

Civilising Violence against Animals? Process-Sociological Reflections on the Ambivalence of Personalisation and Objectification of Animals.

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Abstract: The societal negotiation, evaluation, and sanctioning of violence against animals varies considerably: while some animals are largely protected from violence and hold a high social status as friends or family members, extensive violent practices toward other animals remain legal and normalized. This article analyzes, from a process-sociological perspective, how the ambivalent civilizing process of violence against animals can be explained. To this end, it examines the simultaneous processes of increasing personalization and objectification of animals. Personalized animals, such as many so-called companion animals, are regarded as individual subjects of high moral relevance. Objectification, by contrast, primarily affects farmed animals, which are largely treated as interchangeable objects and commodities. The article also identifies several factors that contribute to the growing challenge to the normative distinction between personalized and objectified animals. This challenge itself, however, remains highly contested and continues to provoke new societal debates about violence against animals.

Zusammenfassung: Die gesellschaftliche Aushandlung, Bewertung und Sanktionierung von Gewalt an Tieren variiert erheblich: Während einige Tiere weitgehend vor Gewalt geschützt sind und als Freunde/Freundinnen oder Familienmitglieder einen hohen sozialen Status besitzen, bleiben umfangreiche Gewaltpraktiken gegenüber anderen Tieren legal und normalisiert. Der Beitrag analysiert aus einer prozesssoziologischen Perspektive, wie sich der ambivalente Zivilisationsprozess von Gewalt an Tieren erklären lässt. Dafür werden die simultanen Prozesse zunehmender Personalisierung und Objektivierung von Tieren analysiert. Personalisierte Tiere, wie etwa viele sogenannte Haustiere, werden als individuelle Subjekte hoher moralischer Relevanz betrachtet. Objektivierung betrifft hingegen vor allem landwirtschaftlich genutzte Tiere, die weitgehend als austauschbare Objekte und Waren behandelt werden. Der Beitrag identifiziert zudem mehrere Faktoren, die dazu beitragen, dass die normative Unterscheidung zwischen personalisierten und objektivierten Tieren zunehmend infrage gestellt wird. Diese Infragestellung selbst ist jedoch weiterhin stark umstritten und stößt neue gesellschaftliche Debatten über Gewalt an Tieren an.

Keywords: human-animal relations; violence against animals; personalisation; objectification; civilisation; process sociology

Introduction

Human–animal relations in Western societies are subject to historical transformation, during which both the lived experiences of different animal species and the cultural and institutional framings of these relations have undergone profound change (Franklin 1999, Serpell 1996). A central aspect through which the changing dynamics of human–animal relations can be analysed is the societal negotiation of the legitimacy and legality of violence toward animals. Drawing on Elias’ figurational process sociology, this paper explores the process of the civilisation of violence against animals, tracing a distinct dual movement: on the one hand, the restriction of violence against animals, and on the other, its expansion, intensification, and centralisation. This dual movement has often been described as the ambivalence of human–animal relations (Eder 1988, Pfau-Effinger/Buschka 2013, Sebastian 2019).

This ambivalence in the societal negotiation of violence within human–animal relations becomes particularly evident in the unequal treatment of domesticated animals: Many so-called companion animals are regarded as friends or even family members (Laurent-Simpson 2021). Acts of violence against them are largely criminalised and culturally tabooed (Sebastian 2023). In contrast, there exists a significantly greater latitude for legal violence against farmed animals, accompanied by corresponding narratives of legitimisation. However, the cultural perception of these unequal forms of treatment as ambivalent is not a historical constant. It is rather the outcome of societal negotiations and transformation processes that in the last about 40 years have culminated in increasingly controversial debates regarding the boundaries of legitimacy in (violent) interactions with animals.

Sociological theory and empirical research on violence have largely overlooked violence against animals. Exceptions include, firstly, several conceptual contributions from sociological Human-Animal Studies that interpret violence against animals within the heuristics of sociology and political theory

(Cudworth 2015, Wadiwel 2015, Nungesser 2018, Sebastian 2023). These works discuss how violence against animals can be theoretically grounded as an interspecies social phenomenon, identify notable differences in the treatment of violence across various species or animal categories, and explore how the role of humans as perpetrators of violence can be theoretically and normatively interpreted. In this context, Elias has thus far played a subordinate role as a theoretical reference, primarily through anecdotal mentions – most prominently, this is demonstrated by Elias’ description of how the slaughter of animals has been moved ‘behind the scenes’ (Elias 2012a: 122) of society in the process of civilisation (see below). Secondly, numerous empirical studies have been presented that address the question of how humans manage the exercise of violence against animals, ascribe meaning and legitimacy to their actions, and the challenges that arise in this context. For instance, studies examined how ‘politics of sight’ (Pachirat 2011) frame subjective engagement with violent practices during the slaughtering of animals, the role that hegemonic masculinity plays in animal slaughter (Mc Loughlin 2019), how emotional neutrality towards killing animals is internalised as professional ‘background emotion work’ (Sebastian 2025), and how legitimising narratives and biographical influences facilitate the exercise of violence (Ben-Yonatan 2022). While violence is the empirical subject of these studies, they lack a thorough social-theoretical contextualisation of violence against animals.

This article engages with the sociological discourse on violence against animals in order to better understand the dynamics of change in the (ambivalent) societal negotiation and treatment of violence against animals, utilising Elias’ concept of civilisation. Thereby, the paper aims to contribute to further empirical research on violence against animals by enhancing the understanding of the (mutable and often fragile) practices of demarcation between violence perceived as legitimate and illegitimate across various empirical fields. The argument focuses on the transformation of social relations with animals in Western Europe and primarily draws on examples from

Germany.

In the first step, I will briefly introduce the role of animals in Elias' theory of civilisation. Following that, I will discuss the ambivalent societal treatment of violence against animals and, in the next step, develop my concept of a simultaneously evolving tendency within the Western civilising process: the personalisation of some animals and the objectification of others as a space of possibility for empirically existing forms of the treatment of animals. Subsequently, I will reconnect and interpret the findings developed here within the framework of Elias' theory. The paper concludes with a sketching discussion of the historical forces that can explain the process dynamics of the (ambivalent) civilisation of violence against animals. I will particularly discuss the societal processes that have led to the increasing scrutiny of the highly disparate societal negotiations of violence against different animals.

1. (The Absence of) Animals in Elias' Theory of Civilisation

Elias' concept of civilisation seeks to understand the dynamics underlying the historical development of Western societies. He argues that the social function and significance of violence changes within the process of civilisation: first, through the increasing invisibility of violence in everyday life and in public; second, through the monopolisation, centralisation and de-privatisation of violence by the state, which is accompanied by a gradual containment of violence; and third, through the decrease in violent interactions within everyday human conduct, as external constraints enforcing the renunciation of violence become internalised as self-constraints guiding behaviour. Hence, Elias explains how individual acts of violence – such as arbitrary aggression, feuds, blood revenge, or vigilante justice – are gradually pushed back, while violent impulses are increasingly suppressed through affect control – a process of simultaneous socio- and psychogenesis (Elias 2012a). However, for Elias, the civilising process is neither teleological – it can be interrupted or even reversed

(Elias 2008) – nor necessarily conceived as progress or normatively desirable.

Overall, animals play a subordinate role in Elias' theory. One significant aspect of Elias' work on the treatment of animals, which cannot be systematically examined further here, concerns his discussion of the ontological differentiation between humans and other animals in shaping Western understandings of subjectivity and human identity (see Sellier 2020). Elias notes, for example, that humans, 'in the course of the civilising process, have sought to suppress in themselves everything that they feel to be of an "animalic character"' (Elias 2012a: 122). Elias himself refrained from drawing an 'ontogenetic barrier' (Elias 2012b: 100) in his sociological determination of the difference between humans and other animals and emphasised the graduality of the relationship among all animals – human and non-human –, despite all the unique achievements of humans and the complexity of their symbol system. However, the question of agency of animals in more-than-human figurations remains largely unaddressed by Elias.

A second line of inquiry concerns the role of violence against animals in the civilising process. The socio- and psychogenetic processes accompanying the process of civilisation described above lead to an increasing repression and tabooing of violence, reflected, for example, in the evolving ethics and aesthetics of meat consumption, arbitrary violence against animals and the increasing invisibilisation of animal death. Elias' analysis of the civilising process was primarily focused on human interactions. Although we can only find traces of animal-related themes in his work, Elias' process-sociological framework of civilisation theory nevertheless provides a strong foundation for analysing changes in societal relations to animals (see also Kapek-Goodridge 2024).

In his main work, Elias prominently addresses the increasing taboo surrounding overt violence against animals and its removal from public view. His description of 'the advance in the threshold of repugnance at the sight of dead animals, to the removal of carving to specialised enclaves' (Elias 2012a: 122) is particularly well known. Elias further observes that

‘today it would arouse rather uneasy feelings in many people if they or others had to carve half a calf or pig at table or cut meat from a pheasant still adorned with its feathers’ (Elias 2012a: 121).

At the same time, he notes that abstaining from meat represents ‘forward thrusts in the threshold of repugnance that go beyond the standard of civilised society in the twentieth century, and are therefore considered “abnormal”’ (Elias 2012a: 121). Here it becomes evident that, for Elias, the civilising process is a dynamic and potentially contested historical movement in which the boundaries between generally recognised threshold of repugnance and those that prevail (initially) only in smaller groups can shift. Similarly, Klaus Eder argues that in the modernisation process, bourgeois food culture is ‘primarily carnivorous’ (Eder 1988: 240, translated by M.S.) and was subsequently ‘generalised across all social classes’ (Eder 1988: 240, translated by M.S.), rendering vegetarianism a counterculture. ‘Characteristic of the relationship between the dominant culinary culture and the marginalised vegetarian culture,’ Eder states, ‘are the derogatory labels applied to vegetarianism’ (Eder 1988: 243, translated by M.S.).

In another passage, Elias describes a form of violence against animals that is less ambivalent and whose rejection had become a matter of consensus in the Western societies he studied. He recounts the cultural practice of cat burning during the *Feast of St. John* in 16th-century Paris, where live cats were thrown on a bonfire amid the cheers of the crowd and in the presence of the nobility. Elias writes that today, ‘the joy in torturing living creatures [...] so nakedly and purposelessly, without any excuse before reason’ (Elias 2012a: 198), is perceived as profoundly repelling (see also Goudsblom 1995: 171).

With the discussion of meat consumption and abstention on one hand, and the rejection of public spectacles of raw violence such as the public burning of cats on the other, Elias’ work illustrates the breadth of societal negotiation surrounding violence against animals and the associated (non-)internalised constraints on behaviour. However, how can the different patterns of internalised behavioural constraints

and societal ideals regarding violence against different animals within a society be reconciled? Drawing on Elias, a perspective that reconstructs the processes of (ambivalent) civilisation concerning violence against animals and the power struggles contained within may offer possible answers.

2. Ambivalences in the Societal Negotiation of Violence against Animals

Violence against animals, as a central argument of this paper asserts, is characterised to a significant extent by ambivalences that manifest in a simultaneity of unequal treatment of animals (Sebastian 2019). Elias himself primarily describes those forms of violence against animals through which processes of transgressing ‘thresholds of repugnance’ (Elias 2012a: 122) can be traced. History is full of further examples of animal-related practices, some of which even communal traditions, that once were widely accepted, then merely tolerated and are now considered beyond the boundaries of civilised behaviour. One example that resembles the *Feast of St. John* analysed by Elias is the tradition of ‘Gänsereiten’ or goose-riding, still practiced in some parts of the German Ruhr region, in which riders attempt to tear off the head of a goose suspended between two trees while galloping past. At the beginning of the 19th century, the use of a live goose was gradually prohibited. Due to re-emerging public pressure in recent decades, many goose-riding clubs have since also replaced the dead goose with an artificial one or discontinued the tradition entirely.

Additionally, a clear process of civilising violence against animals in Elias’ understanding can be observed in the prohibition of dog and cat slaughter in Germany. Although marginal compared to the consumption of cattle, pigs, and chickens, by the 1950s, dog and cat slaughter had come to be widely regarded as inexcusable, irrational, and repugnant. The fact that the slaughter of dogs and cats, despite their cultural taboo, was still legal exerted significant pressure on legislation. Curiously, despite wide-

spread public and political support, it took over 30 years for the slaughter of dogs and cats to be banned in 1986. There was no visible public opposition to the demand from dog meat consumers, the meat industry or the food industry in general. In some cases, slaughterhouse owners even spoke out publicly in favour of the ban.

The reason for the delayed prohibition of dog and cat slaughter highlights the inherent ambivalence of Western human-animal relationships: while policymakers fully supported the normative justification for the slaughter ban, they feared a potential extension of such bans to other animals and thus the potential delegitimisation of meat production as a whole. It was only through arguments for a health policy-based exception that dogs and cats were eventually excluded from the slaughter regulations, making dog and cat slaughter finally illegal. By arguing that slaughtering posed a zoonotic risk to both slaughterers and consumers, the dilemma of drawing a moral boundary between animals that could be slaughtered and those that could not was circumvented. Nevertheless, the slaughter of dogs and cats had long been regarded as uncivilised and morally repugnant without questioning the legitimacy of slaughtering other animals in German society (see Sebastian 2022, Pfau-Effinger/Sebastian 2022).

One could, following a more superficial reading of Elias, assume that the process of civilising violence against animals follows a pattern in which certain forms of violence – deemed excessive and brutal, particularly those that are publicly enacted by private individuals – have been tabooed and forbidden, while other forms of violence, considered rational and legitimised under specific civilised conditions, have continued in the form of industrial, formalised, and institutionalised slaughter by specialists, largely hidden from the public eye. However, the example of the prohibition of dog and cat slaughter already illustrates that this perspective is insufficient for the adequate analysis of the civilisation process regarding violence against animals.

A more detailed analysis could suggest that underlying this pattern are procedural dynamics that lead

to gradual shifts in the threshold of repugnance, and thus the boundaries of cultural legitimacy, concerning even those forms of violence against animals that are fundamentally regarded as rational and legitimate by the societal majority. The civilisation of violence against animals in slaughterhouses – understood here as the limitation of possible action spaces for the exercise of violence through external constraints, such as legal regulations, or internal ones, such as internalised moral or emotional inhibitions – indeed affects not only those species increasingly considered fundamentally ‘unslaughterable,’ like cats and dogs, but also, to a lesser extent, those that continue to be killed for meat production. For example, methods of stunning animals have become increasingly ‘refined,’ so that today the formerly common practice of stunning cattle with the flat side of an axe (MacLachlan 2008) is now widely rejected as uncivilised. This process is ongoing. Current debates regarding the boundaries of legitimacy concern whether male chicks may be ‘shredded’ alive (Stucki 2016) or whether CO₂ stunning of pigs is ethically justifiable. However, this perspective on the differing temporalities of civilising process dynamics among various animal species would also be incapable of adequately describing the process of civilisation regarding violence against animals in Western societies. In this interpretation, the civilising of violence toward different animal species would merely be characterised by proceeding at varying speeds toward the same goal of an increasing containment of violence – with some animals merely lagging behind in the process of civilisation. Instead, as this paper argues, the processes of civilising violence against animals are shaped by distinct dynamics that arise from two different types of social relationships with animals. I will discuss these dynamics below and focus primarily on societal relationships with domesticated animals. The foundation of the ambivalent process of civilising violence against animals lies in the system of what I call socially constructed cultural animal categories commonly found in Western societies, which serve as normative guidelines for social actors regarding how to treat different animals. Regarding the focus

of this article, a particularly significant differentiation exists between domesticated animals categorised as pets or companion animals and those classified as livestock or slaughter animals (Morgan/Cole 2011, Sebastian 2019).

An Elias-inspired analysis of how violence against animals is socially negotiated allows for a nuanced examination of shifting power relations within the complex figurations of actors that have framed and shaped these developments. According to Elias, power is a constitutive element of every figuration – it is distributed asymmetrical, but it can never be possessed unilaterally. In the same way that no figuration of actors can exist without power relations, no social process can unfold free from them (Elias 2012b). Consequently, when reconstructing the procedural dynamics that have produced the growing ambivalence in human–animal relations, it is crucial to scrutinise the power relations that have made these processes possible.

Personalisation of Animals

The history of human–animal relations, especially in Western societies, can be understood as the simultaneity of two historically parallel processes in the development of these relations: Personalisation and objectification. Some relations between humans and certain animals were *increasingly* characterised by a process of personalisation. Personalised animals are considered to be someone, rather than something: A non-exchangeable, unique being of high moral value with an individual character. Personalisation processes are the outcome of social negotiation and therefore human constructions. The capabilities, interactive competences, and cognitive capacities of animals do not directly determine which species or individual animals are subject to personalisation. While scientific knowledge about animal agency and the behaviour of animals may exert some influence, as will be discussed later, there is no direct causal link between an animal's agency and its personalisation.

Relations to personalised animals are characterised by emotional closeness, rejection of raw violence

and cruelty (Sebastian 2019). This particularly and typically applies to animals commonly referred to as companion animals. This is reflected, for instance, in the increasing perception of companion animals as family members (Laurent-Simpson 2021, Jürgens et al. 2025) who are included in traditionally inter-human social rituals such as birthday celebrations and cemetery burials in individualised graves (Meitzler 2017). Although dogs, in particular, have historically always played a special role in human cultural history as members of interspecies communities (Shipman 2015), a cultural shift can be observed in which the view of companion animals as 'subjects of a life' (Regan 1986: 186) has increasingly established itself across different social classes and milieus as societal common sense. Drawing on T.H. Marshall (2009), one could even discuss whether some animals in public service enjoy social rights, such as when retired police dogs receive a state-granted proxy pension through their owners, now considered pets (Cochrane 2016).

The processes of personalisation of animals correlate with the question of how violence against animals is socially negotiated, evaluated, and sanctioned: The more strongly an animal or a species tends toward personalisation on the continuum of possible relational modalities, the more tabooed and sanctioned violent practices become. Thus, the process of personalisation in relation to companion animals provides a clear example of affective self-regulation through the tabooing of previously widespread behaviours and the development and internalisation of new standards of conduct.

For example, the use of electric collars to train dogs, the beating of companion animals, or the drowning of surplus kittens are now widely considered immoral. While social interests that might have defended these practices were marginal, it was above all the emerging animal protection movement that succeeded in establishing new standards of conduct toward companion animals. Conflicts of interest with powerful actors, such as those occurring in the field of agricultural animal use, played no significant role in this context. Moreover, the personalisation of companion

animals in particular does not conflict with the economic interests of the pet breeding industry. This example rather illustrates how individual animals can change their position on the continuum between personalisation and objectification when they are re-figured within more-than-human figurations: an animal traded as a pet commodity can become a family member after purchase.

Consequently, the cultural and legal demands regarding pet ownership have steadily evolved toward greater protection and recognition of the vulnerability of these animals. Exceptions here indeed confirm the rule: when cases of brutal, cruel violence against companion animals become known, they are socially condemned and usually criminally sanctioned. In such cases, perpetrators are forced to provide justification for their actions and possess little power to define the legitimacy of their actions.

However, from a process sociological perspective, personalisation does not signify a teleological development that knows no exceptions. Numerous empirical examples demonstrate that even animal species which are commonly highly personalised can become victims of severe violence. Dog fights, for instance, continue to be organised, and many companion animals suffer from neglect – even though such practices have been outlawed in most Western countries. Moreover, dogs and cats are still legally killed in laboratory experiments and companion animals are legally their owner's property. Many of them are also euthanised based on the owners' ideas of what constitutes a worthwhile animal life or because they have stayed in shelters too long.

This discussion illustrates, firstly, that societal discourses on the legitimacy of violence depend significantly on how a given animal is categorised (for example as a 'companion animal', 'farmed animal', 'wild animal', or 'lab animal'). Individual species may even simultaneously be assigned to different categories – for instance, dogs can be both categorised as companion and laboratory animals (Cole/Morgan 2011, Sebastian 2019). Secondly, it becomes apparent that personalisation must be understood as a gradual phenomenon forming a continuum with the

objectification of animals. Within specific empirical human-animal relationships, animals may tend more strongly towards one or the other side of this continuum.

Objectification of Animals

While relations to some animals have become increasingly personalised in the course of modernity, the relations to other animals have instead been *increasingly* objectified. Like personalisation, objectification is a result of social constructions and does not directly reflect the capabilities, interactive competences, or cognitive capacities of animals. The process of objectification of animals primarily relates to farmed animals, to which societal relations were marked by an increasingly industrialised, formalised, and institutionalised form of mass physical harm, accompanied by growing emotional and ontological distancing. Fully objectified animals are replaceable, anonymous and perceived as means to an end. The most significant force driving the objectification of animals has been the economic interests of actors who profit from turning animals into commodities (Riley 2022).

With the expansion of industrial capitalism, powerful meat producers increasingly prevailed over smaller meat producers, resulting in a market dominated to this day by a few large corporations that are able to precarise both working conditions and animal welfare standards for profit. Key milestones in this process include the establishment of industrial slaughtering starting in the mid-19th century and the rise of industrial animal breeding from the mid-20th century (Sebastian 2017), driven by the expanse of industrial capitalism and the capitalisation, or 'Inwertsetzung' (Tittor 2022), of nature. In this process, the number of bred, killed, and processed animals has increased significantly. These animals have been integrated into a system of increasingly mechanised, and anonymised breeding and slaughter, which reduces them primarily to quantifiable data and profit margins (Settele 2020, Sebastian 2017).

The question of the social construction of legitimacy

of violence can be interpreted here in reverse logic compared to personalised animals: The more an animal is objectified, the less tabooed and sanctioned violent practices become. Hence, violent practices targeting farmed animal bodies are not exceptions, but the norm and a precondition for the production of animal products. They form the structural basis for the agricultural use of animals and are defended and upheld by powerful stakeholders whose economic and social positions depend on it.

In fact, the animal industry is an ideal example of what Elias calls a lengthening of the ‘chains of interdependence’ (Elias 2012b: 137) among the actors within a figuration. As the industrial use of increasingly objectified animals expanded, so too did the number of actors involved on an increasingly globalised scale: seed and feed producers, animal breeding operations, logistics and transport companies, slaughterhouses, and supermarkets are all part of this interdependent figuration – alongside insurance companies, manufacturers of stable and slaughter equipment, consulting firms, and banks (Sebastian 2017). Collectively they concentrate immense power that is difficult for opposing actors such as social movements, critical consumers or even policymakers to counterbalance (Riley 2022).

Normative conflicts over the legitimacy of changing human-farm-animal relations are, with few exceptions, conducted in a way that criticises certain forms of animal use, but does not fundamentally question the legitimacy of practices like slaughtering. The threshold of repugnance is crossed when societal agreements regarding the minimum level of protection for animals against ‘excessive’ or ‘inappropriate violence’ are exceeded. The institutional counterpart to this is the refinement of animal protection laws, which, on the one hand, aim to end certain forms of animal cruelty in small steps, but, overall, do not reduce the extent of violence. Rather, ‘at its core, [farmed animal welfare] regulation still treats farmed animals as food and commodities in trade’ (Riley 2022: 196). In fact, the 1974 amendment to Germany’s animal protection law facilitated the enforcement of industrial animal farming (von Gall 2016), with the

state politically directing and financially supporting the agricultural transformation (Settele 2020).

This reveals a process whereby, on one hand, standards of conduct for treating farmed animals became more differentiated, but on the other hand, the quantity of violence against them significantly increased. Furthermore, beyond merely delegating its monopoly on violence to private enterprises within the animal industry, the state often provides comprehensive political, legal, and economic support – through subsidies and by ensuring regulatory security (Settele 2020). The intertwining of political and economic power that enables the continued objectification of animals is also clearly illustrated by policies such as the Ag-Gag laws in the United States, which criminalise specific forms of whistleblowing and activism, including undercover documentation of practices within industrial farms and slaughterhouses (Riley 2022).

Distinctions and Ambivalences between Personalisation and Objectification of Animals

The distinction between personalised and objectified relations to animals is exemplified, for example, in the form of mourning for deceased animals, which in the case of personalised companion animals can even resemble the intensity of loss experienced for a close human being (Reisbig et al. 2017). In contrast, mourning for objectified slaughtered animals typically occurs only in exceptional cases, such as animal rights vigils (Cooke 2023), and is not widely recognised as a culturally accepted response to the constant dying of animals occurring in slaughterhouses. Another suitable, albeit partly speculative, starting point for a comparative analysis of personalisation and objectification processes is rural, agricultural life at the end of the late Middle Ages. Although subjective perspectives on human-animal relationships among ‘ordinary people’ from that time are difficult to systematically reconstruct empirically due to a lack of data, the human-animal figuration of the farm suggests significantly less pronounced differences in human views of pigs, dogs, and cattle than are observed today. For example, dogs likely had greater

instrumental value due to their economic roles as herding, guard, or hunting dogs than they do today (Meier 2008). Moreover, a hierarchical and religious worldview in general and an according perception of nature, in particular, supported a clear distinction between humans on one side and all other animals, that are equally subject to human dominion, on the other. In contrast, however, cattle were most likely regarded much more strongly as unique beings by most people since the survival of an agricultural community could depend on the survival of a few cattle that could not be easily replaced. In this sense, the gap between the empirically existing differences in the treatment of animals was overall smaller than it is today. I argue that this emerging gap between personalisation and objectification of animals can be defined as an ambivalent tension in the human-animal relation.

Unaffected by this short historical reconstruction is the inquiry into the quantity and quality of acts of violence against animals. A smaller gap between the possible maximum expressions of personalised and objectified relations with animals to a given point in history does not allow for normative evaluations of the well-being of the animals themselves. This brief discussion of general structures of medieval human-animal relations aims to offer a reflective examination of a pertinent episode in the human relation to domesticated animals, thereby illuminating the dynamics associated with the growing intensification of personalisation and objectification. The extensive normative problematisation of violence against animals as a significant cultural phenomenon within Western societies emerges only later, as will be discussed in subsequent sections. What becomes evident, however, is that the historically unfolding process of intensifying personalisation and objectification of animals frames the social space for empirically possible relationships with animals as binary poles.

On this basis, specific human-animal relations can be positioned within the continuum between personalising and objectifying relations, allowing for numerous gradations and hybrid phenomena. Further-

more, standards of conduct toward animals can differ according to their cultural categorisation. While animal experiments involving dogs typically elicit stronger public opposition than those involving mice, tens of thousands of dogs around the world continue to be treated in ways that would be regarded as extremely cruel and unjustifiable within the context of keeping companion animals. Likewise, the standards of conduct shift once a pig is regarded as a companion animal rather than as livestock intended for slaughter.

In summary, the civilising process regarding violence against objectified animals differs significantly from that concerning personalised animals. While the boundary of legitimacy for violence against personalised companion animals typically revolves around *whether* the animals should be slaughtered at all, for objectified pigs, cattle, and chickens, it typically concerns *how* they are slaughtered. Although the normative order of human-animal relations is increasingly called into question, for the majority of people in Western societies, stunning a cow with a bolt gun is considered humane treatment, whereas stunning with a hammer is deemed animal cruelty.

3. Discussing Violence against Animals in an Eliasian Framework

In summary, we can reconstruct a process of civilisation regarding violence against animals, which fluctuates between categorical rejection and gradual restriction of violent practices depending on the extent to which the respective animals are perceived and treated as personalised or objectified. The extent of the restriction of action spaces for the exercise of violence, that is, the internalisation of self-constraints and their institutional framing through laws and norms, is generally significantly greater for personalised animals than for objectified animals.

For Elias, besides the containment of the exercise of violence, the centralisation of violence through state monopolisation is a key characteristic of the civilisation process (Elias 2012a). Violence against animals allows for a nuanced examination of the facets of this phenomenon. Violence against farmed animals

has been first de- and then re-privatised: First, private backyard slaughtering was made more difficult or prohibited – such as through the beginning of the mandatory use of slaughterhouses in many European cities during the 19th century (Brantz 2008). In establishing and enforcing its monopoly on violence against farmed animals through laws governing animal farming and slaughter, the state simultaneously delegated the legalised use of violence against animals to private economic actors resulting in the fact that today, the vast majority of commercial slaughters are conducted by private companies rather than the state itself.

In other words: the Western, industrial state, using its power to obtain the monopoly, first had to centralise the use of violence against animals, to then be able to delegate this monopoly to few private-sector economic actors. The shift of violence against animals behind the societal scenes in the process of civilisation (Elias 2012a: 122) is thus also reflected in the growing invisibility of animals through the state-initiated and state-supported relocation of slaughterhouses and animal breeding facilities to the societal periphery (Fitzgerald 2010).

The industrialisation of meat production and the enormous increase in the slaughter of animals during this process raises further questions regarding the theoretical conceptualisation of Elias' notion of civilisation (see also Riley 2022: 194). Elias conceived the civilising process not as a teleological development or a narrative of progress, but as a process that remains 'in a continuous conflict with countervailing, decivilising processes' (Elias 2008: 4). Elias noted that de-civilisation 'means a change in the opposite direction, a reduction in the scope of empathy' (Elias 2008: 7).

In relation to animals, this raises the intriguing question of whether the development of modern animal protection laws for farmed and slaughtered animals represents a forward thrust in civilisation or rather marks a process of de-civilisation. Arguments can be made both for the position that the extension of animal welfare laws represents a slowly but ongoing process of civilisation and for the position that

the (legalised) system of industrial slaughter has unleashed formerly unknown extent of harm and violence towards animals that is, in fact, globally expanding and growing. This reasoning resembles two dominant perspectives within animal ethics: a reform-oriented and generally more optimistic animal welfare position that strives for improvement of animal welfare regulations and an abolitionist and generally more pessimistic animal rights position that denies the legitimacy of violence against animals (see Francione/Garner 2010).

In light of the reflections put forward in this article, however, a somewhat paradoxical picture emerges: on the micro level of individual experience, animal welfare legislation restricting the power of disposal over farmed animals leads to a genuine *qualitative* containment regarding specific violent practices. While overall, extensive forms of severe violence against animals remain legal and are widely socially accepted despite critical counter-movements, animal welfare regulations aim to prevent animals from experiencing specific forms of suffering deemed most cruel. On the macro level, however, this qualitative containment of individually experienced violence does not result in a *quantitative* reduction of violence. As discussed earlier, on the contrary, with the expansion and globalisation of industrial capitalism, the number of slaughtered animals has increased dramatically and meat consumption has become an everyday phenomenon based on a production regime that, despite existing animal protection legislation, allows numerous legal forms of severe injury to animal bodies.

The state has actively contributed to this development by strongly supporting the quantitative growth of agricultural animal exploitation (Settele 2020, Riley 2022) and by applying highly unequal standards in the sanctioning of violence across different categories of animals. Although certain forms of treatment toward animals have been negatively sanctioned, many violent practices especially towards farmed animals continue to be positively sanctioned through law, policy, and economic incentives. In figurational terms, the state functions as a central actor within the chains of

interdependencies that upholds and legitimises violence against animals.

The seemingly paradoxical coexistence of qualitative containment and quantitative intensification of violence against animals can be understood when the ambivalent contemporary human-animal relations are viewed as resulting from power conflicts of competing interdependent actors: social movements and critical consumers seeking to restrict or abolish violent practices on one side, and animal industrial corporations together with many policy-makers striving to expand the profitable economic use of animals on the other. Although economically powerful actors have been able to institutionalise and perpetuate a system based on violent utilisation of animals, oppositional actors – despite their comparatively limited power – have succeeded in constraining this system's operational range. This range, however, has been rather limited with respect to objectified animals, while comparatively much broader concerning the containment of violence towards personalised animals.

Furthermore, Elias' theses on the relationship between civilisation and de-civilisation, developed through the observation of human history, may not be directly applicable to human-animal relations. It may be questioned whether a genuinely civilised condition has ever existed at least with regard to farmed animals – one that was subsequently 'de-civilised' through opposing forces, implying that previously achieved constraints on violence were later withdrawn. Rather, the intensification of the objectification of animals appears to be a process that has at best been interrupted or decelerated by civilising forces. Hence, in Eliasian terms, the civilising process regarding violence toward animals is 'in process' – open-ended, contingent, and continuously shaped through power struggles.

4. Societal Forces Challenging the Unequal Process of Civilising Violence against Animals: An Outline

In summary, the simultaneity of personalisation and objectification processes in western human-animal relations have resulted in a situation where the poles of empirically existing treatments of domesticated animals have become increasingly distinct from one another, ranging from personalisation to objectification as the two poles of a continuum of possible and empirically existing forms of human-animal relations. I argue that this emerging gap can be defined as an ambivalent tension in the human-animal relation. For Eder, this expresses the 'most important key to the ambiguity of the symbolic relationship with nature' (Eder 1988: 237, translated by M.S.).

For Elias, shifting thresholds of repugnance that restrict the standards of conduct indicate forward thrusts in the civilising process. These implicate a shift in the dominant perception within a society of the boundary between culturally accepted forms of conduct and those considered dubious, inappropriate, or outright immoral and taboo. We can illustrate a process of civilisation regarding the eating of meat: Elias' claim from the 1930s that vegetarianism represents 'forward thrusts in the threshold of repugnance that go beyond the standard of civilised society in the twentieth century' (Elias 2012a: 122) is no longer unambiguously true, at least in many Western societies today.

Roughly since the late 1970s, public controversies over the ethical dimensions of animal farming, industrial slaughter and meat consumptions increased in many Western societies. While, for instance, only about 8–12% of the population in Germany follows a vegetarian or vegan diet, the fact that over 40% of Germans describe themselves as 'flexitarian' in recent representative studies (Forsa 2022, BMEL 2024) highlights a significant shift in sensitivities towards animals. Although health and environmental aspects are important motives for meat-free or meat-reducing diets, ethical concerns regarding

animals remain among the most significant reasons. Despite a potentially considerable uncertainty regarding how consistently the identification as flexitarian actually translates into significant behavioural changes, the avoidance of meat seems to have become, if not the ‘new normal,’ then at least normalised to the extent that the cultural dominance of meat consumption can no longer be regarded as the central characteristic of Western food culture. This argument is further supported by the decreasing per capita consumption of meat in Germany. This process is not undisputed, of course, and often leads to new lines of conflict, turning veganism, in particular, into a cultural ‘Triggerpoint’ (Mau et al. 2023, translated by M.S.) that can stir up heated debates.

How did Western societies develop to reach this point in the discourse on violence against animals? The theses developed in this article – especially regarding the emerging ambivalent gap between the treatment of personalised and objectified animals – help to explain why the significant differences in societal perceptions of violence against personalised and objectified animals have been increasingly critically reflected upon over the past approximately 40 years. In the following, I will briefly discuss some of the most relevant multifaceted causes and driving forces behind this specific ambivalent process of civilisation regarding violence towards animals in Western societies.

First and foremost, Elias himself addressed the shift in dominant worldviews from religious models of order to scientific paradigms (2012b: 28-45). In the course of the modernisation process, alongside the prevailing model of ever-growing dominion over nature driven by what Max Horkheimer coined ‘instrumental reason’ (2007), there also emerged a critical intellectual and ecological counter-movement characterised by an increasing awareness of what could be referred to in Elias’ terms as more-than-human interdependences. Broadly speaking, it can initially be concluded that critical reflection on the societal construction of human-animal relations was supported by this unleashed ‘power of imagination’ (Elias 2012b: 87), which first had to emerge in the course of human

history of ideas and knowledge. A significant aspect of late modern Western history of ideas is an overall increasing moral sensitivity and awareness towards animals (Franklin/White 2001), despite the fact that this sensitivity and awareness manifests very differently in practical human behaviour towards various species.

Second, it can be argued that a process of increased pacification in inter-human relations (Elias 2012a) and a minimum level of prosperity for a majority of people in a given society were necessary before the pacification of certain human-animal relations could commence. According to this argument, a phase of economic stability and a gradual consolidation of (latent) class conflicts, such as those generated by the welfare state (Beck 1986, Esping-Andersen 1990), was required to enable people to engage politically with actor groups to which they do not belong themselves. Third, and closely related to the first two arguments, the role of social movements and other civil society organisations in their ‘civilizing missions’ (Bucholtz et al. 2024: 17) needs to be considered (see also Kappek-Goodridge 2024). These movements aim to change standards of conduct and legal regulations in favour of animals, for example through undercover investigations that reveal otherwise hidden animal suffering. Ecological social movements in general, and animal protection and animal rights movements in particular, extend beyond the political demands of traditional subject positions such as ‘worker’ or ‘woman’, although this often presupposes that the activists are sufficiently materially secure themselves. While this argument is not easily empirically substantiated, the fact that the animal protection movement initially recruited primarily from the bourgeois milieu (Roscher 2009) provides an important clue here. Overall, the influence of social movements for animals on the containment of violence against animals is evident (Weisskircher 2024) and has led, as seen in the case of the previously discussed prohibition on dog slaughtering (Sebastian 2022, Pfau-Effinger/Sebastian 2022), to significant shifts in standards of conduct and according legal regulations. Modern animal rights organisations pri-

marily focus on the exploitation of farmed animals, thus trying to decrease the gap in the societal treatment of domesticated animals.

Fourth, the growing body of scientific knowledge about the cognitive, emotional, and social abilities of animals challenges traditional interpretive frameworks regarding animals. In particular, increasing awareness regarding animal consciousness and their capacity for suffering (Benz-Schwarzburg 2020) undermines the argumentative foundations for the ethical non-consideration of non-human animals in general and the ontological divide between humans and all other animals. It is now widely accepted that vertebrates (Andrews et al. 2024) and many other species are capable of experiencing pain, which evidently weakens ethical positions that morally devalue animals based on any presumed insensitivity to pain. In contrast, the ethical significance of suffering is unsurprisingly a crucial foundation for all modern animal ethics (e.g., Regan 1986, Singer 1996). Furthermore, increased knowledge about animals can also challenge the ambivalent and unequal treatment of domesticated animals. For instance, research findings refute the traditional notion that pigs are significantly less intelligent than dogs (Marino/Colvin 2015). In fact, both species exhibit considerable similarities in regard to their cognitive, social and emotional capabilities.

Fifth, the growing awareness and knowledge of the contribution of industrial animal farming to social-ecological crises is undoubtedly becoming increasingly influential. The fact that 14,5–20% of global greenhouse gases originate from animal agriculture (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2016, Xu et al. 2021), and that approximately 80% of global agricultural land is used for animal products such as meat, dairy, and eggs (Ritchie 2017) – which leads to the conversion of complex, biodiverse ecosystems into monocultural farmlands and pastures – places enormous new legitimising pressure on both animal farming and carnivorous lifestyles. In Elias' words, one could argue that the increasingly complex chains of interdependence within human and more-than-human figurations lead to

a state in which the societal relevance of farmed animals can no longer be ignored, as the negative impacts of industrial animal agriculture manifest as climate change and species extinction. This broadens the scope of interested actors in the negotiation of future human-animal relations: societal actors who remain unaffected by the aforementioned transformations in cultural ideals about animal ethics and new knowledge regarding animal capabilities may nonetheless have an intrinsic interest in the role of non-human animals in the escalation of social-ecological crises. Sixth, the growing technological feasibility of plant-based diets and other alternatives to animal products can lower the barrier to consuming products for which the killing of animals is not an essential component. This argument parallels the materialist notion that the increasing ability to address animal concerns is depending upon societal structures providing a minimal level of prosperity for all. As the availability of familiar animal products is replaced by plant-based alternatives, dependence on the violent utilisation of animals decreases. In turn, as material interests in the societal organisation of violence against animals slowly declines, the likelihood that individuals are willing to engage critically with the ambivalence inherent in human-animal relationships might increase.

The factors in this list of processes, which should by no means be understood as complete, contribute to explaining the increasing cultural ambivalence in society's approach to violence against animals, illustrated by the strikingly unequal treatment of companion animals and farmed animals. While this discussion is explorative, it seeks to demonstrate how a process sociological perspective can contribute to a better understanding of the 'peculiar relationship with animals, torn between meat and mercy' (Eder 1988: 235, translated by M.S.).

5. Summary

As demonstrated, the process of civilisation regarding violence against animals can be fruitfully analysed through a process sociological perspective in-

formed by Elias. In particular, the ambivalent nature of societal negotiation, evaluation, and sanctioning of violence against animals resulting in the increasing questioning of the unequal treatment of domesticated animals, can be interpreted as an ambivalent and contested civilising process. On the one hand, there is a trend toward changes in standards of conduct and corresponding legal regulations that are relatively comprehensively reducing the socially accepted scope for violence against personalised animals. In contrast, with regard to objectified animals, there exists a simultaneity of the restriction of some violent practices deemed particularly cruel alongside a quantitative expansion of legalised and accepted violence that is systematic, institutionalised, and technologised.

I argue that this inequality must be understood as a historical, dialectical dual movement (see Buchholz et al. 2024: 16), which delineates the possibilities for future human-animal relations between personalisation and objectification. Recent and current development trends in western societies indicate a potentially increasing questioning of the normative order of societal relations with animals. At the same time, these trends are highly contested and conflictual and should by no means be understood as a narrative for progress. The simultaneity of the globally expanding model of industrial animal farming and meat production and the growing international dispute over the environmental impact of these exact practices indicate that there is clearly no one-dimensional trend in either possible direction.

At the same time, the reflections made here about the process of civilising violence against animals refer to Western societies and mostly use Germany as an empirical reference. Following Elias' argument, the civilising process can be understood as a universal social phenomenon that must, however, be considered in light of local and figurational particularities. Thus, it can be assumed that humans generally categorise other animals along a continuum between personalisation and objectification, although the animal species treated in these ways may regionally differ considerably. Exceptions might include alternative,

however marginalised cosmologies and ontologies that conceptualise the fundamental boundaries and the question of agency within animate and inanimate nature in entirely different ways.

The future of violence in human-animal relations is unwritten and malleable. The potential futures of this relation not only determine the fate of non-human animals but also frame the chances for a sustainable transformation of society. Thus, the negotiating of these futures in human-animal relations are socially highly relevant. There is a clear need for intensified sociological research on the conflictual processes involved in this negotiation. As could be shown, a process-sociological perspective on these dynamics is particularly suitable for understanding how these processes are structured and what dynamics are inherent to it.

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