

AN IMAGINARY DINNER- TABLE CONVERSATION ON TROPHY HUNTING

BETWEEN NORBERT ELIAS
AND ELIZABETH COSTELLO

Femke Brandt*

Picture a tourist Lodge elevated on wooden stilts somewhere in the South-African wilderness and imagine it is dinnertime. The dark sky is filled with countless bright yellow stars. Pine trees and thorn bushes cast shadows on the walls of the Game Lodge. Inside the restaurant, nearly all chairs are occupied and a medley of soft conversations simmer in the air. African waiters walk up and down to serve guests who have just returned from an evening game drive where they possibly spotted a leopard in a tree or a zebra drinking at a watering hole. The following text is a fictional dialogue in the place just described. It zooms in on an exchange between two individuals in that setting, on that particular summer night. They discuss and theorize trophy-hunting practices in South Africa based on insights from recent ethnographic material presented in scientific circles. The speakers are the sociologist Norbert Elias and novelist Elizabeth Costello.

Norbert Elias is best known as the author of 'The Civilizing Process' and founder of figurational sociology. Born in 1897 in Germany, Elias lived through most of the twentieth century, passing away in Amsterdam in 1990 at the age of 93. His dinner companion tonight, Elizabeth Costello, is the fictional alter ego of South-African writer J.M. Coetzee, a Nobel Prize winner. Born

**Femke Brandt is writing an ethnography on contemporary social figurations in the Karoo region of South Africa focusing on farm conversions to wildlife production, particularly trophy hunting. She is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Organization Sciences at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.*

in 1928 in Australia, Elizabeth is a writer that is also passionate about animal rights. Her provocative stance in discussions dealing with this subject matter made her both famous and infamous. For this reason, many would consider her to be an unpleasant dinner companion. Not Norbert Elias however, who appreciates her temperament and passionate speech. They are both studying tonight's menu. Faint sounds of cooking and the smell of fresh herbs and food processing waft in from the kitchen in the back. Elizabeth is the first to look up from the menu.

Elizabeth. How inappropriate to take me to a Game Lodge in South Africa Norbert, where the menu offers Kudu steak and Ostrich burger. There are hardly any vegetarian options. I don't like to be confronted with the horrors of animal lives and deaths when I am eating.

Norbert *apologetically*. I am sorry Elizabeth, your vegetarianism must have slipped my mind and I was really looking forward to try game meat tonight as I heard it is lean and healthy.

Elizabeth. Well, just because it is a rare occasion I will have the vegetable curry with chickpeas, despite the fact that I find myself in a restaurant situated in a place I would call a 'wildlife factory'. It always astonishes me that people belonging to so-called 'civilization', who don't believe in sin and pollution are experts in organized degradation and cruelty when it comes to the lives of animals.

Norbert. Elizabeth, I suggest you detach yourself from the empirical reality for a moment. This is a tourist Lodge on a farm where wild creatures have lived a relatively good life compared to domesticated animals born and raised in the meat industry. And what do you mean with 'civilization' by the way? If in your opinion 'civilization' and organized cruelty don't go together then we have a different understanding of the concept. When I wrote about the process of civilization I did not imply a particular social order. I mainly exposed a particular *mechanism*, namely that personality structures are linked to processes of state formation. The civilizing process has no preconceived direction and unfolds itself to scientists who engage in historical and empirical research. Based on my work on manners in Western Europe since the Middle Ages, I found that human self-restraint emerges as a decisive trait

built into every ‘civilized’ human being. And that this stands in the closest relationship to the monopolization of physical force and the growing stability of the central organs in society.

Elizabeth. Thank you Norbert for that clarification but let me remind you we were talking about meat eating.

Norbert. Exactly, what I for instance fleshed out in my empirical study was the development of human attitudes towards meat eating. The manner in which meat is served has changed dramatically over the centuries. Initially dead animal bodies were brought to the dinner tables of the upper classes and the meat was carved on the table, where everyone could see it. Carving and distributing the meat were special tasks for the master of the house or special guests who took delight in the preparation of the flesh for eating. When during the seventeenth century the size of households gradually decreased, and specialists took over the carving of dead animals in butcheries and factories, the sight of a dead animal carcass was regarded as being distasteful. Thus the standard attitude in France and Germany in modern times held that meat should not in any way remind us of an animal killing. You will of course notice this when you look at the Kudu steaks and Ostrich burgers in this restaurant; we won’t be able to recognise the animals we just viewed in the wild during our game drive.

Elizabeth sarcastically. Personally, I neither like to see dead recognisable body parts nor concealed ones on the dinner table. I prefer not seeing meat and I refuse to eat dead flesh of a beast. In fact, I am astonished that you can insert the dead flesh of an animal into your mouth, and, even more astoundingly that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices caused by the wounds to death.

Norbert. To be honest, I think the whole point is that I don’t *feel* like I am eating an *animal* when I eat meat. I know it, but I don’t emotionally connect the matter on my dinner plate with the notion of animal rights abuse. In ‘The Civilization Process’ I illustrated how children are taught to disassociate from the ‘animalistic’ characteristics of their food, just like they are taught to suppress anything that reminds them of their own animalistic

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characteristics. Such changes in manners are linked to changes in general social structures. Meat eating manners are part of the civilizing process where the distasteful is removed from sight. There are hidden places where we do the distasteful things we do; in the kitchen, the toilet, and in our bedrooms.

Elizabeth interjects. And on trophy-hunting farms.

Norbert looks puzzled. Sorry, come again?

Elizabeth. Trophy-hunting farms: an invisible part of the tourist economy dedicated to the repugnant practice of killing animals. A wildlife farm like this, dedicated to trophy hunting. Friends insisted that I visit them on their farm last week and that's how I got to learn about the hunting scene recently.

Norbert. But surely hunting is not a new phenomenon Elizabeth.

Elizabeth explains. No certainly not, but here in South Africa the commercial hunting industry is rapidly growing since the fall of apartheid not long after your passing Norbert.

Norbert. Please enlighten me on the societal changes from the recent past.

[Elizabeth straightens her back and prepares for an opinionated explanation]

Elizabeth. Well, there is a proliferating hunting industry driven by white landowners and farmers who convert their sheep farms to wildlife habitats. They invite overseas hunters to purchase 'hunting packages' that allow them to shoot several species of wildlife during a multiple-day stay in the country. The trophy-hunting farms are tucked away in the interior that is re-wilded for the rearing of trophy animals. Despite the fact that these game farms are suspected to be sanctuaries of extravagant behaviour reminiscent of colonial times, the industry is growing year by year. The African Nationalist Congress (ANC) party, ruling since 1994, doesn't really seem to be bothered by the huge tracts of land being converted for wildlife production. They buy into the idea of 'nature conservation' and 'tourism'.

Norbert recalling anti-apartheid demonstrations in Amsterdam. And how does the state deal with the legacy of the apartheid system?

Elizabeth. Unfortunately Norbert, the post-apartheid promises of land reform and poverty reduction mainly proved to

be political castles in the sky. The apartheid beast is replaced by a postcolonial hybrid made of capitalism and democracy. Mandela promised the liberated South Africans a rainbow nation in which “never, never again shall one man dominate over another”. The new dispensation adopted a progressive constitution in which all citizens are protected against racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. And what worries me is human domination *over animals* in this country. South Africa is becoming a giant zoo confining the mobility of its wildlife through high, and sometimes electrified, game fences! The struggle between lion and men is definitely over. Today animals have no more power. They only have their silence left with which to confront us.

Norbert. This is an intriguing observation, but I wouldn't be so sure of this silence Elizabeth. Inherent to every social figuration are tensions and conflicts related to patterns and power relations that people formed with each other. Animals are part of the silent tug-of-war hidden beneath the institutionalized forms of co-operation among humans on the farm. They, like humans perhaps, confront the conditions of their domination and attempt to achieve freedom. When they are kept in confined spaces, they will escape like human slaves did. When they are physically under threat by hunting activities, they will charge back, not so? This way, animals constantly challenge the balance of powers on the farm; they ignore geographical borders as well as rules aimed at restricting their mobility. Their animalistic behaviour muddles up the farmer's fantasy of an orderly game farm. In other words, animals constantly remind us of the limitations of human's desire to control their environment.

Elizabeth. Very eloquently articulated indeed. The ironic twist subsequently lies in the farm environment being constructed in such a way to make the animals look wild and undomesticated; there are few fences, roads and traces of human presence on the 'pristine' hunting terrain. The black workers' families living on trophy-hunting properties are gradually displaced which feeds into the colonial settler fantasy of Africa as 'empty land'.

Norbert. Your choice of words bewilders me. These trophy-hunting farmers might respond to the political change around

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them because - as I once wrote in a different context - people confronted with a quickly changing world are apt to seek refuge in an image of a social order which never changes, and project it into a past that never was. Great disparities exist between the 'reality' of the present and the 'images' humans construct to make sense of it. Even though the trophy-hunting farmers can still perpetuate their privileged lifestyle in the postcolony, they obviously feel existentially threatened by the political configuration that wants to change the balance of powers in society through economic reforms. I have tried to emphasize that we often overlook the *emotional* aspects of change in society. Reason and rationality are believed to guide and legitimise all human action, but civilization is set in motion blindly and kept in motion by the autonomous dynamics of a web of relationships, by specific changes in the way people are bound to live together.

Elizabeth. I agree. You are quite astute for a deceased thinker Norbert. In my opinion the transition in South Africa has not improved the relations between humans nor between humans and animals.

Norbert. Please elaborate.

Elizabeth continues. Let's look at the trophy-hunt itself. From the moment the trophy animal is bleeding to death, a remarkable ritual starts in the hunting field. The black farm workers are expected to 'set the scene' for the trophy-hunting picture of hunter and hunted. The hunter poses with the weapon that he used to kill the trophy; usually a rifle or a cross bow. Although it was the hunter's intention from the start to kill the animal, in the picture the animal is made to look alive. How do they do this? Not the hunter himself, but several black farm workers, converted to *trackers*, are expected to wash the blood from the carcass, conceal the wound, make sure the unseeing eyes remain open, and on top of that sometimes place a stone in the animal's mouth as if it is engaged in the act of *eating*.

Norbert. It strikes me that the hunter doesn't seem to get his hands dirty or bloody while his trophy is prepared for the photo shoot?

Elizabeth. Indeed, these international clients might not be used to such butchering and especially not African animal species.

Norbert. Clearly these hunting clients come from societies where slaughtering has been banned out of sight.

Elizabeth. Anyway, South-African men raised in the countryside know how to slaughter an animal and don't perceive this as an unclean thing. Part of a professional hunter's rite of passage for instance consists of feeling the animal's blood and organs as well as slaughtering and dissecting the carcass with their bare hands. These rites strongly affirm a particular masculinity, prowess, bravery, and male dominance.

[Norbert sits back and remains silent for a moment, seemingly deep in thought]

Norbert. To me it seems that both the white South-African professional hunter and the overseas hunting clients are resisting the civilizing processes that attempts to mould them into pacified societies. Through commodification of hunting rituals they remained on the land, kept their weapons, put on their military garments, pulled up their ranks against intruders from outside, and in doing so they resisted social transformation and symbolically re-asserted racial hierarchies of power.

Elizabeth. Not to mention humans' superior attitude towards animals. And the South-African state is implicated as well. In constitutionally protecting landowners' rights they criminalise those hunters without land who are defined as 'poachers' or 'stock thieves'. Moreover, a particular constructed hierarchy of skills and knowledge becomes evident when we look at who performs which tasks with the animal carcass, and for what *reason*. White farmers believe their workers have *innate* knowledge of tracking and working with wildlife, they argue that their black workers have a particular instinctive closeness to nature that white men can only rhetorically envy. Therefore it is deemed natural that black workers remain in positions where they do the dirty, low-paid, work that involves roaming the bush and being with the animals both when they're still alive and when they are lifeless.

Norbert. That sounds like an effective group fantasy to legitimise existing power relations on the farm. Farmers attribute 'animalistic' characteristics to their workers by praising them for their closeness to nature. Now that black farm workers have equal

citizenship rights, it is even more important for white farmers to label them as inferior beings and ‘keep them in their place’.

Elizabeth. Such a typical human way to symbolise social difference and status. Ironically, farm workers who have never encountered a buffalo in their lives as sheep herders or mine workers are just as scared as you and I when they encounter one on the trophy-hunting farm.

Norbert. Yes, this is a rather curious situation. Did you find out what happens with the animal carcass after the photo shoot?

Elizabeth. The hunter won’t touch the animal again until it has been transformed into a costly wall decoration reminding them of the kill. While the hunter and his guide celebrate the successful hunt and their reconfirmed manliness, the black workers prepare the animal body for consumption in an out of sight shed. They remove the skin, horns and tusks that are covered in salt until collected by a professional taxidermist. The rest of the flesh is prepared to sell as game meat. Therefore, the game meat industry is trying to change the dietary habits of South Africans who mostly eat mutton and beef. Fortunately tourists like us are easy to lure into wildlife consumption. The farm workers don’t have a choice in this respect

as they are occasionally ‘rewarded’ with left over pieces from the shed. For their preferred sheep meat they rely on the supermarket.

Norbert. This is so interesting Elizabeth. It takes me back to the days I wrote about the civilising process. In this particular context I also recognise groups resisting societal reform and state intervention. The trophy-hunting farm seems to increasingly formalise, professionalise, and ritualise hunting practices. The fact that dead trophy carcasses are removed from the farm to another place where they are prepared and mounted for the hunter signals a process of economic differentiation that resonates with the butcher removing the animal carcass from the dinner table during the Middle Ages. This certainly is an intellectually challenging case about the twists and turns in the South-African process of civilisation.

Elizabeth. Norbert, your statements upset me. I don’t understand that you detect any form of civilization in this context!

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‘animalistic’ characteristics to their workers by praising them for their closeness to nature.

All I see is the systematic production of animals for hunting, combined with the exploitation and stigmatization of black workers. Surely this can never represent a process of civilization? As if your theory is not contested enough yet!

Norbert. First of all Elizabeth, like I said earlier the ‘process of civilization’ does not imply a particular order and direction in my view. Besides, even my most fervent critics have at least agreed that the concept of ‘civilization’ is relevant for observing how people legitimise superiority, taking into account that the meanings of what is civilised and what is not vary per cultural context. You should know by now that I am as pessimistic as you about the nature of humans, and unlike you, careful with normative or prescriptive articulations.

Elizabeth red-faced. On my part I don’t understand how you get to pretend to be so-called ‘detached’ from the horrific injustices perpetrated against animals and humans that surround us.

Norbert. Perhaps we should agree to disagree Elizabeth. I admire your passionate approach to debate and you have certainly given me much food for thought tonight.

Elizabeth. Consider the food for thought a starter, because your Kudu steak is about to be served!

The end.

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