

Civilising Children with a Question Mark¹

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Cywilizowanie dzieci? Społeczno-kulturowe badania dzieciństwa w perspektywie teorii Norberta Eliasa [Civilising Children? Social-Cultural Studies on Childhood in the Perspective of Norbert Elias's Theory], a book edited by Marta Rakoczy and Zofia Boni, should primarily be placed within the field of childhood studies, as we can easily guess since it belongs to the series "Dzieci / granice / etnografie" [Children / boundaries / ethnographies] published by the Childhood Studies Interdisciplinary Research Team at the University of Warsaw. The originality of this volume in the series consists in the fact that the book owes its coherence not to a specific problem discussed (such as ADHD, in vitro fertilisation) or a category of collected data, but to a common theoretical approach – in this case, it is Norbert Elias's conception, which is referred to by all authors in the volume.

Such an enterprise may serve various aims. One may concentrate above all on the elaborated scientific material and use the chosen theoretical concept merely as a ready-made set of analytical tools. Someone else may analyse a selected fragment of reality and combine the use of conceptual apparatus with a reflection on the theory itself. On the whole, the first approach definitely dominates in the volume, but the second one is represented by Marta Bucholc's opening article ("Wychowanie dzieci jako motor procesów cywilizacji (i decywilizacji)" [Children Upbringing as a Driving Force of the

¹ This article is a review of the book: *Cywilizowanie dzieci? Społeczno-kulturowe badania dzieciństwa w perspektywie teorii Norberta Eliasa*, eds. Zofia Boni, Marta Rakoczy, Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa 2023. The review was originally published in Polish: "Cywilizowanie ze znakiem zapytania", *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 2024, no. 2, pp. 159–162, <https://doi.org/10.31338/2657-599X.ph.2024-2.11>.

Civilising (and Decivilising) Processes]). The author makes use of Elias's conception in order to argue, somewhat perversely, that contemporary relationships between children and adults are ruled both by paedocentrism and paedophobia, understood as two sides of the same coin – mutually contradictory, yet necessarily interrelated. At the same time, Bucholc in an accessible manner defines the place of primary socialisation in Elias's theory and characterises the German scholar's understanding of this issue.

Marta Bucholc's text provides not only a theoretical basis for the rest of the authors (this is tangibly confirmed by the fact that this article as well as other texts by this author dedicated to Elias are explicitly referred to in most of the articles in the book), but it is also a very good introduction to the monograph's topic and allows to discern the element that makes it coherent.

Despite the very large scope of the scientific material elaborated in individual articles – ranging from analyses of schoolbooks for plastic arts education from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, to interviews with volunteers helping the refugees in the third decade of the 21st century – the common feature of all texts is that they are stories about education of young generations, understood as a process taking place within a complicated system of social relations, called “figurations” in Elias's language. This system involves not only the child's closest milieu, but also a broadly understood social environment, including various types of organisations, media, national and international institutions.

The practical application of the very dynamic and flexible nature of Elias's conception, also strongly underlined by Marta Bucholc, seems to be even more crucial for the character of the entire volume. Namely, the German scholar perceives civilisational transformations as a continuous sequence of fragile consensuses, emerging from the clash of contradictory interests of the groups that gain or lose power. This is not necessarily a one-way process, but rather the civilising process, which means, among others, the flattening of differences in power-sharing and the reduction of violence in social life, is accompanied by a reverse movement – the decivilising process.

The authors of texts contained in the book use various methods of grasping the dynamics of social changes. One of them consists in choosing a pivotal moment in history, such as, for example, the creation of a new state invoked by Julia Harasimowicz and Marta Rakoczy (the creation of the Second Polish Republic) and Weronika Parfianowicz (the first years of the Third Polish Republic). For a researcher who remains within the framework of Elias's conception, such periods may be particularly tempting, not only due to the possibility of observing, like in a fast-motion film, the process of creation of new social figurations and the transformation of habits that have become insufficient or inappropriate in the new situation, but also because the actors of those changes are more prone to subject them to intensive reflection, which gives access to a particularly rich scientific material.

Two mutually complementary texts dedicated to educational projects in the Second Polish Republic (“Ćwiczenia z patrzenia i rysowania. Wychowanie estetyczne

w Polsce w latach 1903–1923 jako proces cywilizowania” [Exercises in Looking and Drawing. Aesthetic Education in Poland in the Years 1903–1923 as a Civilising Process] by Julia Harasimowicz and “Pisanie, przymus, wstyd. Alfabetyzacja dzieci jako medium cywilizowania w przedwojennej Polsce” [Writing, Coercion, Shame. Literacy Development in Children as a Civilising Medium in the Pre-War Poland] by Marta Rakoczy) constitute the most optimistic part of the monograph. They speak of a tendency, inscribed in schoolbooks that were written with the aim to help the educated children interiorize certain principles of thought, conduct and bodily self-control, which the authors present as a relatively coherent and in many aspects reasonable project, enhancing the chances of the educated persons to make use of their own internal resources and to actively participate in social and political life. However, it has to be said that the optimistic tone of both articles results, to a large extent, from the fact that the authors focus on the project itself, and take little account of its actual implementation.

The same optimism cannot be found in other articles, investigating the social life of the Third Polish Republic. This reality is presented in much darker colours, and the crucial question underlying all of those texts is based on the doubt whether in the education of children, in various domains of Polish social life, the civilising processes prevail over the decivilising processes, or whether the opposite is true.

Many texts level their accusations at the state. According to the authors, the tendency to intensify violence in social life and to increase social inequalities can be attributed to the activity of the state’s institutions and legal regulations, beginning with the Balcerowicz Plan (“‘Już można – tylko co?’”. *Filipinka* wobec ekonomii moralnej czasów transformacji ustrojowej”) [‘Now You Can – But What Exactly?’”. *Filipinka* on the Moral Economy of the Times of Political Transformation] by Weronika Parfianowicz), through the core curriculum and schoolbooks for sexual education, which excluded from the norm the non-heteronormative persons (“O cywilizowaniu (queerowych) dzieciństwach. Notatki na marginesie”) [On Civilising the (Queer) Childhoods. Notes on the Margin] by Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska), to the lack of regulations facilitating the implementation of the right for education and, in consequence, the participation in social life of immigrants’ children (“Między obowiązkiem szkolnym a prawem do nauki. Dziecko z doświadczeniem uchodźczym w polskiej szkole A.D. 2021”) [Between Compulsory Schooling and the Right for Education. A Child with Refugee Experience in the Polish School A.D. 2021] by Ada Tymiąńska).

Experts’ recommendations are also subject to criticism. The authors present further dark sides of various civilising projects. For instance, the measures taken to protect children from violation of their broadly understood boundaries in the sexual sphere led to treating them as fully “innocent” creatures; as a result, early attempts to discover one’s own identity in this sphere are perceived as pathological, especially if this concerns an LGBT sexuality (“O cywilizowaniu (queerowych) dzieciństwach...”). Slimming a child, which is meant to establish healthy ways of bodily self-control,

leads to a negative body image and prompts young people to take chaotic corrective measures with detrimental health and social effects (“‘Jak będzie szczupła, to będzie miała łatwiej w życiu’. Uwikłanie procesów cywilizacji, medykalizacji i estetyzacji w kontekście dziecięcej otyłości” [‘If She’s Slim, She’ll Have It Easier in Life’. The Entanglement of Civilising Processes, Medicalisation and Aestheticisation in the Context of Childhood Obesity] by Zofia Boni). The contradictory expectations placed on adoptive parents – who are supposed to create an ordinary family, and at the same time fulfil advanced therapeutic functions – leave them confused and make it harder for them to cope with the real problems they face (“‘Powiedzenie, że jesteśmy troszkę inną rodziną, nie jest niczym złym’. O procesach cywilizowania rodziny w kontekście adopcji w Polsce” [‘There Is Nothing Wrong in Saying That Our Family Is a Bit Different’. On the Processes of Family Civilising in the Context of Adoption in Poland] by Ewa Maciejewska-Mroczek and Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk). Finally, perceiving the youth language as a broken version of the official idiom, associated with prison slang and a risk of perpetuating the erroneous principles in speech and writing, results in overlooking its creative and relationship-forming potential (“‘Frendzia na topie’. Cywilizowanie praktyk językowych współczesnych nastolatków” [‘My Top Bestie’. Civilising the Linguistic Practices of Contemporary Adolescents] by Marta Rakoczy). We may, therefore, draw a general conclusion that the solutions suggested by experts, which are meant to facilitate adaptation in the social world, in practice lead to various exclusions and foster aggressive and self-aggressive behaviours.

The contradictions present in educational models are revealed in a particularly interesting way in those texts that include the point of view of young people themselves (regrettably, their point of view is taken into account relatively rarely, considering the fact that these studies employ, for the most part, childhood studies methodology, in which treating the young investigated individuals as subjects, not objects, is particularly important). The texts where this can be observed (“‘Nie czuję się małym dzieckiem’. O sprawczości dzieci w procesie dorastania z perspektywy procesu cywilizacyjnego” [‘I Don’t Feel Like a Little Kid’. On Children’s Agency in the Process of Growing-Up from the Perspective of the Civilising Process] by Maria Tulisow, “‘Jak będzie szczupła, to będzie miała łatwiej w życiu’...” by Zofia Boni, “‘Już można – tylko co?’...” by Weronika Parfianowicz) demonstrate quite unanimously that the division according to which adults are the civilising agents, and children and youth – the civilised subjects, can no longer be maintained. Each time a voice is given to the youth, it turns out that young people are the ones who act in line with strongly internalised principles – sometimes they radicalise the message coming from adults, sometimes they become its guardians, when the closest environment seems to be failing in this respect, and at times they denounce its extremist and violent nature. It is also clear beyond doubt that adolescence, as a period of intensified sense of shame, may be regarded as particularly important for the civilising process.

Childhood studies have proved to be a field perfectly suited for the adoption of Norbert Elias's perspective, which helped the authors aptly grasp the paradoxes of the process of creation of a new citizen in the contemporary society. The richness of evoked topics turns this book into a compelling read, and the authors' shared perspective gives the impression that the kaleidoscopic sequence of themes ultimately forms a coherent image.

References

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