Informalization

The concept of informalization was coined in 1976 by the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters. It was developed primarily to understand and interpret the growing leniency in codes of conduct and feeling in Western societies of the 1960s and 1970s. In Amsterdam, discussions of this increasing 'permissiveness' included the question how to interpret these changes and, more specifically, whether they involved a change in the direction of what Norbert Elias had called the civilizing process. The framing of this question within Elias's theory of wide range and scope gave rise to the theory of informalization processes. It provides a perspective in which both the process of informalization and the spread of consumer culture turn out to have sprung from the same speed-up of social interweaving processes and the same intensification of social competition.

In his book *The Civilizing Process* (2000 [1939]), now a classic for being the first systematic study of the history of manners and emotion regulation, Elias shows how in between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, European regimes of manners and emotions had expanded and become increasingly strict and detailed, giving rise to a particular type of self-regulation, a type of habitus and personality with a particular conscience-formation. It was a long-term process towards the formalizing of manners and the disciplining of people and their emotions. By presenting a large number of excerpts from manners books in chronological order, focusing particularly on manners regarding basic human functions such as eating, drinking, sleeping, defecating, and blowing one's nose, as well as on those regulating sexual and aggressive impulses, Elias uncovered evidence of long-term changes in the codes of manners, thus opening a window to developments in social structures and personality structures. The overall directional trend in codes of behaviour and feeling provided an empirical basis for integrating historical sociology and psychology. The process of formalizing manners and disciplining of people continued in the nineteenth century, and although many a change had been perceived before the 1960s and 1970s – particularly in the 1920s –, it was only during the 'expressive revolution' (Parsons 1978: 300–24) that changes in manners and lifestyles became so impressive as to give rise to the question whether the whole civilizing process had changed direction. With regard to the informalization of manners, the answer was that it obviously had, but regarding the disciplining of people and their emotions, developments had

continued in the direction of increasing demands on emotion management or self-regulation.

Later studies showed the 'expressive revolution' to have been a moment of rapid acceleration in a long-term process of informalization, involving much broader social layers than in earlier accelerations such as around the turn of the century and in the 1920s. Particularly Wouters's monographs *Sex and Manners* (2004) and *Informalization* (2007), provide extensive evidence that from the last decades of the nineteenth century onwards, the code of manners and lifestyles in four Western countries (Britain, the USA, Germany, and the Netherlands) came to allow for an increasing variety of behavioural and emotional alternatives; manners becoming more lenient, more differentiated and varied for a wider and more differentiated public (see also Elias 1996, and Stearns 2007). Many modes of conduct that in the preceding long-term process of formalization had been curbed or forbidden came to be allowed, particularly in matters of sexuality. With one significant exception, all behaviours, manners and arts, such as the written and spoken language, clothing, music, dancing, and hairstyles, conduct and emotions became less formally restricted and regulated, thus giving way to a widening range of acceptable behavioural and emotional options. People became more frank and more at ease in expressing and discussing their feelings.

For several reasons, however, an acceptable and respectable usage of these alternatives implied a continued increase of the demands that were being made on self-regulation. One reason is because the ways in which individuals fashion their selection of alternatives became increasingly important as a criterion for status attribution. Another reason, closely connected, is that any selection of alternatives should look 'natural': it is a constraint to be unconstrained, at ease, and authentic. Moreover, informalization also involved rising external social constraints towards such self-restraints as being reflexive, showing presence of mind, considerateness, role-taking, and the ability to tolerate and control conflicts, to compromise. And last but not least, there was no 'liberation' of displays of superiority and inferiority – quite the contrary. This observation touches upon the exception to the widening of the range of socially acceptable behaviours and feelings, and also upon a major difference from 'permissiveness': informalization implies that feelings and displays of superiority and inferiority were increasingly curbed and forbidden.

Particularly by the social ascent of a wide variety of groups – the working classes, women, youth, homosexuals, blacks and other immigrants – and their integration within national and international networks of interdependency, all concerned were expected to

treat each other increasingly on the basis of equality, that is, to avoid open displays of inferiority and superiority. Thus, declining power differences between various groups and social classes went hand in hand with expanding mutual identification and diminishing social and psychic distance between people. Expressing any such distance, whether pertaining to people of different social class, age, or gender, had to be done in relatively cautious and concealed ways. Increasingly, information on differences in rank was disguised or concealed. The established codes of behaviour changed accordingly, and as rising numbers of people came to direct themselves to these codes, status competition turned more subtle and demanding, without losing any of its intensity. Competition in smooth manners and relaxed lifestyles functioned as a motor of both informalization and consumer culture, particularly from the 1960s onwards, when the increase of wealth and its spread in most Western countries via welfare state arrangements triggered a wave of emancipation and informalization as well as a spread of consumer culture.

Directly connected to the informalization process is an 'emancipation of emotions': their representation in the centre of personality – consciousness. This is a partial reversal of what had happened to the regulation of emotions in the process of formalization. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, 'dangerous' emotions such as those related to physical (including sexual) violence had come to be avoided, repressed and denied in increasingly automatic ways, that is, increasingly regulated by the inner fears of a rather rigid and authoritarian conscience, functioning as a 'second nature'. A second-nature or conscience-dominated type of personality became dominant. In the process of informalization, all kinds of emotions that in the long-term process of formalizing manners and disciplining people had been repressed and denied gained access to consciousness and wider acceptance in more informal social codes. They were again 'discovered' as part of a collective emotional makeup – representing a shift from conscience to consciousness. The Wouters studies provide evidence of a rising control of the fear of slippery slopes, the rise of a stronger and yet more flexible self-regulation in which these emotions were expressed but kept under control.

Between the 1950s and 1980s, these processes of social and psychic emancipation and integration accelerated dramatically. The conviction that being open to 'dangerous' emotions would almost irrevocably be followed by acting upon them, was destroyed. This old conviction expressed a fear that is symptomatic of rather authoritarian relationships and social controls as well as of a rather rigid type of self-control, dominated by a more or less automatically functioning authoritarian conscience. From being an advantage, this 'inner-

directedness' (Riesman 1950), that is, internalized social controls of a fixed kind, changed into being a handicap when in less hierarchical relationships, overcoming this fear came to be taken for granted. Only a more ego-dominated self-regulation allowed for the reflexive and flexible calculation that came to be expected. Thus, increasing numbers of people have become aware of emotions and temptations in circumstances where fears and dangers had been dominant before. It was the overall emancipation and integration of 'lower' social groups in western societies that triggered and allowed for the emancipation and integration of 'lower' impulses and emotions in personality.

Yet it was only after the 1950s that the dominant mode of self-regulation had reached a strength and scope that increasingly enabled people to admit to themselves and to others to have 'dangerous' emotions without provoking status anxiety and shame, particularly the shame-fear of losing control and having to give in. In the process of informalization, both psychic and social censorship declined and to the extent that it has become 'natural' to perceive the pulls and pushes of both 'first nature' and 'second nature', a 'third nature' type of personality has been developing. Its further development depends on the above mentioned exception, that is, on the control of emotions connected with the struggle for power, status and value, particularly the feelings of inferiority and superiority. For these feelings appear to be highly significant for understanding why social and psychic conflicts erupt in violence.

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