 1500s, when the anthropocentric approach that dominated people's attitudes to animals started to change, albeit differently to philosophical views. Although at that time there was no tendency to keep animals for sentimental reasons, human-animal relations were much closer than previously thought, creating a space for a slightly better treatment of some animals, depending on their usefulness, such as horses, hawks or dogs (Thomas 1991). However, improved handling did not develop in tandem with compassion since these animals very often died while being forced to do their jobs. Nevertheless, brutality to both human and non-human animals was a commonplace in Britain at that time (Harwood 2002/1928).

A significant shift occurred during Renaissance alongside developments in science, technology, and art. It was a beginning for the European societies to look at the world through a scientific lens. Elias points out this change:

An essential phase of the civilizing process was concluded at exactly the time when the consciousness of civilization, the consciousness of their own behaviour and its embodiments in science, technology or art began to spread over the whole nations of the West (Elias 2000).

At that time, not only did people's attitudes to human violence change, so did their approach to animal suffering. The fears about nature started to diminish, a process facilitated by moving from rural to urban areas (Elias 2000). In this context, people from urban areas who visited natural spots for pleasure and relaxation became more sensitive to it. Therefore, the civilizing process facilitated complex social changes that brought more compassionate approaches to nature. Furthermore, a gradual shift in general kindness prompted the rise in sensitivity to both human and animal cruelty. Because of this, during the 1700s, a more reflective sense of identity, known as 'sensibility', emerged (Fraser 2009).

This progress not only facilitated a creation of means to avoid violence and to express the distaste for brutality, but also prompted a 'delicacy of feeling' (Mennell 1998). To emphasize this newly found attitude, people started to push certain practices away from view, such as slaughter of animals in the streets and carving of meat on the table (Elias 2000). Therefore, *the visibility of these issues and their movement towards the invisible* underwent similar psychological tendencies that matched the overall social developments in the civilizing process (Elias 2000). These changes consequently initiated a transformation in the general threshold of repugnance and introduced a new standard among civilised societies.

From Descartes to Darwin – Recognising Animal Suffering

The movement towards 'civilized disgust' was also reflected in the philosophical debates on the moral status of animals. Although the 17th century was dominated by Descartes' view that animals are merely machines that are unable to feel, the 18th century provided a significant change in terms of newly found sensibilities to animal cruelty and conceptions of ethical behaviour (Midgley 1984). Jeremy Bentham's much quoted dictum: 'The question is not Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?' (Bentham 1789) has been considered a protagonist of

Animal Suffering and the Civilizing Process

Written by Adrianna Kapek-Goodridge

the utilitarian approach that extended compassion towards all creation and underlined the importance of an improved treatment of animals (Fraser 2009). Many other thinkers, such as William Wollaston and Henry St John Bolingbroke, not only agreed with Bentham that physical pain provides a sufficient argument to improve animal handling, they also agreed that animals could be sharing certain features of intelligence with humans, a reasoning that facilitated the advocacy of vegetarianism (Harwood 2002/1928; Preece 2005).

Yet it was Darwin who argued that animals are capable of having feelings such as love, memory, attention and curiosity, imitation, and reason (Darwin 1871). Through these increasing sensibilities as well as the recognition of animal intelligence and feelings, people started to argue for changes in legislation and formed animal welfare organizations. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, bull baiting was made illegal, horses were protected from ill-treatment, cock-fighting and other cruel pastimes were abolished, all to ensure control of violent inclinations towards animals. As a result, the environmentalist movement was initiated in the United Kingdom and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA; transformed to RSPCA after Queen Victoria's endorsement) was formed, widely championed by aristocrats (Fraser 2009). Simultaneously, the movement towards 'greater delicacy' and the feeling of repugnance was provoked by the sight of slaughter in butcher shops and the carving of meat at a table. This development led to the disappearance of public slaughter from view: first replacing small private butcher shops with large abattoirs, and then pushing these slaughterhouses to outer rural areas, away from places where civilized sensibilities could be offended.

A Quest for Animal Rights in the 21st Century

Similar developments can be observed currently in people's attitudes towards animal suffering. Many contemporary authors, such as Ruth Harrison, Richard Ryder, Brigid Brophy, Roslind Godlovitch, Tom Regan, Donald Broom, and Peter Singer extend Bentham's argument in their writings. They consider issues of animal interests, needs, sentience, rights, and captivity, among many others, illustrating a shift in people's moral concerns about animals (Godlovitch 1973; Singer 1985; Regan and Singer 1989; Regan 2003; Regan 2004; Harrison 2013; Singer 2015). Such developments, both in philosophy and public debates, facilitated the establishment of animal welfare NGOs, charities and campaigns: Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Open Cages, World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), World Animal Protection (WAP), Humane Society International (HSI), to name a few. These organizations tackle the issues of industrial farming, wildlife trafficking, pet sales, and animal captivity to ensure animal protection and shielding from human cruelty. The emergence of these organisations has been accompanied by people's growing aversion to animal suffering and their dissatisfaction with their government's lack of action on industrial farming, environmental repercussions, experiments on animals, and many others.

As a result, NGOs currently have the possibility of acquiring a certain measure of power to influence major retailers for more ethical food sourcing and therefore impact consumers as well as their buying choices (Freidberg 2004). It is possible not only due to rising consumer sensibilities that facilitate more conscious buying habits and increase in demand for animal-friendly products, but also due to a shift in relations between NGOs, retailers, governments, and consumers. Animal welfare NGOs are also concerned with improving existing legislation on animal welfare, such as the development of EU regulations on pregnant sows facilitated by CIWF. This enormous European discourse illustrates a web of interdependencies that can be analysed within smaller relations between people, their attitudes to non-human animals, relations with their governments, retailers, and other consumers – for example, when looking at one nation or local communities.

However, the expansion of animal welfare sensibilities in philosophy and public debate through the emergence of animal orientated organisations and rise in vegetarianism goes hand in hand with a rapid increase in global livestock production and wildlife trafficking (Blokhuys et al. 2013). This inconsistency can be linked to the invisibility of so-called disgusting practices that were firstly 'pushed behind views' in the 18th century, such as slaughter of animals for consumption. Progressive urbanization also goes hand in hand with the invisibility of industrial farming systems; therefore, despite the rise in people's sensitivity to animal cruelty, many remain detached from the act of killing animals for food.

Animal Suffering and the Civilizing Process

Written by Adrianna Kapek-Goodridge

This modern discourse therefore involves not only separation and distance from certain practices, but also a development of environmental activism. Nevertheless, the placement of slaughterhouses and growing environmental activism illustrate the civilizing process moving forward; the former in making the repugnant issues invisible as to not offend civilized sensibilities, the latter in growing sensitivity to violence towards animals.

Conclusion – a Celebration of ‘Civilized’ Attitudes?

An enhanced sensitivity to violence is accompanied by increasing forms of social self-restraint and feelings of repugnance towards visible brutality in human relations (Elias 2000). However, the analysis of human-animal interactions over the last five centuries illustrates a parallel civilizing process concerning human-animal relations. This is reflected in the development of new sensibilities that influenced the disgust of civilized societies towards slaughter practices and which defined manners of self-restraint. This progress has been demonstrated by the increasing number of public debates on animal cruelty and the rise of vegetarianism, with subsequent ‘invisibility’ of intense farming practices and increase in worldwide meat consumption.

In line with shifting approaches of European societies and various animal welfare NGO activities, the European Union recognised animals as sentient beings for the first time in 1997 with the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997). This development has paved the road for legitimising the improvements of animal-related legislation and invited further public discussion on humanity’s moral responsibility to non-human animals. The changes in European regulations and growing awareness of slaughter practices can therefore be interpreted as civilizing ‘spurts’ that define anew the meaning of being civilized, despite, or possibly because of, certain practices being ‘pushed behind the scenes’. Therefore, the extension of Elias’s argument of the civilizing process provides an innovative account of how and why people’s attitudes to non-human animals have been evolving over the centuries. Nevertheless, when analysing people’s approaches to animal suffering, the question remains: What does it mean to be civilised in the 21st century?

Notes

[1] Humans are the centre of the world and supreme to all creation.

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Animal Suffering and the Civilizing Process

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