# ‘Counter-spurt’ but not ‘de-civilization’: fascism, (un)civility, taboo, and the ‘civilizing process’

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## ABSTRACT

Norbert Elias described the rise of fascism and the violent spasm of the Holocaust as examples of extreme ‘counter-spurts’ towards ‘re-barbarisation’ in his overall schema of recent human history as a ‘civilizing process’. But the shift towards the normalization of uncivility and extreme violence that became trademarks of fascism in the interwar years was in fact far less at odds with assumed mainstream values than it actually appeared or assumed to be. In this article, I argue that fascist uncivil ideology, discourse, and praxis need to be placed along a continuum of mainstream acceptability that rendered them broadly desirable or tolerable to mainstream society at the time in spite of their radical deviation from an assumed liberal canon. I focus on two examples of fascist uncivility - attack on the liberal framework of minority protection promoted by the liberal powers post-WW1; and violent anti-semitism. Each of these instances involved targets that were in principle associated with taboos that fascism helped deconstruct and conditionally transgress in practice, in the name of defending a narrowly re-defined ‘we-identity’. I argue that, while fascist uncivility represented a violent, extreme ‘counter-spurt’ in its cumulative dynamics and effects, it was underwritten by a number of facilitating impulses and behaviours that were deeply embedded in interwar mainstream societies and thus did not constitute qualitative regressions from the ‘civilizing process’, as Elias claimed afterwards.

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From the moment of its founding meeting in central Milan in March 1919, Fascism stood out as a zealous taboo-breaker. Fascists embraced violent transgressive language and action directed at their perceived political enemies. Fascist squads too set the tone of Fascist radical ‘new politics’[[1]](#endnote-1) on the streets, again harassing their opponents and regularly engaging in violent action against them.[[2]](#endnote-2) The subsequent success and political diffusion of fascism across Europe was as dizzying as the escalation of Fascist uncivility in the early 1920s. But that this shift occurred right after the end of WW1, at the dawn of what was meant to be, and was initially heralded as, a ‘liberal moment’ – that is, the anticipated decisive climax of a trans-European liberal experiment in building a lasting civil society based on rights, freedoms, and a greater drive towards equality - is even more staggering.[[3]](#endnote-3) The trans-national appeal of fascism articulated a seething hyper-nationalist / exclusionary backlash[[4]](#endnote-4) but also seized the opportunity to posit a radical counter-utopia to a (seemingly) mainstream liberal teleology of pluralism, growing empathy for an expanding circle of others, internationalism, and pacifism.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Still, the creeping normalization of fascist uncivil ideas, discourses, and eventually extreme violent practices cannot be understood as aberrant regressions from an assumed mainstream ‘civilizing’ orthodox path, even as they constituted marked reversals of elemental *liberal* civic norms and assumed taboos. Breaking taboos may be usually associated with attitudes and practices conventionally labelled as ‘extremist’ (and thus qualitatively excised from what is assumed to be ‘the mainstream’); but normalizing the transgression to the extent that it becomes a widespread internalized norm shared by growing social constituencies points to a far higher degree of its pre-existing embeddedness in this very mainstream. Fascism did not generate such extreme beliefs, resentments, fears, and anxieties in the first place; these had already been part of the tapestry of mainstream views in interwar Europe for a long time, even as optimism was gaining hold that they would be tamed and eventually overcome in the post-WW1 new global era. Instead fascism’s remarkable appeal in the interwar years was based on its capacity for resourcefully mobilizing, sanctioning, and then shaping these alternative suppressed aspirations and forms of behaviour into dominant alternative paradigms of thought and action that sought either to drastically modify or to supplant altogether existing mainstream norms. The cumulative effects of fascist uncivility may have been unquestionably and drastically regressive; but the individual components and affective drivers of the fascist ideological and political radical ‘synthesis’ were far from aberrant or seismic.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In this article, I examine fascist uncivility through the lens of Norbert Elias’s pioneering but ever-controversial sociological study of what he described as the ‘civilizing process’. Elias presented civility as the macro-historical effect of the gradual social propagation and embedding of *civilité* from the sixteenth century onwards, as the all-crucial interim phase between the two poles of barbarism and civilization. He located the origins of this change at the intersection of the structural rise of the modern state (with its growing monopoly over sanctioned violence) and the psychological shift from external constraints to individual self-restraint – both considered the hallmarks of the ‘civilizing process’.[[7]](#endnote-7) I argue that the significance of the Eliasian scheme for fascism studies - particularly in terms of how *un*civil ideas and language facilitated a generalized transition to transgressive violent praxis in interwar Europe - has not been fully appreciated. George L Mosse, who had initially criticised Elias for his reading of European and German history,[[8]](#endnote-8) subsequently subsumed many of his insights into his analysis of fascism as a ‘split-personality’ historical phenomenon (at once an affirmation/recasting of ‘bourgeois’/‘civil’ values and manners of the nineteenth century and an aggressive ‘anti-bourgeois’ revolt).[[9]](#endnote-9) His notion of fascist ‘bourgeois respectability’ was clearly indebted to Elias’s macro-historical analysis of changing manners as the core of the ‘civilizing process’. It also prefigured subsequent discussions about social and political ‘(un)civility’ in interwar years, especially in the context of responding to perceived ‘others’ who were deemed threatening both to the individual and to the collective body of the community.

Mosse’s provocative reading of generic fascism (National Socialism included) as partly rooted in the very dynamics of the ‘civilizing process’ unsettled the conventional understanding of fascism in terms of rigid binaries of civilization-versus-barbarism and Enlightenment rationality-versus-atavism that sought to expunge fascism from a normative path of European culture and politics.[[10]](#endnote-10) Rather than presenting the success of interwar fascism as a ‘regression’ into a putative earlier state of ‘barbarism’ (a *de*civilizing ‘counter-spurt’, as Elias himself called it[[11]](#endnote-11)), Mosse posited an alternative nuanced understanding of the affective appeal of fascism as an affirmation of the central role of violent impulses and trends within the ‘civilizing process’ itself. In short, far from being exclusively the binary opposite of *civilité*, violence could also be a ‘normal’ expression of aspects and processes of modern ‘civilization’.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the last three decades, the scholarship of the Holocaust has also grappled with this idea extensively in the context of the facilitation and sanctioning of industrialised mass murder by Nazi Germany. Zygmunt Bauman and Michael Mann, for example, have criticised Elias’s standard analysis of the rise of National Socialism and of the Holocaust as ‘decivilizing’ regressions, positing instead their structural affinities with the project of western modernity.[[13]](#endnote-13) In a similar vein, Enzo Traverso argued for a lineage of eliminationist Nazi violence that, through its bureaucratic sophistication and precision as well as embrace of technology, placed it firmly within the ‘civilizing process’ as its ‘authentic product’.[[14]](#endnote-14) By contrast, Dominick LaCapra has urged scholars to shift their focus away from the ‘modern’ aspects of the Holocaust and towards its ritualistic functions as promoting the sacrificial purification of the community. In a direct critique of Elias’s position, LaCapra drew attention to the ‘unexpected, indeed uncanny combination of the new and the (seemingly) old [that] is oversimplified or even mistakenly understood in terms of regression to barbarism or even brutalization’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Exceptionalizing fascism in general and National Socialism in particular as a ‘*de*civilizing spurt’ is, in my opinion, a problematic and unhelpful line of interpretation. In fact, I argue that Elias may have over-estimated the overall qualitative dynamics of civility in his ‘civilizing process’. His notion of ‘civilization’ as an ongoing historical project with no ‘zero (starting) point’, linear direction or end stage rested on the expectation of a more or less symmetrical translation of sociogenetic (structural) developments into a set of psychogenetic (behavioural) changes. Paramount among the latter were two shift processes: from external constraints over individual and collective behaviour to increasing self-restraint; and from strictly *bounded* collective identities to increasingly broader and detached forms of social consciousness made possible through unbounded interdependence. The social appeal and political success of interwar fascism expressed and exposed the variable, reversible dynamics of these processes as *ordinal* counter-movements otherwise inscribed *within* the overall matrix of the ‘civilizing process’ and not as qualitative ruptures thereof. I therefore propose an analysis of fascist radical *un*civility as rooted in a *continuum of mainstream acceptability*, embedded in key trends of the ‘civilizing process’ but resting on revised underlying norms about community identification and treatment of otherness. I analyse two very different examples of uncivil backlash that became associated with, and sanctioned by, interwar fascism: first, the implacable attack on the liberal framework of ideas and principles promoted by the liberal powers as the basis of the post-WW1 order; and second, the normalization of violent anti-semitism. By examining the facilitating drivers of each of these spasms of uncivility, I approach fascist agency in terms of authorizing and then spearheading *a limited, conditional transgression* of associated *taboos* without destroying the taboos themselves or the mainstream values of civility that they otherwise promoted. In so doing, I also highlight how fascist uncivility responded to, expressed, and effectively mobilized widespread mainstream social and political support for a radical redefinition of the notions of community and citizenship in uncompromising opposition to more recent liberal precepts.

## The ‘civilizing process’, ‘decivilizing spurts’, and ‘the mainstream’

Elias saw civility in behaviour as an integral driver of the ‘civilizing process’ in Europe in the last four centuries. He identified two key processes of change - centralization of power by the modern state; and increasing social inter-dependence among members of social groups - as resulting in an overall reconstruction of mentalities towards the rationalization of social interaction.[[16]](#endnote-16) Over time, the standards regulating violence, sexual behaviour, social manners, and public forms of speech became more sophisticated, ‘with an increasing threshold of shame, embarrassment and repugnance’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Civility then was the cumulative behavioural outcome of fundamental modifications in the structure of society (sociogenesis), translating over time into changes in the individual and collective psychical habitus (psychogenesis).[[18]](#endnote-18) Elias identified the monopolization of power and the strict regulation of violence by the institutions of the modern state as the critical structural requirement for the ensuing shift from externally imposed control of behaviour to individual self-restraint. This historical transference from sociogenesis to psychogenesis thus made possible a shift towards increasing individual self-restraint and empathy for expanding circles of individuals and groups beyond traditional forms of collective membership:

[t]he peculiar stability of the apparatus of psychological self-restraint which emerges as a decisive trait built into the habitus of every ‘civilized’ human being, stands in the closest relationship to the monopolization of physical force and the growing stability of the central organs of society. Only with the formation of this kind of relatively stable monopoly institutions do societies acquire those characteristics as a result of which the individuals forming them get attuned, from infancy, to a highly regulated and differentiated pattern of self-restraint; only in conjunction with these monopolies does this kind of self-restraint require a higher degree or automaticity, does it become, as it were, ‘second nature’.[[19]](#endnote-19)

However inspired, sweeping, and sophisticated it is considered to be nowadays, Elias’s *Civilizing Process*, originally published in 1939, remained marginal to sociological and historiographical accounts until it was re-issued and then translated in English thirty years later. Along with a wave of belated critical recognition, however, came a string of high-profile critical appraisals of the work.[[20]](#endnote-20) Of primary relevance to this discussion were two criticisms in particular: its alleged totalizing historical teleology, aligned with modern notions of civilizing progress in ‘the west’; and its inability to account for the devastating catastrophes of the twentieth century, with fascism, WW2, and the Nazi ‘Final Solution’ paramount among them.[[21]](#endnote-21) Critics such as Charles Tilly have noted a potential slippage between notions of broad directional change and the suggestion of ineluctable long-term ‘progress’ in Elias’s interpretation.[[22]](#endnote-22) The accusation that Elias posited a quasi-linear historical development scheme towards ‘civilization’-qua-pacification/interdependence, as well as its refutation by defenders of his approach, have been extensively paraded in reviews of the ‘civilizing process’ since its re-publication in 1969. Even supporters of Elias’s analysis have conceded that he often used such complex and loaded terms in rather unsystematic and fluid ways throughout his long account, obfuscating distinctions between changes in quality versus shifts in quantity, between emic and etic approaches to ‘civilization’ or between processual and normative/ethical understandings.[[23]](#endnote-23) It is worth reiterating nevertheless the main defence of Elias’s ‘civilizing process’ thesis so often invoked by his apologists: that he conceived of the 'civilizing process' as a dominant *cumulative* – and not linear or automatic - trajectory of historical travel;[[24]](#endnote-24) that he underlined its fragility, its inherent blindness; and that he did not rule out the potentiality of movement in the opposite direction – ‘criss-cross movements, shifts and spurts in this or that direction on a smaller scale’.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Such ‘decivilizing spurts’, Elias conceded, may occur at any point[[26]](#endnote-26) when enhanced insecurity and fear among members of a society caused rationalization – the ‘armour of civilized society’, as he described it – to crumble or collapse altogether.[[27]](#endnote-27) So how would he account for the devastating clustering of extreme violent episodes in the twentieth century? Here we arrive at the second criticism against the Eliasian scheme, raised in relation to events such as the devastating appeal of fascism in interwar years or the violent spasm of the Holocaust. In the original text of the *Civilizing Process*, Elias had already alluded that the period he was living in already qualified as a ‘decivilizing’ spurt, unfolding in the wake of WW1 and gathering pace in the 1920s-1930s:

[o]ne such fluctuation is present today in the memories of all: in the period following World War I, as compared to the pre-war period, a ‘relaxation of morals’ appears to have occurred. A number of constraints imposed on behaviour before the war have weakened or disappeared entirely. *Many things forbidden earlier are now permitted.* And seen at close quarters, the movement seems to be proceeding in the direction opposite to shown here.[[28]](#endnote-28)

But it was half a century later, in his seminal later work *The Germans* (1989/1996), that Elias finally dealt with the momentous *micro*-historical context of twentieth-century totalitarianism and eliminationist anti-semitism that were unfolding at the time of the publication of the *Civilizing Process*. Echoing aspects of the *Sonderweg* thesis, he argued that there were exceptional long-term tendencies present in Germany’s historical path (going all the way back to the formation and dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire) that undermined the process of centralization of state power and the formation of a strong middle class as driver of functional democratization.[[29]](#endnote-29) In addition, he claimed that a set of unique circumstances in the Weimar Republic accentuated and prolonged the ‘decivilizing’ effects of the preceding war and facilitated the acceptance of a militaristic mentality by large sectors of German society.[[30]](#endnote-30) As a result, escalating uncivility and levels of violence directed at an enlarged circle of perceived enemies made a spectacular return and culminated in the Nazi campaign to exterminate Europe’s Jews, with its kaleidoscope of willing transnational appendages. Elias memorably explained the rise of National Socialism to power and its murderous ‘Final Solution’ project as the ‘deepest regression [from the civilizing process] … to the barbarism and savagery of earlier times’.[[31]](#endnote-31) His chosen language of ‘barbarism’ is indeed awkward and problematic, positing *civilité* as an interim stage of historical development between primitivism and a normative category of ‘civilization’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Nevertheless, he also sought to re-integrate the ‘decivilizing spurt' of Nazism and the Holocaust into the open horizon of potentialities intrinsic to his ‘civilizing process’ even as it involved profound reversals in terms of violence, self-restraint, and human inter-dependence.[[33]](#endnote-33) *Micro*-historical psychogenetic (behavioural) swings in one place or another, in other words, did not invalidate the analysis of *macro*-historical sociogenetic processes as a cumulative direction of historical travel.

The implications of Elias’s attempt to accommodate the rise of National Socialism into his overall scheme extend beyond the particular context of interwar Germany. The rise and spread of fascism across many countries of Europe in the interwar period was driven by a generalized atmosphere of heightened anxiety, fear caused by the seemingly dizzying pace of change, instability and perception of profound crisis that lingered on long after the end of WW1. Liberal ideas of individualism, respect for diversity, parliamentarism, minority protection, and international co-operation crumbled under the weight of collective perceptions of insecurity and existential danger from outsiders that appeared to justify exceptional responses in the name of community self-defence. This resulted in a deepening of community self-identification based on strict national and/or racial membership, while promoting a severe narrowing its membership and the aggressive exclusion of those deemed alien or dangerous to its welfare. Such a violent constriction of the circle of empathy felt by many individuals and groups was fed by otherwise mainstream ideas of exclusive identitarian nationalism and state sovereign power that seemingly justified a violent drive towards purification in the name of self-preservation.[[34]](#endnote-34) In addition, political and social norms broken by the two paradigmatic fascist regimes in Italy and Germany found numerous willing – and sometimes unlikely - adherents beyond their respective national borders, and indeed political constituencies, precisely because such radicalism spoke to profound fissures in the political and social mainstream of interwar Europe.[[35]](#endnote-35) The crumbling of many ostensibly liberal-parliamentary regimes in central, southern, and eastern Europe in the 1930s resulted in dictatorships that were supported by broad sectors of the political mainstream (conservatives, military and/or religious institutions) and adopted, however selectively or critically, a number of ‘fascist’ practices demonstrated elsewhere. Thus what we call ‘fascism’ was successfully diffused beyond Italy and Germany even when fascism’s membership and its electoral basis remained limited; or when its radical political entrepreneurs failed in their bid to power.[[36]](#endnote-36) When it came to the implementation of the ‘Final Solution’ during WW2, the support and very often active participation of segments of the local population in the undertaking was as striking as the willing (sometimes even anticipatory) collaboration of most of the authoritarian regimes that had appeared in the previous decade.[[37]](#endnote-37)

All these changes undoubtedly qualified as a ‘counter-spurt’ when judged against either the macro-historical trends of the civilizing process or the expectations of a ‘liberal moment’ post-WW1. But did they also constitute qualitative ‘*de*civilizing’ regressions in terms of their underlying assumptions - the escalating uncivility and violence, the rejection of parliamentary democracy in favour of authoritarianism[[38]](#endnote-38) or the narrowing of empathy towards others in the interwar period? At this point the methodological dichotomy between an emic/internal approach to ‘civilization’ and an etic/external counter-perspective results in notably different verdicts – and such a distinction is not consistently applied in Elias’s analysis. From an emic (that is, specific to the place, time, and societies under review) point of view, neither an extension of empathy to perceived others (as dictated by liberal norms), nor an adherence to parliamentary democracy, pluralism, and pacifism amounted to entrenched ‘mainstream’ canons, even if they could meaningfully be regarded as such from a particular etic perspective.[[39]](#endnote-39) Early interpretations of fascism as a stark deviation from mainstream European/national history and culture, such as those offered by Benedetto Croce, Gerhard Ritter or Friedrich Meinecke,[[40]](#endnote-40) derived from a narrow, predominantly external/etic reading of mainstream society's pulse – in essence, a wishful projection of normative liberal expectations onto the far more granular realities of mainstream consciousness in interwar European societies. This misapprehension is symptomatic of a general heuristic confusion surrounding the concept of ‘the mainstream’ per se. In fact, in deploying the term without precise conceptual foundations, one encounters another important dichotomy that refers to two otherwise partly divergent formations under the same appellation. On the one hand, there is a *normative* mainstream, expressed in the language of ‘ought to’ through hegemonic channels mediated by politicians, public intellectuals, educational institutions, and established media outlets. On the other hand, there is an *aggregative* mainstream, denoting a volatile patchwork of ideas and attitudes that occupy a broad spectrum of acceptability all the way to the boundaries of what is broadly considered taboo extremist ideas, speech, and behaviour. To equate ‘the mainstream’ with a particular normative projection is to bestow upon it wishful meaning and undue stability that prevent a full appreciation of its heterogeneous and protean nature.

Fascist uncivil ideas and discourses thrived on the indeterminate borderline spaces between the normative ‘civilizing’ mainstream fiction and an often obfuscated cluster of uncivil impulses still rooted in mainstream society, sustained by enduring traditional beliefs, old stereotypes, and new anxieties. These grew around a profound lacuna of the ‘civilizing process’ linked to the self-constitution of ‘the community as both an inclusive and an exclusive imagined formation. As Mosse argued, it was with regard to perceived otherness that the thresholds of respectability were tested and then lowered at the same time that they were otherwise re-affirmed vis-à-vis the accepted – narrower - membership of the community.[[41]](#endnote-41) Elias himself came to review this tension in his later work, talking of shifts in the ‘we-identity’ balance and the persistent appeal of ‘group self-love’ manifesting itself as amplified exclusion and denigration of perceived others/otherness.[[42]](#endnote-42) Excessive hostility to a designated out-group was both resulting from, and conducive to, excessive community self-love, justified by the erection of a ‘rigid boundary between an inflated version of the self and the denigrated and abjected other’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The remarkable surge of extreme collective disinhibition towards particular groups of others across interwar Europe highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the place of fascist uncivility in the overall Eliasian scheme of the ‘civilizing process’. In the following sections, I review two key episodes of uncivil backlash in the interwar years – first, the agitation against liberal minority protection stipulations in the 1920s; and second, the violent persecution of the Jews in the 1930s and WW2 years. Although very different, these two episodes expressed the same rejection of the universalizing canons of the ‘liberal moment’ and an emphatic affirmation of the yawning gap between aggregative and normative mainstream. They also echoed a similar (deep and widespread) desire for a radical re-conceptualization of the ‘we-identity’ - the first by resisting/reversing its (liberal) extension to outsiders; and the second by promoting a project of aggressive redemption of the community against perceived threatening others. Individually and in sequence, these two episodes became principal arenas of contestation and transgression in which fascist input and agency proved decisive.

## Minority protection in post-WW1 Europe: an imposed liberal taboo and its discontents

The interwar period was marked by a striking paradox. On the one hand, in the wake of WW1 liberalism extended its reach across Europe, with a number of new states that succeeded the collapsed empires moving along the path of democracy and enshrining an extended set of liberal rights in new national constitutions. On the other hand, from the first moment the fundamental assumptions of the liberal political canon came under ferocious and sustained attack by both the revolutionary left and the hyper-nationalist ‘old’ and especially ‘new’ right.[[44]](#endnote-44) Right-wing nationalist resentment at the post-1918 liberal order targeted a series of political and social innovations, such as the institutions of global cooperation, the extension of parliamentary rule, the codification of a wider set of liberal rights into the constitutional order of an increasing circle of countries, and the legal protection offered to ethnic and religious minorities. At the heart, however, of all these expressions of backlash was a fundamental unease with the attempted inclusive reconstitution of the ‘we-identity’ and a desire to reverse, even violently, these and other earlier changes to that effect.

These tensions were particularly felt in those new or relatively recently formed states where liberal canons held weak normative status and newly inflated nationalist aspirations clashed more violently with perceived external liberal impositions in the wake of WW1. In Romania, the perceived imposition of a model of full parliamentary governance as an integral part of the postwar order in central Europe touched on a much deeper cultural and political faultline between supporters of western modernization and those advocating a revival of distinct Romanian traditions as an alternative model for the country.[[45]](#endnote-45) With the Liberals emerging as the biggest political party in the post-1918 period, the same debate re-emerged, this time focusing symbolically on the issue of a new constitution for the Greater Romania created by the post-WW1 peace treaties. Invited to contribute to the public debate about the form of the future constitution in 1922, the historian and nationalist politician Nicolae Iorga argued against what he described as an uncritical import of ‘ready-made’ foreign legal and political models, making the case instead for the primacy of Romanian traditions and unwritten laws in determining the constitutional order of Greater Romania.[[46]](#endnote-46) However, by far the most controversial stipulation of the new constitution concerned the introduction of the non-discrimination clause (Article 5), which stated that ‘Romanians, irrespective of ethnic origin, language or religion shall enjoy freedom of conscience, of education, of press, of assembly, of association; and all[[47]](#endnote-47) freedoms and rights established by law’.[[48]](#endnote-48) Such a stipulation was particularly sensitive because the considerable territorial gains awarded to Romania by the Treaty of St Germain in 1919 involved a significant number of new minority groups. Also covered by the clause, though not explicitly mentioned in the constitution, was the particular status of the country’s Jewish minority. Back in 1918, the Romanian delegation under prime minister Ion Brătianu had objected strenuously to the condition of accepting the treaty’s minority protection clause. Brătianu reportedly stormed out of the negotiations in angry protest when he was presented with the demand for granting full citizenship to almost all Romanian Jews, including those significant numbers coming from the newly awarded territories.[[49]](#endnote-49) The imposition of an explicit commitment to Jewish emancipation was also fiercely contested by a broad spectrum of politicians from the old conservative right to far more radical hyper-nationalist figures such as Alexandru C. Cuza. Speaking for hours in front of the parliamentary assembly, Cuza painted an apocalyptic picture of the future with the alleged Jewish over-representation in the country’s economic, social, and cultural life causing the terminal decline of Romanian identity and of the sovereign character of the state.[[50]](#endnote-50)

The widespread reaction to the minority provisions of the new constitution in Romania fell on a particularly fertile soil of exclusionary nativism and violent anti-semitism with intellectual roots going back to the nineteenth century. Universities in particular became symbolic battlegrounds in 1920-23, where forces of a ‘new’ hyper-nationalist right, with Cuza as the paternal intellectual figurehead and the young Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (future leader of the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael and the Iron Guard) as the rising star of the movement, openly demanding the re-introduction of exclusionary measures against Romanian Jews as the first step towards disemancipation and eventual expulsion from the Romanian territories.[[51]](#endnote-51) When the constitution was finally approved in March 1923, Cuza moved the battle against liberalism and Jewish emancipation into the official political domain with the formation of the League of National Christian Defence. This set off a new political dynamic for the Romanian ‘new’ right that would lead to the radicalization of the ‘generation of 1922’ and the emergence of a distinctly violent, activist form of Romanian fascism in Codreanu’s Iron Guard.[[52]](#endnote-52)

The issue of minority protection was fiercely contested by another country at the peace negotiations in Paris. Poland, a new state arising out of the territorial and political vacuum caused by World War I, was singled out for a separate Minorities Treaty that included a positive commitment to non-discrimination of any group. Protection of the country’s sizeable Jewish minority was explicitly mentioned in the treaty, after pressure from the Entente powers to introduce legal guarantees for the Jews against a backdrop of anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland’s eastern border during 1918-19.[[53]](#endnote-53) The additional provision of legal guarantee and oversight of minority rights enshrined in the treaty by the League of Nations added further fuel to the Polish impression of an onerous external imposition. The Polish delegation in Paris protested that both the separate minority treaty and the enforced stipulations about Jews amounted to unfair and discriminatory treatment directed at a sovereign state.[[54]](#endnote-54) In the end, they too run out of options in the face of concerted Entente support for the Wilsonian programme of minority self-determination. The Minority Treaty was eventually signed in June 1919 and its minority protection provisions found their way in the new liberal constitution of 1921. Its provisions, however, and the perceived affront of external imposition meant that its principles would continue to be fiercely resented and contested both by the Polish nationalist right and significant sectors of the ethnic Polish mainstream public opinion.[[55]](#endnote-55)

In the case of another new state, Hungary, the campaign to undermine the minority provisions included in the Trianon Treaty began immediately after its grudging ratification by the parliament. In 1920, the right-wing government of Pál Teleki voted ‘law 25’ that introduced a *numerus clausus* mechanism for restricting minority representation to universities.[[56]](#endnote-56) Clearly going against commitments that Hungary had accepted in Paris, the law was justified as a temporary measure to allegedly rebalance the over-representation of ethnic groups in higher education, introducing quotas that matched each group’s national percentage. While Jews were not initially singled out in the law, subsequent clarifications by the ministry of education explicitly fixed their quota at 6%. Gyula Gömbös, the then leader of the radical right, pressed for even more stringent restrictions, proposing that the quota include converted Jews as well - to no avail. The government implemented the law loosely, effecting an overall reduction in the number of Jewish students in universities that nevertheless stayed well above the stipulated quota for the group.[[57]](#endnote-57) Meanwhile, the matter was repeatedly referred to the League of Nations for adjudication and foreign investment in Hungary suffered considerably as a result of the negative publicity.[[58]](#endnote-58) Eventually, the Hungarian government succumbed to pressure from the League and amended the law in 1928 by removing the offending stipulations; but the amendment did not completely remove the *numerus clausus* principle, introducing new restrictions on the basis of location that were calculated to affect adversely the overwhelmingly urban Jewish community.[[59]](#endnote-59)

## Taboo and transgression

Overall the post-WW1 framework of liberal-democratic governance and human rights that the Entente powers sponsored at the postwar peace negotiations was promoted on the basis of a set of new canonical norms about citizenship and governance that were presented by the victors as destined to acquire universal paradigmatic status. They were extended and institutionalized through formal treaties and negotiated constitutional provisions, as well as through political pressure from both liberal elites within each country and from outside. The liberal Wilsonian framework of national self-determination and minority protection became an integral component of the postwar *normative* mainstream; but, beyond the narrow circle of liberal sympathisers and ‘European’ modernisers, they were only grudgingly and tactically accepted while widely resented by wide sectors of the conservative and (hyper-) nationalist political forces and their constituencies.[[60]](#endnote-60) While Poland maintained a semblance of adherence to the provisions of the treaty during the 1920s, the rapidly changing international situation in the 1930s weakened the paradigmatic status of the minority protection system overseen by the League of Nations. The cumulative resentment, initially expressed only through more extreme forces of the nationalist right, escalated into blatant defiance once Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor in January 1933 and subsequently Japan (March 1933) and Germany (October 1933) left the League. It was thus not surprising that the Polish foreign minister Josef Beck rescinded the minority treaty in January 1934 and replaced the old constitution with a new one in 1935, re-introducing restrictions to the status of minorities.[[61]](#endnote-61) Romania and Hungary followed shortly afterwards. A short-lived government led by Goga and Cuza revoked the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Jews in 1938.[[62]](#endnote-62) Meanwhile in Hungary a series of anti-Jewish laws were introduced between 1938 and 1941 with increasingly restrictive and discriminatory provisions inspired by the Nazi precedent at Nuremberg.[[63]](#endnote-63)

The ill-fated experiment with an international system of minority protection introduced as part of the negotiations for the Versailles Treaty underlines the ultimate failure of the Entente powers to embed liberal provisions about extended equal citizenship as universal paradigmatic norms into mainstream consciousness. Put differently, international and domestic efforts to enforce the emergent principle of minority protection as a new *universal taboo* backfired and eventually failed. In its standard definition, ‘taboo’ is a strong prohibition of an utterance and/or behaviour deployed against something that is considered either too important for the solidarity of a group (e.g. sacred precepts) or too morally troubling to be adopted as acceptable social practice (e.g. incest, which Sigmund Freud considered as the most powerful universal taboo[[64]](#endnote-64)). While taboos are universal anthropological phenomena, the scope and target of their associated prohibition is different from one society to another; and they are often subject to some degree of change - relaxation, cancellation or reinforcement - over time.[[65]](#endnote-65) In other words, beyond a very restricted circle of universally operative prohibitions, taboos may come and go, lose or gain paradigmatic strength or shift the character or intensity of associated sanctions for transgression. Importantly as well, some taboos may be temporarily suspended in order to deal with an exceptional situation that threatens the community attached to them; and new taboos may be introduced with strict associated moral and/or legal sanctions. As a result, taboos have variable thresholds and strengths, measured by the amount of people who are willing to question their value, contemplate transgression or actively violate them.[[66]](#endnote-66) The latter point is particularly true in two scenarios: first, where social and cultural norms have shifted so much as to render the original assumptions underpinning the taboo increasingly indefensible; and when a new taboo is introduced from above or from outside, whose associated benefits are not obvious to the members of the community or whose stipulations are considered by the group itself to run counter to its established social practices and customs.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Exercising pressure on the national delegations to accept minority protection conditions in return for favourable territorial and other rewards at the post-WW1 peace negotiations may have worked in the short term, for the power dynamics in Paris made non-acceptance of the agreed conditions by the individual states practically impossible at the time. Yet it did not succeed in bestowing upon these new norms the aura of a universal *taboo* prohibition as intended.[[68]](#endnote-68) The taboo was formally established through the incorporation of the imposed minority clauses into new international legal obligations and constitutional commitments; yet the alleged benefits associated with it were fiercely contested by both fringe and mainstream nationalist elements in all the countries where they were introduced as part of the new Versailles order.[[69]](#endnote-69) Furthermore, the universally paradigmatic status of the international framework for supervising the implementation of minority protection through the League of Nations suffered from the very first moment with the decision of the USA not to join the organization and was further undermined by the decision of Japan and Germany to withdraw from the organization.[[70]](#endnote-70)

Thus the attempt of the Entente powers to introduce minority protection and inclusive citizenship as a new taboo component of the post-WW1 order in Europe stumbled from the outset upon local traditions of exclusive nationalism, deeply embedded anti-semitic reflexes, and the stigma of an external insensitive imposition that ran counter to another taboo principle of the Wilsonian framework - that of national sovereignty. During the 1920s, initiatives to contest and revise the minority protection stipulations outlined above formed the tip of an iceberg whose foundations lay deep in hostile public opinions, ruling elites with grudging commitment to the Versailles settlement, and a new brand of radical nationalism that from the first moment pressed for a more robust exercise of exclusive national sovereignty against the international liberal mechanisms put in place after 1919. The gap between, on the one hand, a normative mainstream of liberal respect for minorities and plural equal citizenship for all regardless of ethnic, religious or cultural identities; and, on the other hand, an aggregative mainstream that hosted widespread resentment directed at the stipulations of the Versailles postwar settlement, widened considerably. At that early stage, fascism was only a relatively small component of this complex and much deeper dynamic. However, in the 1930s, when this fascism became a new international political paradigm and local substrata of radical nationalism were emboldened by the radical Nazi exemplar of anti-semitism, racialism, and uncompromising violent activism, anti-minority/anti-Jewish agitation entered a new, infinitely more radical and open-ended phase.

## National Socialism and the limited transgression of the taboo of violence

At this point, it is useful to return to Elias’s schema and examine how a ‘counter-spurt’ may come about as an inversion of trends associated with the ‘civilizing process’. As previously noted, Elias conceded that the decline in mutual self-identification and self-restraint may occur all the time on the individual level; but he was also aware that the required momentum for a real 'counter-spurt' depended on these processes’ escalation into permissible *collective* expressions and behaviours. This escalation involved a transfer of the momentum from, first, a small-group dimension (the transformation of individual uncivil impulses into allowable social practice by members of a particular social group) to an 'intra-state’ or societal domain (involving most members of a state-society), and finally to the 'inter-state' level (which occurs across state boundaries, with developments in one state effecting similar changes in another or even becoming universal norms).[[71]](#endnote-71)

The rise of fascism as an increasingly attractive mainstream political paradigm in the 1930s made a crucial input in all these three processes of escalation. What the March on Rome in 1922 had unlocked as a radical possibility the establishment of the Nazi regime in 1933-34 established as an attractive *and viable* alternative that was far more attractive to large sectors of the European aggregative political and social mainstream. Fascist movements had already started to appear in many European countries in the 1920s but their ideological and political radicalization received fresh momentum from Hitler’s consolidation in power in Germany.[[72]](#endnote-72) At the same time, a wave of ‘authoritarian transformation’ with an increasing ‘fascist’ political hue from 1933 onwards [Austria (March 1933), Estonia (March 1934), Latvia, and Bulgaria (May 1934), Greece (1936), Spain (1939), Romania (1938, 1941)] undermined the putatively normative status of political liberalism in the post-Versailles order. This facilitated a growing political convergence between conservative-authoritarian and fascist paradigms - a process that can be described by the term ‘fascistization’ in relation to the increasingly more radical ideological and political profile of most authoritarian-dictatorial forces and regimes that appeared in south, central, and Eastern Europe.[[73]](#endnote-73) In the eyes of its international admirers and ideological supporters, the Nazi regime in Germany soon emerged as both the template for, and the assumed harbinger of, a new international order with wholly rewritten rules for what constitutes acceptable behaviour.

Nazi extreme uncivility towards its perceived opponents was already evident long before Hitler’s appointment in 1933.[[74]](#endnote-74) But any illusions that the radical edge of Nazism would be somehow tamed through the award of power and its integration into formal state structures dissipated very quickly in 1933 after a series of violent events (Reichstag fire and declaration of a state of emergency, mass arrests of socialists and communists, opening of the Dachau concentration camp, anti-Jewish boycott, beginning of exclusion of Jews from public life) shattered any outstanding illusion. Still, it was the model pioneered by the Nazi regime with the 1935 Nuremberg Laws that marked a seismic turning point for Germany and Europe alike. The new restrictive ‘citizenship’ law and the subsequent legal, economic, social, cultural, and biological ostracism of Jews from the German *Volksgemeinschaft* that it legitimized was a genuine taboo-breaking episode with seismic open-ended implications that would be increasingly and devastatingly felt in the following years. This was not a simple reversal of the Versailles minority protection and equal citizenship principles that Weimar Germany had shown itself to be one of their most enthusiastic international sponsors in the second half of the 1920s.[[75]](#endnote-75) Instead it formalized legally and justified morally the notion of the narrow re-definition of the community’s ‘we-identity’ that sought to exclude an expanding web of groups deemed dangerous to it by expunging them in the most extreme and brutal fashion.

There was a Janus-faced dimension to this reactivation and normalization of taboo-breaking violent impulses by the National Socialist regime. If viewed through the Eliasian prism of societal pacification, the Nazi uncivil discourse and praxis indeed a constituted deep regression from the assumed trajectory of the ‘civilizing process’, as Elias himself later argued. If, however, the vantage point shifted to that of the narrowly conceived ‘we-identity’, then the Nazi murderous campaign against Jews and other otherized minorities mutated into an *external* *war* waged in the name of the protection of the community itself – a war that, qua Elias, was conditionally sanctioned and thus not contrary to the ‘civilizing process’.[[76]](#endnote-76) This alternative understanding does not of course deny the campaign’s distressing ‘decivilizing’ effects; but it does re-situate it in the inherently violent and far more permissive context of a putatively defensive war-like campaign against assumed mortal enemies of the community. As a result, it is not so much the threshold of repugnance to violence that was being questioned but rather the moral legitimacy of its deployment by the state against perceived external others, as well as of the very humanity of its targets.[[77]](#endnote-77) As Elias poignantly noted, ‘the torment, suffering and death of Jews did not appear [to the Nazis] to mean more than that of flies’.[[78]](#endnote-78) The ‘civilizing process’ simply excluded them and other targeted minorities, at the same time that mutual identification and regulation of public violence among the members of the (narrowly re-defined) community was otherwise affirmed and deepened.

Such a displacement of sanctioned violence — against targets excluded from the ‘we-identity’ and expunged legally, socially, and biologically from community — also reframed the taboo of violence as *conditionally violable* in the context of particular *inter*-community interactions without challenging its otherwise paradigmatic validity as an *intra*-community prohibition. In his classic account of taboo and transgression, Georges Bataille mentioned the example of war as the archetype of a *limited* allowable transgression of the taboo of violence without questioning its paradigmatic validity:

We can even go as far as the absurd proposition: ‘The taboo is there in order to be violated.’ … The statement: ‘The taboo is there to be violated’ ought to make sense of the fact that the taboo on murder, universal though it may be, nowhere opposes war.[[79]](#endnote-79)

It was thus the recasting of the violent persecution and expunging of particular community outsiders as an external war that made the transgression ethically imaginable and permissible, not to mention desirable. In other words, transgression was still allowable – but only on the basis of a particular *licence*, granted through utterance or law, to stray from normative standards of behaviour in circumstances defined as exceptional and through appeals to alternative overriding higher principles. The strength of the original taboo and the moral stigma associated with its transgression required a robust justification that in practice placed the taboo in an either-or conflict with alternative principles (in this case, the self-defence of the community; and the alleged sub-humanity of the Jews) and thus opened up the possibility of a morally defensible alternative *violent* course of action as a temporary, focused exception. Licence did not enable a wholesale normalization of violence per se but only its permissible performance against a defined threat/scapegoat for a particular set of reasons and in accordance with an array of new restrictions.[[80]](#endnote-80) Bataille used precisely the word ‘licence’ to describe his understanding of ‘limited transgression’. He was only too keen to note that it did not amount to the positive freedom to be violent; but he also observed that, once transgressed, however conditionally or partially, it unlocked a myriad of new extreme potentials for further radicalization:

[o]ften the transgression of a taboo is no less subject to rules than the taboo itself. No liberty here. ‘At such and such a time and up to a certain point this is permissible’ - that is what the transgression concedes. *But once a limited licence has been allowed, unlimited urges towards violence may break forth*. The barriers are not merely raised, for it may even be necessary at the moment of transgression to assert their solidity.[[81]](#endnote-81)

In order for the suspension/transgression to be accepted and acted upon by the broader community, the justification offered would also need to correspond to social desire for some form of uncivil action against the particular human target. Bataille spoke of a strong element of suppressed desire in transgression, noting that ‘the very prohibition attached to it is what arouses the desire [itself]’.[[82]](#endnote-82) This places the coveted transgression in a complex relation to the aggregative mainstream, as a possibility that is normally proscribed and morally troubling but otherwise rooted in strong affective predispositions shared by a significant portion of mainstream society. Fascist ideology was a crucial facilitator of uncivility by effectively synthesizing, cogently communicating, and eventually underwriting a core set of binaries that were firmly rooted in mainstream cognition: raising the ‘value’ of an ethnically homogeneous national community vis-à-vis specific others; exaggerating the alleged threat presented by the mere existence of these others in the midst of the community; and lessening these others’ human ‘value’, whether through ascribing to them demonic qualities or denying them equal human status and thus customary protection under the taboo of intra-community violence. Far from all fascist movements adopted anti-semitism as a central tenet of their ideology and discourse;[[83]](#endnote-83) but where strong under-currents of anti-Jewish prejudice had already manifested themselves (as was the case especially in Romania, Hungary, and Germany), initially as fringe expressions in the otherwise restrictive international environment of liberal orthodoxy throughout much of the 1920s, fascism embraced them as an integral part of its hyper-nationalist ‘we-identity’ vision and then aligned them with more acceptable ideas of national rebirth, national sovereignty, and protection of the community.

But it is further noteworthy that interwar fascism also developed a strong trans- and inter-national momentum, particularly in the 1930s and during the early war years, when the Axis military campaign and the extermination project against Europe’s Jews unfolded as *joint* undertakings driven and overseen by Nazi Germany.[[84]](#endnote-84) Starting from the small group level (the early adopters who joined the fascist movements), fascism grew in appeal by giving collective political expression to, and organizing politically, wider resentment experienced by a significant number of individuals in mainstream society. By the late-1930s, ‘fascism’ had become a primary pole of loyalty and political inspiration, either through positive ideological/political identification or because of its claim that the world was on the verge of an apocalyptic battle between liberalism, socialist internationalism, and (hyper-)nationalism that would decide once and for all the future world order. Fascism in general, and Nazi Germany as its most radical political manifestation, acquired the status of a sui generis authority, dominating a truly international partnership of hyper-nationalist forces across the continent. Fascist movements across Europe epitomized this sense of transnational loyalty, perceiving themselves as the vanguard soldiers of the international fascist cause. But beyond the circles of committed followers, the burgeoning block of hybrid authoritarian dictatorships that had replaced democracies in the 1920s and 1930s continued to view fascism, and National Socialist Germany in particular, as the de facto forerunner of a global ‘fascist new order’, at the vanguard of a culturally and racially re-defined ‘European’ community engaged in a decisive war against transnational others.[[85]](#endnote-85) Until the early 1940s, the perceived aura of Nazi radical leadership and Axis military invincibility gradually convinced or compelled many in the political and social mainstream of a significant number of countries to follow Germany’s taboo-breaking example. Governments, local authorities, political movements, and increasingly ‘ordinary people’ across the ‘fascist’ bloc became willing agents in the execution of the Nazi violent project of ‘cleansing’ this re-defined ‘Europe’ of its alleged political and racial foes.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Thus fascism’s transnational affective appeal and political dynamics transformed previously suppressed/de-legitimized individual and group desires into a series of intra-state ‘counter-spurts’ that eventually morphed into a single inter-state/inter-national project of transgressive mass violence.[[87]](#endnote-87) It is against this backdrop that we can understand the internationalization of both these taboo-breaking projects as a ‘counter-spurt’ vis-à-vis the ‘liberal moment’ and the normative liberal mainstream but not intrinsically a ‘*de*civilizing’ one in the overall Eliasian scheme.[[88]](#endnote-88) However dramatic and devastating the lapse may have seemed in relation to assumed liberal taboos, the historical experience of fascist uncivility and violence constituted a regression not from norms such as centralization of state power, monopolization and regulation of violence, *civilité* among members of a self-defined group or human inter-dependence per se - but only from growing empathy towards otherness and from a radically expanded sense of the self.[[89]](#endnote-89)

## Conclusions: what kind of ‘counter-spurt’?

Fascism turned uncivility and violence into a single taboo-breaking project of pursuing an alternative redemptive utopia for the narrowly re-defined community. It denied the subjectivity or even sheer humanity of 'the other’. It brandished hyper-nationalism as a superior alternative to global interdependence and a rights-based system. Finally, it legitimized and licensed redemptive violent behaviours as an integral part of its ethical political praxis. That Elias considered self-restraint and mutual identification among human beings as one of the defining characteristics of the ‘civilizing process’ places the fascist vision of a narrow, exclusive ‘we-identity’ expunged from perceived threatening others at fundamental odds with the normative essence of his ‘civilizing process’. Fascists and their ideological and political allies were in the vanguard of the attack on the precepts underwriting the ‘liberal moment’ in the early-twentieth century (the post-WW1 drive towards minority protection, constitutional guarantees for liberal citizenship rights, parliamentary democracy, multilateralism) and of the flagrant transgression of the taboo of violence vis-à-vis particular forms of other-ness. But in describing fascism/Nazism and the Holocaust as ‘re-barbarization’, Elias exaggerated the aberrant/regressive nature of the constituent aspects and drivers, if not the effects themselves, of the fascist ‘counter-spurt’ from his overall scheme of ‘civilization’. For beyond electoral performance or party membership, support for fascism’s ideas and for its uncivil-turn-genocidal project was driven by beliefs, anxieties, and suppressed desires that need to be understood as rooted components of an *aggregative* *mainstream continuum* in interwar (and not only interwar) societies.

Therein lies in the end the paradox of interwar fascism: the transgression of the taboo of violence that it authorized and spearheaded was justified and performed conditionally in terms that directly appealed to deep-rooted mainstream dispositions - of nationalism, supreme loyalty to the (narrow) community, and alleged self-defence in the face of a perceived existential threat. However extreme and at odds with the liberal normative mainstream canon it may have seemed, however contrary to the claimed ‘civilizing’ shift towards human inter-dependence and self-restraint, fascist uncivility gained broad appeal as a unique cumulative assemblage of otherwise multiple *ordinal* shifts in, *not of qualitative ruptures* from, the main(stream) macro-historical wherewithal of the Eliasian ‘civilizing process’. A ravaging ‘counter-spurt’ then – but a ‘*de*civilizing’ one? The essential fallacy of Elias’s subsequent analysis of fascism/Nazism as the ‘deepest regression’ from the ‘civilizing process’ rests not so much on the unsatisfactory metaphors of ‘barbarism’ that he invoked but rather on the optimistic over-inflation of the ‘civilizing process’ itself with a host of qualitative and etic assumptions about the trajectory of ‘civilization’. The ‘armour of civilized society’ may have indeed crumbled in the 1930s and 1940s; but what it revealed behind the rubble of liberal over-optimism was an extreme constellation of deep-seated dark potentialities in the essentially directionless and volatile ‘civilizing process’.

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