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Benet Davetian, *Civility: A Cultural History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). x + 607 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8020-9338-7 (hb); 978-0-8020-9722-4 (pb).

Stephen Mennell talked me into writing a short review of Benet Davetian's book for *Figurations*. When it arrived, I started reading bits that looked interesting but again and again became disappointed or irritated. Davetian practices the popular style of 'nouveau erudition' that jumps from one book to the next, and in his discussion of Norbert Elias's theory of civilising processes, he parrots with an air of decisiveness many of the old misunderstandings of Elias from the 1970s and 1980s, for example: 'Despite some of the above problems, Elias's theory of restraint (if not internalized shame) seems to hold right up to the middle of the nineteenth century in America, England, and France' (p.351). This reduction of Elias's theory to 'restraint' made me look in the 'Index' in search of 'informalization'. It is not there, nor is my name.

And yet, unless he reads as jumpy as he writes, for a number of reasons Davetian must have known about informalization. In part II, a mishmash focusing on the USA, he refers to Peter Stearns's *Battleground of Desire: The Struggle for Self-Control in Modern America* (1999), a book in which Stearns embraces the interpretation of an informalization process. Stearns writes, for example: 'In sum manners became more informal while demands for systematic emotional control became more stringent' and 'Americans were told to become less stiff but more cautious' (1999: 154). Davetian, however, selectively quotes only the 'more cautious' side, and even that he gets wrong by summarizing Stearns argument as: 'Americans have become more controlled and repressed than were the Victorians' (p.278).

Another reason is in the same chapter, when he appears to have read my book *Sex and Manners*: ‘while America may have led the world in female emancipation in the 1920s, it began lagging in the latter half of the century in comparison with Europe. Cass [sic!] Wouters (2004) believes that this may have been due to the fact that American dating rituals were established quite early on, before the arrival of second-wave feminism, and remained entrenched in a male-dominated conception of gender’ (p.302). On the next page is another reference to *Sex and Manners* but again without involving the theory of informalization that is such a prominent thread in this book.

As Davetian continues his discussion of the 1960s, he writes: ‘What Elias has considered a long process of evolution of manners was cheerfully reformed within a few months by the bolder members of the 1960s cultural movement. The restraint of bodily functions, described by Elias as a *sine qua non* of the civilizing process, was substantially abridged’ (p.305). Indeed, Davetian simply explains the ‘expressive revolution’ away. He starts out by saying that it was probably not a decivilizing process: ‘That certain segments of culture dared become less inhibited – and consequently more spontaneous – may not have been an indication of a decivilizing process but of how secure (or bored) Americans had come to feel with their rational approach to reality’ (305). He then proceeds to distort informalization theory and to stifle the facts of informalization processes: ‘Cass Wouters (1986:1-18) suggests that this deformatization [sic!] and ‘decontrolling’ was made possible by the efficiency of previously imposed restraints. His view accords with that of Elias ([1939] 1978), who ... considered the reversal a ‘relaxation within the framework of an already established standard’ (140).’

After having reduced informalization theory to what Elias had written on bathing customs in the 1920s and 1930s, he comes up with an alternative:

‘But what both Elias and Wouters may be ignoring is that ... a decivilizing process did not occur not only because the notion of civilized behaviour was sufficiently anchored in the human psyche, but because many continued to remain inhibited and in control while the spontaneous went on their freedom trip. While a certain number tuned in and dropped out, the majority continued doing their work, fixing the plumbing, carrying the garbage to the dumps, putting out fires, and so on.’ This trifling/measly idea becomes even grotesque because accompanied by naïve one-upmanship: ‘The argument may be based on an unwillingness to part with historical continuity’, and ‘So to look back and say that some of the wild and unrestrained behaviour was due to hyper-efficient previous restraints is to reveal a need to preserve theoretical consistency at all costs’ (p.306).

Once more in the same chapter, Davetian makes a perfunctory and selective use of an article explaining the theory of informalization. When arguing that ‘humans are not capable of managing without a certain degree of stability and custom’, he writes ‘Even informality can become formalized into a form of its own (Wouters 1986)’ (p.332), thus using an aspect of the informalization process just to back up this platitude.

At about this point, from this combination of misreading, misinterpretation and self-aggrandizement, I realized that I was not going to like writing the short review I had agreed to write, and I put the book on a far end of my desk. There it still was when I got the news – from the horses’ mouths – that Johan Goudsblom had agreed to write a review of this very book for the *American Journal of Sociology* and Stephen Menell the same for *Contemporary Sociology*. So readers will have other opportunities to read critiques of Davetian’s unfortunate book.

Cas Wouters