

The Social Pathologisation of Political Dissent

Civilising processes and the institutional classification of political dissent

Dick H. Ahles



“...a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him.”¹

Étienne de La Boétie

“The social constraint towards self-constraint.”²

Norbert Elias

¹ Étienne de La Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, translated by Harry Kurz (1942), opening paragraph. The excerpt is reproduced in the Online Library of Liberty, “No. 25: Étienne de la Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1576)”: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/oll-reader-25>.

² Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (1939; revised English edition, 2012), Part Four, section 1. The phrase is the section heading in the 2012 edition; 1939 is the date of the original work.



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Abstract

This paper examines whether Norbert Elias's account of the "social constraint towards self-restraint" can be extended beyond the regulation of conduct and affect to political convictions, standards of credibility, and the boundaries of legitimate dissent. It distinguishes civilisation, understood as a historically formed configuration of beliefs about reality, norms, values and behavioural repertoires, from civilising, understood as the process through which these elements are transmitted, internalised, modified and embedded in institutions.

The central argument is that civilising processes do more than create the expectations required for cooperation and institutional continuity. They also shape the standards by which political views that depart sharply from prevailing norms are judged as legitimate, unreasonable, dangerous or pathological. Here, pathologisation means the process through which a political conviction is no longer assessed primarily on its content, but is treated as evidence of a cognitive, moral, psychological or social deficiency in the person or group expressing it. This sociological use is distinguished from medical or psychiatric diagnosis.

The paper then develops the concept of institutional self-confirmation. Institutions are trusted because they are regarded as expert and legitimate; while their claims are accepted as reasonable partly because they come from trusted institutions. Once these standards are internalised, officials, professionals, journalists and citizens may apply them sincerely, without central direction. Pathologisation can therefore stabilise the political order by reaffirming norms and reducing uncertainty. That effect, however, does not show that a classification is factually correct, morally justified or legally legitimate.

Finally, pathologisation can weaken a society's capacity for self-correction by disqualifying dissenters before their arguments are examined. Open contestation is therefore needed to test political claims and to keep classifications of those who express them open to criticism and revision. The proposed extension of Elias's theory is presented as a research programme requiring historical, comparative and empirical investigation.

Keywords: Norbert Elias; civilising processes; social pathologisation; political dissent; institutional self-confirmation; self-restraint

1 Cooperation and the social basis of power

Analyses of social change often begin with the formal distribution of power: control over the state and the media, legislative authority, the allocation of resources and the appointment of office-holders.

This can lead to a simple explanatory model in which a relatively small group acquires power and subsequently imposes its will on society. That model gives insufficient attention to the cooperation through which decisions acquire practical force. A government may decide, but others must formulate, justify, explain, administer, implement and enforce its decisions. Changes in what people hold to be true, right and worth pursuing help provide power with its social basis and continuity. Officials, professionals and citizens may contribute to the operation of an institution because they regard its procedures as responsible, just, normal or inevitable. Their cooperation may also reflect material dependence, coercion or strategic adaptation. Cooperation in this sense should therefore not be equated with freely given consent.

Anyone seeking to understand how societies function and change must therefore look beyond the formal holders of power. They must investigate how people acquire their conceptions of reality, convictions, norms and forms of conduct. In this essay I refer to that broader process as civilising. The proposed usage builds on Elias's account of interdependence and internalisation while extending its application to the political evaluation of convictions.

The central question is whether and under what conditions the social constraint towards self-constraint can help explain how political vocabularies, standards of credibility and boundaries of legitimate dissent are internalised.

1.1 Approach and scope

The essay proceeds through conceptual reconstruction and the formulation of a possible social mechanism. It offers no original dataset, systematic survey or comparative case study. References to officials, experts, journalists and citizens identify possible roles within that mechanism; they do not establish how frequently particular institutions pathologise dissent. The argument must therefore be assessed for conceptual consistency and explanatory usefulness before its empirical scope can be established.

Three levels of argument are distinguished: Eliasian points of departure, the analytical vocabulary proposed here, and the normative case for preserving opportunities for correction. The terms personal civilisation, dominant civilisation and institutional self-confirmation are used as working concepts. Their value depends on whether they identify relationships that cannot be adequately described by existing accounts of socialisation, habitus and group stigmatisation.

2 Civilising and moral evaluation

In everyday usage, civilisation often carries a normative meaning. It is associated with refinement, reasonableness, self-control and social progress. For sociological analysis, however, this meaning is problematic because it assumes that civilising necessarily produces morally desirable outcomes. I use civilising in a broader, analytical sense to examine how people learn standards of factual credibility, moral evaluation and expected conduct, together with the authority they attribute to persons, sources and institutions.

The outcomes of these processes are not morally predetermined. Civilising can contribute to tolerance, cooperation, mutual restraint and respect for personal freedom. It can equally normalise obedience, exclusion, images of enemies and oppression. A repressive social order may also rest on strongly internalised rules of conduct, specialised functions, training, procedures, legal categories and moral justifications. Within the conceptual framework used here, it is therefore likewise an outcome of civilising processes. The analytical question is not whether the internalised norms are morally desirable, but how they durably structure perception, judgement and action and are institutionally continued and transformed.

These definitions do not imply that every process of social learning is civilising in Elias's more specific historical sense. The broader terminology used here is a proposal whose explanatory value must be assessed against established accounts of socialisation and habitus.

Civilising is used here in a descriptive-analytical sense. The analysis concerns the processes through which conceptions of reality, norms and forms of conduct are transmitted, internalised, coordinated and institutionally continued. The question whether the convictions involved are factually correct and whether the norms or practices are morally justified is analytically distinguished from this explanation, but not excluded from consideration. This separation of sociological explanation from substantive evaluation requires the explanatory model to be applied symmetrically. The same model must be usable for convictions the researcher endorses and for convictions they reject. This principle may be termed analytical symmetry.

3 Conceptual distinctions

This paper distinguishes between civilisation and civilising.

Civilisation denotes the historically formed configuration, existing at a particular moment, of conceptions of reality, convictions, norms, values, interpretative frameworks and behavioural repertoires. At the individual level I use the term personal civilisation. In relation to a social circle, organisation or society, it refers to the overlapping and socially effective elements of personal civilisations insofar as they are embedded in language, conduct, social expectations and institutions.

Civilising denotes the process through which elements of a civilisation are transmitted, internalised, interpreted, combined, added, modified, strengthened, weakened or rejected. This process never begins from a social zero point, but always takes place within already existing personal and social civilisations. Civilising therefore encompasses both continuity and change.

Where this paper refers to Elias's civilising process, it means his specific analysis of the interrelationship between changing social figurations, the regulation of conduct, the control of affect and self-constraint. For my broader theoretical approach I use the expression the process of civilising.

The term dominant civilisation is used here when particular conceptions of reality, norms and expectations of conduct are not only socially widespread, but also occupy a privileged position within authoritative institutions and thereby largely determine prevailing standards of reasonableness, normality and legitimacy.

4 Eliasian foundations and the proposed contribution

At its centre is the relationship between long-term changes in social figurations and changes in the personality structures of the people interconnected within them. Elias analyses this relationship as an interweaving of sociogenesis and psychogenesis. Individual and society are not separate realities that subsequently act upon one another; changes in social relations and changes in conduct, affect regulation and habitus are mutually intertwined. As the social division of labour expands and people become involved in longer and more complex chains of interdependence, they must coordinate their conduct more precisely with that of others. They must look further ahead, take longer-term consequences into account, control impulses and assess the possible reactions of others more accurately. Elias relates this development, among other things, to state formation, the concentration of the means of violence, the pacification of social relations and the expansion of economic and functional interdependencies.³

The phrase social constraint towards self-constraint summarises an important part of this process. Social constraint does not disappear. It remains present in relations of interdependence, expectations, sanctions and balances of power. Part of this external regulation is, however, internalised in the form of more automatic and enduring self-regulation. Rules of conduct are no longer followed solely because others exercise immediate supervision or impose sanctions. They may become part of the habitus and be supported by feelings of shame, embarrassment, aversion and personal responsibility. For Elias, this development is not a deliberately designed programme of civilisation. Individual persons and institutions may take purposeful educational measures, formulate rules of conduct or pursue particular social reforms. The course and long-term outcomes of the overall process are not, however, controlled by any single actor or group. They arise from the interweaving of the largely purposive actions of mutually interdependent people. The civilising process is thus humanly produced and structured, yet as a whole largely unplanned.

The largely unplanned character of the overall process does not mean that all civilising influence is unintended. Parents, teachers, religious leaders, administrators, political movements and social institutions may deliberately seek to transmit particular convictions, norms and forms of conduct and to make them socially dominant. In politics especially, language, education, media, legislation, rituals and organisations are consciously used to disseminate conceptions of reality and standards of right and wrong. A purposeful civilising intervention does not, however, fully determine its social outcome. Every recipient interprets it through an already formed personal civilisation and under the influence of many other, partly contingent experiences and dependencies. The transmitted elements may be accepted, rejected, modified or connected with other elements. Civilising influence may therefore be purposive, while the wider process and its long-term consequences remain largely unplanned and only partly controllable.

Within such figurations, socially prestigious groups may function as model-setting centres. The standards of conduct of courtly elites arose partly from status competition and interdependencies within the court. Other groups could adopt these manners, tastes and forms of self-control because they were associated with social prestige, access and upward mobility. This was not a simple one-way process in which an entirely autonomous elite imposed its norms on passive subjects. As power relations changed and dependencies became more reciprocal, established groups also came under increasing pressure to adjust their conduct to less powerful

³ Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012 [1939]), especially Part Four. This provides the point of departure for the connection between social interdependence, external constraint and self-regulation.

groups. Elias therefore addresses both the model-setting influence of groups above and the increasing pressure from below.

A social rule may thus become part of personality, but it does not do so in the same way or to the same degree in every individual. Within the framework proposed here, concrete internalisation is shaped partly by biological and psychological predispositions, already formed personality structure, cognitive capacities, earlier experiences and the position a person occupies within different social figurations. That personality structure is itself partly shaped by earlier civilising processes. The issue is therefore not an unchanging individual core on which society subsequently imprints its rules, but an ongoing interplay between individual processing and social influence.

Nor does a civilising process begin from a social zero point. Every society consists of people who already possess personally formed repertoires of convictions, norms and conduct. The language, institutions, power relations and social expectations encountered by new generations have likewise emerged from earlier processes. Civilising therefore means more than passing on an existing civilisation. It encompasses both continuity and change. Existing elements may be continued, strengthened, weakened, reinterpreted or connected with other elements. They may disappear while new knowledge, norms, concepts and forms of conduct are added. In this sense, civilising is always a process of continuing, adding to, reordering and transforming already existing civilisations.

Technological change is an important driving force within this dynamic. It does not come from outside society, but is produced by people and institutions that themselves operate within existing civilisations. New technologies subsequently alter the possibilities for action, chains of interdependence, forms of communication and social relations within which people coordinate their conduct. They may thereby also change conceptions of reality, norms and values. The development of a technology may be purposive while its wider social consequences remain largely unplanned. Disruptive innovations may visibly unsettle existing expectations of conduct and generate social conflict. Gradual innovations, by contrast, may normalise new forms of conduct almost imperceptibly. In both cases, technological development and the process of civilising act upon one another. Technological changes may therefore also shift what a society classifies as adapted, threatening or pathological.

The proposed framework should not be understood as introducing knowledge or group classification into an otherwise exclusively behavioural theory. Elias's later work on symbols and knowledge, and his analysis with John L. Scotson of established–outsider relations, already provide points of connection. The contribution proposed here concerns the relationship between the internalisation of political convictions, institutional self-confirmation and the classification of dissent as personal or group deficiency.⁴

The central hypothesis is that political vocabularies and boundaries of legitimate dissent may become internalised to such a degree that they are experienced as self-evident expressions of reasonableness and responsible citizenship. Institutional authority may then reinforce these standards, while their routine application supports that authority. The theoretical task is to spe-

⁴ For Elias's treatment of language and knowledge, see *The Symbol Theory* (2011 [1991]). For group classification and exclusion, see Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (2nd ed., 1994 [1965]), Introduction, pp. xv–xx. These are points of connection; the institutional mechanism proposed in this essay requires separate evaluation.

cify when this relationship permits revision and when it turns disagreement into a judgement of deficiency.

5 Personal civilisation

To analyse how civilising processes operate at the individual level, I introduce the concept of personal civilisation. Every individual has biological and psychological characteristics, including predispositions, temperament, cognitive capacities, sensitivities, and physical possibilities and limitations. These characteristics develop throughout life in continual interaction with upbringing, social relationships, education, language, institutions and social experience.

By personal civilisation I mean:

the historically formed, largely learned and only partly conscious repertoire through which an individual interprets reality, evaluates situations and conduct, and acts within social relations.

This repertoire can be analytically divided into three interconnected domains.

5.1 Conceptions of reality and interpretative frameworks

People acquire knowledge, explanations, concepts and narratives through which they interpret reality. They learn not only what their environment regards as factually correct, but also which sources are considered reliable, which persons count as experts, which institutions possess authority and which forms of evidence are accepted as convincing.

These conceptions of reality may be factually correct, partly correct, outdated or false. In explaining conduct, what matters is not only how reality actually is, but also how an individual perceives it and which interpretations they find credible.

5.2 Norms values and ideals

People also acquire standards of judgement by which they evaluate conduct, situations, institutions and persons. They learn what is regarded as desirable, just, decent, objectionable or impermissible.

These norms and values help shape feelings of approval, admiration, aversion, guilt and shame. They also provide the basis for ideals concerning one's own life, social relations and the organisation of society.

5.3 Behavioural repertoires and practical routines

Finally, people acquire patterns of action for a wide range of social situations. They learn how to speak, greet, cooperate, obey, contradict, reward, punish, mourn and celebrate.

A substantial part of this regulation of conduct takes place without continual conscious deliberation. Through repetition, social confirmation and internalisation, forms of conduct may acquire a routine character and come to be experienced as self-evident.

Every individual's personal civilisation is unique. It is formed by a specific combination of predisposition, life history, social position, upbringing, education, occupation, relationships, media, organisations and particular experiences. No two people are exposed to precisely the same influences or process them in exactly the same way. Individual differences therefore remain even in the most egalitarian society. Such variations may provide starting points for

gradual changes in a civilisation when they are adopted by others, further developed and institutionally embedded. In this limited sense, comparison with biological evolution is possible: variation supplies the material on which transmission and selection can operate. This analogy does not establish that cultural and biological selection follow the same mechanisms.

A personal civilisation is not a fully coherent and unchanging system. It may contain contradictory convictions, divergent norms, only partly internalised rules of conduct and ideals that are difficult to reconcile. New experiences may strengthen, weaken or reinterpret existing elements, or connect them with others. Which parts of this repertoire become active in a particular situation depends partly on the social relationship in which a person is situated. The same person may apply different behavioural expectations and standards of judgement within a family, a friendship, a work organisation or a political institution. This does not mean that conduct is arbitrary. It means that personal civilisation is activated situationally. Different social spheres and power relations call upon different parts of the same acquired repertoire.

People do not act from a single, fully coherent and unchanging programme, but from a personally formed repertoire whose different elements become operative in different social figurations.

6 Language as a medium of transmission and classification

Not all transmission and internalisation within civilising processes occurs through language. People also learn through observation, imitation, repetition, reward, disapproval and participation in social practices. Children, for example, acquire interpersonal distances, facial expressions, bodily routines and expectations of proper conduct at an early age, before they fully master the associated concepts.

Language nevertheless acquires a special significance when experiences, conduct and social relations are explicitly named, classified, evaluated and transmitted. It makes it possible to turn implicit behavioural expectations into generally applicable concepts and rules.

Words do not merely describe conduct. They also place it within a normative and social interpretative framework. An action may be described as decent or vulgar, honest or misleading, courageous or reckless, critical or extremist, erotic or obscene, concerned or paranoid, or independent or antisocial. Each designation connects the act to a different expectation about its meaning and the response it warrants.

The chosen designation therefore affects not only how an action is described, but also how it is judged and which response is considered appropriate. In this sense, language forms part of the social ordering of perception and conduct. Through language, implicit customs may become explicit norms. These norms can then be embedded in upbringing, education, professional codes, political programmes, media communications, journalistic conventions, legislation and judicial decisions. Language thereby increases the transmissibility, generalisability and institutional durability of elements of civilisation.

It also contributes to alignment between publicly expressed convictions and visible conduct. People are generally expected not to act continually in ways that contradict the norms they themselves endorse. When such a contradiction becomes visible, it may lead to descriptions such as hypocritical, unreliable or indecent and, when institutionalised rules are violated, to formal sanctions. This alignment need not be complete. People may harbour private doubts, conceal conduct, adapt strategically or tactically, or simultaneously endorse contradictory

norms, sometimes without being conscious of doing so. Civilising processes therefore do not produce complete unity between conviction, language and conduct, but they do create social pressure to maintain a degree of consistency among them.

The evaluation of conduct also does not depend solely on the physical act or representation itself. It is shaped by the socially interpreted character of the situation. An actual shooting and the depiction of a shooting in a film may present physically similar images to an observer, yet be judged entirely differently within different social frames. This distinction shows that civilising not only regulates conduct, but also forms interpretative frameworks by which conduct, convictions and persons are classified. Such classification may shift from evaluating the act or claim to judging the person who performs or expresses it. A form of conduct or a conviction is then described not only as false, improper or prohibited, but as evidence of irrationality, dangerousness, unfitness or some other personal or social deficiency.

In this paper, pathologisation refers to this social process of classification: deviation is no longer contested solely on its content, but is interpreted as a symptom of a deficient person, group or social condition.

7 Social spheres and shared civilisations

People do not function within a single undifferentiated social space. They participate in different social figurations, such as families, circles of friends, work organisations, associations, scientific communities and state institutions. These figurations involve different relations of interdependence, behavioural expectations and standards of appropriate conduct. Conduct that is self-evident or desirable within one social relationship may be judged improper or impermissible within another. Obedience, confidentiality, dissent, loyalty and openness, for example, acquire different meanings within a family, a business, a scientific institution or a parliament.

An individual's personal civilisation is therefore not activated in the same way in every situation. Which convictions, norms and behavioural repertoires become operative depends partly on the figuration in which the person is situated, the position they occupy and the expectations attached to that position. When this paper speaks of the civilisation of a social circle, organisation or society, it does not assume that a group possesses a single collective consciousness. It refers to sufficiently overlapping and socially effective elements of personal civilisations insofar as they are embedded in language, expectations, routines, functions and institutions. This overlap makes coordinated and predictable conduct possible, but it is never complete. Differences in conceptions of reality, norms, interests and interpretations persist within every figuration. Such differences become political when they concern the organisation of shared relations, the distribution of authority and the boundaries of legitimate participation.

The same social figuration that enables cooperation therefore also produces standards by which divergent conduct and convictions are judged. The subsequent question is when such divergences continue to be treated as normal variation or political dissent and when they are classified as unreasonable, dangerous or pathological.

8 Political conflict as a conflict between convictions

Politics is often described as a struggle for power. This is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. Power is both a means and an outcome of a struggle over which conceptions of reality, norms, interests and principles of social ordering are to become socially dominant. People generally do

not experience their political ideals and convictions as arbitrary preferences. They regard them as factually correct, morally justified or socially desirable and therefore seek to have others share them. Political convictions often have a moral component. When actors identify their own position with the good, rejection of that position may be interpreted as rejection of the good itself. The political opponent then appears not merely as someone holding an incorrect or undesirable view, but as a morally deficient person or group.

At that point, conflict between convictions shifts towards the classification of those who express them. The opponent no longer needs to be explained or refuted on substantive grounds, but may instead be exposed, excluded, shamed or removed from public debate. This observation does not preclude severe criticism of political ideas, means and consequences. Political convictions may be factually false, normatively unjust or practically dangerous. Sociological analysis nevertheless requires an inquiry into why people acquire such convictions and how those convictions are socially sustained. Those who treat an opponent solely as an embodiment of evil or deficiency lose the capacity to explain that person's conviction and, with it, an important means of contesting or changing it.

9 The civilisation of legitimate political opinion

A society teaches its members not only what they should believe, but also which political views count as reasonable, decent and legitimate. A repertoire of legitimate political conflict emerges. Within that repertoire, people may disagree about taxation, policy, political parties, office-holders and the distribution of resources. Yet not every possible view is treated as an equally valid contribution to political discussion.

This repertoire concerns the objectives that may be discussed, the language considered appropriate to respectable politicians, the opponents recognised as legitimate participants and the means judged permissible. It also shapes the boundaries between reform and extremism, and between reasonable opposition and a threat to the social order.

No political order can exist entirely without boundaries. Someone who seeks to replace parliamentary decision-making with personal violence cannot demand that both methods be treated as equivalent contributions to debate. The crucial questions concern who draws the boundary, on what grounds and whether the boundary itself remains open to discussion. Constitutional oaths and affirmations can illustrate how participation is tied to public acceptance of procedural obligations, although their wording and political significance vary between systems. Acceptance of constitutional procedures need not imply agreement with current policy or with every prevailing interpretation of those procedures.

The shift occurs, however, when three different requirements are conflated:

1. loyalty to constitutional procedures
2. loyalty to the prevailing interpretation of those procedures
3. agreement with the aims and intentions of the current office-holders.

When these requirements are conflated, criticism of policy may be interpreted as hostility towards the rule of law, criticism of an institution as distrust of democracy, and criticism of the established order's moral self-description as evidence that the critic stands outside the bounds of respectable politics. These are possible classificatory shifts rather than inevitable consequences of constitutional commitments.

10 The pathologisation of political dissent

Not every rejection or limitation of a political conviction can be described as pathologisation. Political conflict presupposes that statements can be factually disputed, proposals normatively rejected and the likely consequences of policy critically examined. Nor does setting limits on threats, violence or directly harmful conduct in itself amount to the pathologisation of political dissent. Pathologisation occurs when attention shifts from the content of a conviction to an alleged 'deficiency' in the person who holds it. The dissenting conviction is then no longer treated primarily as a potentially false, unjust or undesirable idea, but as a symptom of a cognitive, moral, psychological or social defect. The opponent is no longer regarded merely as someone who has reached a different conclusion. Their conviction is explained through qualities that call into question their fitness for reasonable or legitimate participation. They may, for example, be described as irrational, uncivilised, backward, pathologically distrustful, morally contaminated, psychologically disturbed or socially unfit.

Such descriptions may have a descriptive meaning and may be justified in particular cases. The analytical problem arises when they replace substantive evaluation of the conviction. The argument then no longer needs to be examined separately, because the mere fact that someone expresses the dissenting conviction is treated as evidence of their deficiency. Pathologisation need not result from a deliberate strategy pursued by an established elite. Office-holders, experts, journalists and citizens may sincerely believe that they are defending a reasonable, humane and peaceful order. As the corresponding norms, concepts and interpretative frameworks become more deeply internalised, they are less readily experienced as historically formed elements of a particular political civilisation. They appear instead as self-evident expressions of reasonableness, decency and responsible citizenship. From that position, fundamental dissent becomes increasingly difficult to imagine as the outcome of a different, likewise socially formed conviction. The critic appears not simply to interpret reality differently, but, according to the established classification, to demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to recognise the evident reasonableness of the order.

The process is reinforced when established and dissenting groups are judged by different standards. The established group may identify itself with its formal principles, its best representatives and its declared intentions. The dissenting group, by contrast, is judged by its most extreme statements, its least controlled representatives and the most harmful consequences that can be attributed to its ideas. A difference in social position can thereby be converted into a difference in moral and psychological worth. The established group appears responsible, reasonable and civilised; the dissenting group as uncontrolled, unreliable or dangerous outsiders.⁵

In this paper, the pathologisation of political dissent therefore means: the social process through which a dissenting political conviction is no longer assessed primarily on its content, but is interpreted as a symptom of a cognitive, moral, psychological or social deficiency in the person or group expressing it.

This definition does not imply that all dissenting convictions are reasonable, factually correct or morally acceptable. Nor does it exclude the possibility that particular persons genuinely have mental disorders or that particular movements pose real dangers. It requires only that substant-

⁵ Elias and Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994), Introduction, p. xix. Elias describes the asymmetry between an established group's exemplary members and the least conforming members of an outsider group. The application to political classifications in this essay is a theoretical proposal.

ive assessment of a conviction be analytically distinguished from classification of those who hold it.

This is a deliberately broader use of pathologisation than medicalisation alone. Stigmatisation and delegitimation are neighbouring processes, but they need not involve an attribution of deficiency. For the purposes of this essay, the defining shift occurs when dissent itself becomes evidence of diminished cognitive, moral, psychological or social fitness and that attribution displaces assessment of the argument. Neither disagreement, condemnation nor exclusion is sufficient on its own to establish that shift.

Pathologisation is used here in a sociological sense. The analysis concerns how descriptions of a person or group as deficient acquire authority and affect their social position. It does not deny that psychological or neurological disorders can affect perception, judgement and conduct. The presence and significance of such a disorder in an individual case cannot be determined from political disagreement alone and fall outside the scope of this essay. A social classification may coincide with a clinically established condition or may be mistaken. Neither possibility removes the need to distinguish the evaluation of a claim from the classification of the person who expresses it.

Pathologisation becomes especially politically significant when such classifications do not remain confined to informal language, but are adopted by media organisations, expert professions, educational institutions, administrative bodies or legal institutions. A dissenting conviction may then affect the access of persons and groups to public debate, social functions, institutional protection and legitimate political participation. This gives rise to a further analytical question: how can institutions confirm and disseminate social classifications while their own authority rests partly on the reasonableness and legitimacy they attribute to themselves and to one another?

11 The loop of institutional self confirmation

The classifications described in the preceding section acquire a wider social effect when they are adopted by authoritative institutions. An informal judgement that a political conviction is unreasonable, dangerous or socially unacceptable may be challenged or ignored. When a similar judgement is confirmed by administrative bodies, scientific institutions, educational organisations, the media or courts, it may acquire a more general and enduring character. Institutions contribute to the criteria by which convictions, persons and conduct are judged. These criteria concern recognised expertise, the authority to make public judgements, definitions of the general interest, grounds for protection or sanction, and the boundaries of legitimate political dissent.

The state occupies a distinctive position within this process. It can not only formulate and disseminate classifications, but also connect them to binding rules, administrative decisions and ultimately coercion. At the same time, a state cannot function through coercion alone. Decisions must be prepared, interpreted, administered, implemented and accepted by large numbers of people across different functions and chains of interdependence. The functioning of institutions therefore rests partly on expectations concerning their legitimacy, expertise and good intentions. Citizens and officials learn, for example, that government serves the general interest, judges administer justice, the police protect public order, civil servants ought to act impartially and experts base their judgements on relevant knowledge. Such expectations are necessary in

every society. Not every citizen or official can independently re-examine every technical calculation, legal judgement or administrative act. Institutional trust makes coordinated action possible and reduces the need to reconsider every decision in full whenever it is implemented.

A self-confirming loop arises when legitimacy, expertise and good intentions no longer function solely as testable expectations, but also become part of the institutional definition itself:

the institution is regarded as legitimate because it is presumed to act reasonably, expertly and in the general interest;

its conduct is regarded as reasonable, expert and in the general interest because it originates from a legitimate institution.

A comparable mechanism may arise around expertise:

an institution derives authority from the experts associated with it;

these persons count as authoritative experts because they have been selected, certified or consulted by recognised institutions.

This mutual confirmation does not by itself demonstrate circular reasoning, unlawful conduct or factual error. Institutional recognition may be supported by independently assessable evidence, a record of reliable performance and procedures for detecting mistakes. The proposed loop becomes epistemically closed when recognition itself supplies the decisive justification and contrary evidence or criticism cannot effectively prompt revision. The distinction is therefore between trust sustained through correction and trust insulated from correction. The loop concerns conduct as well as convictions. People working within institutions learn the tasks, powers and responsibilities attached to their positions. Many rules are implemented without every official re-examining their factual and moral foundations in every case. Such routine and role-bound conduct can support legitimate coordination while also making inherited classifications harder to question.

Here the question posed by Étienne de La Boétie, with which this paper begins, acquires sociological significance. His argument directs attention to the cooperation through which a ruler's commands acquire practical force, including cooperation sustained by dependence, habit or coercion. In a modern society, however, this power is not bestowed solely through personal admiration for a single monarch or office-holder. It arises within an extensive network of people who formulate, justify, administer, implement, enforce and accept decisions. From the perspective developed here, this cooperation need not result from a repeatedly renewed conscious decision to obey. It follows partly from civilising. People acquire convictions about which institutions are authorised, which procedures ought to be followed and which conduct is expected of a responsible official or citizen. Elias's social constraint towards self-constraint thereby also acquires an institutional dimension. Rules are implemented not only because violations may be punished, but because implementation is experienced as professional, responsible, decent or lawful.

A second loop thereby arises:

institutions derive the power to act from people's willingness to implement their rules and decisions;

the regular implementation of those rules and decisions in turn confirms the authority and effective power of those institutions.

The institutional order thus helps to produce the conduct on which its functioning rests, while that conduct in turn confirms the institutional order. This relationship connects La Boétie's insight that power is granted through cooperation with Elias's analysis of the social constraint towards self-constraint.

The loop also contributes to the continuation and social dissemination of a civilisation. Conceptions of reality, norms and expectations of conduct embedded in durable institutions, functions and routines are more likely to be transmitted again and applied in new situations. They thereby acquire an institutional continuity that does not depend on the original persons who developed them. In this sense, one may speak of a selective process: elements of civilisation that enable coordinated action, become institutionally embedded and are protected against erosion are more likely to persist socially. This selection presupposes neither a consciously acting society nor a previously designed purpose. It arises from interdependence and the largely routine conduct of persons and institutions. The loop of institutional self-confirmation is therefore not inherently pathological. It is partly a condition of continuity, predictability and cooperation in complex societies. Yet precisely because institutions depend on sufficient agreement for their functioning, they also generate standards by which dissent is classified as acceptable, disruptive or threatening.

12 The pathologising effects of institutional self confirmation

Civilising produces shared conceptions of reality, norms and expectations of conduct, together with standards by which deviations are perceived, named and classified. Shared norms may make fundamental deviations appear unreasonable, dangerous or pathological. Whether this develops into pathologisation is a contingent question rather than an inevitable consequence of cooperation. The proposed mechanism may have a stabilising effect when it reinforces expectations and reduces uncertainty. That effect would need to be demonstrated in particular settings and should not be inferred merely from the persistence of the institution or from the exclusion of a critic.

Pathologisation in itself says nothing about the mental condition of the person who dissents. It is not a medical diagnosis but a social classification. It reveals first of all which civilisation is socially dominant and able to make its own conceptions of reality, norms and expectations of conduct operate as standards of reasonableness and normality. The classification of dissent is also historically variable. Convictions and forms of conduct regarded as irrational, immoral, dangerous or pathological within one dominant civilisation may be regarded as normal, legitimate or even self-evident within a later civilisation. Conversely, conduct that was previously accepted may later be placed beyond the boundaries of the reasonable and permissible. This variability does not mean that every conviction is equally correct or every form of conduct equally harmless. It does show that the social classification of dissent must not be equated with a time-less determination of pathology. It also reveals something about the dominant civilisation of the time, its available knowledge, its technological and social relations and its standards of normality.⁶

The loop of institutional self-confirmation does not necessarily lead to pathologisation. It does, however, create favourable conditions for it when institutionally confirmed standards are

⁶ The persistence of a group classification despite changing conditions is illustrated in Elias and Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994), Preface, p. xi. That example concerns a neighbourhood image and does not by itself establish a general mechanism of political pathologisation.

no longer experienced as historically formed and testable, but as self-evident attributes of reasonableness, expertise and responsible citizenship.

The pathologising effect may develop through three shifts.

First, the institutional definition of reasonableness, expertise and the general interest becomes the principal standard by which criticism of that same institution is judged.

Second, fundamental dissent is no longer understood solely as an alternative interpretation, a normative difference or a possibly false conviction, but as evidence that the critic lacks the required reasonableness, knowledge, responsibility or self-control.

Third, such descriptions are adopted and mutually confirmed by several authoritative institutions, with consequences for access to public debate, social functions, institutional protection and legitimate political participation.

Within this mechanism, an asymmetrical burden of proof emerges. The institution need not establish its reasonableness anew in response to every criticism, because reasonableness is already presumed to be inherent in its social position and self-description. The critic, by contrast, must first demonstrate that their dissenting judgement does not arise from ignorance, irrationality, bad faith, irresponsibility or social unfitness. The substantive question—whether the criticism is factually or normatively tenable—may consequently recede into the background. It is replaced by the classificatory question: what does the expression of this criticism reveal about the person making it?

Such a shift may become visible when fundamental criticism is described as extremist, paranoid, anti-scientific, anti-democratic or a threat to the state without first separately examining the factual claims, normative premises and political proposals defended by the critic. Classification of the speaker then precedes assessment of the argument. This does not mean that such descriptions can never be justified. Particular political movements may genuinely promote violence, spread demonstrably false information or seek to abolish constitutional procedures. The analytical problem arises when the classification does not follow from an inquiry into such characteristics, but from the mere fact that a conviction fundamentally diverges from the institutionally confirmed political civilisation.

The pathologising effect of the loop does not therefore necessarily rest on deliberate deception by a ruling elite. Office-holders, experts, journalists and citizens may sincerely believe that they are defending a reasonable, humane and peaceful order. Precisely because the corresponding norms and interpretative frameworks have been internalised through civilising, they are less readily experienced as historically formed elements of a particular political civilisation. They appear as self-evident expressions of reasonableness, decency and responsible citizenship. Once such norms and classifications have been sufficiently internalised and institutionally embedded, their application no longer requires continuous direction by political leaders or a ruling elite. Journalists, civil servants, experts, administrators and citizens may independently and sincerely classify dissenting convictions as unreasonable, dangerous or socially unfit. The protective mechanism of the dominant civilisation thereby acquires a partly autonomous character: it is continued by people who experience their conduct not as political oppression, but as the normal exercise of expertise, responsibility and good citizenship. From this position, fundamental dissent becomes more difficult to understand as the result of another, likewise socially formed conviction. According to the dominant classification, the critic appears not merely to interpret

reality differently, but to demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to recognise the evident reasonableness of the institutional order.

When media organisations, scientific bodies, educational institutions, administrative agencies and legal institutions employ similar classifications, they may mutually reinforce one another. One institution invokes the judgement of another, while their joint confirmation subsequently serves as evidence of a broad and reasonable consensus.

The institutional loop then acquires a pathologising extension:

- recognised institutions determine which convictions count as reasonable and legitimate
- those who fundamentally diverge from them are classified as unreasonable or unfit
- the subsequent exclusion or marginalisation of the critic reduces the visibility of dissent
- the decline of visible dissent in turn confirms the impression that the institutional position is reasonable and generally accepted.

The pathologisation of political dissent can thus help to protect the dominant political civilisation. It does so not by prohibiting every dissenting thought, but by increasing the social costs of dissent and requiring those who express it to defend their own reasonableness and fitness before their arguments are considered on their merits. The boundary between legitimate limitation and pathologisation does not therefore lie in the mere existence of institutional norms. Every political order imposes conditions of participation, and every institution employs criteria of expertise and authority. What matters is whether those criteria themselves remain testable and open to discussion, and whether dissenting convictions can be examined substantively before they are classified as symptoms of deficiency.

Pathologisation may therefore strengthen the continuity and stability of a dominant political civilisation. It raises the social costs of dissent, reduces the visibility of opposition and confirms among other members the impression that established views are general, reasonable and self-evident. Yet this stabilising function provides no evidence that the classification is factually correct, morally justified or lawful. A person classified as deviant may be excluded, prosecuted, barred from social functions or subjected to intense social and psychological pressure without having a mental disorder or having committed a concrete infringement of the rights of others. The same mechanism that promotes cooperation and institutional continuity may thus discourage public dissent, terminate dialogue and reduce institutions' capacity for correction and adaptation. In the short term, pathologisation may produce stability; in the longer term, it may close society off from information and criticism essential to its continued existence.

The framework therefore identifies a possible way in which a civilisation may protect its convictions against dissent. The occurrence of pathologisation is evidence of a classificatory relationship, not by itself evidence of a disorder in the person who dissents. It may express the self-protective capacity of a dominant institutional order. This mechanism must be examined symmetrically. It is not restricted in advance to a particular ideology, social class or historical group. A movement whose views were once marginalised may itself acquire the power to impose standards of reasonableness and classify criticism as deficiency. Whether it does so, and with what effects, remains an empirical question.

This makes the following question unavoidable: how can factual truth, personal conviction and institutional authority be analytically distinguished from one another?

13 Substantive evaluation and classification of the bearer

The pathologisation of political dissent is facilitated when several different questions are insufficiently distinguished. Whether a statement is true is not the same question as why someone believes it. Nor does social recognition of a conviction coincide with its factual correctness. Finally, the falsehood or deviance of a conviction does not in itself demonstrate that the person holding it is cognitively, morally or psychologically deficient. Insofar as factual statements are concerned, their truth depends on the reality to which they refer. An event either did or did not occur, regardless of how many people accept a particular account of it. A physical, economic or historical relationship does not become true because a majority, a government or a scientific institution agrees with it. Nor does it become false because it is defended by a socially marginalised person. The social origin of a statement therefore does not decide its truth. It is, however, relevant to explaining why people find the statement plausible, what meaning they attribute to it and which sources and arguments they regard as reliable.

A conviction is first of all a psychological and social fact. A person may sincerely and with great certainty believe something. That conviction may profoundly structure their perception, conduct and political choices. Sincerity, firmness and inner certainty do not, however, provide independent evidence that the content of the conviction is correct.

The central distinction is therefore: reality determines whether a factual statement is true; civilising helps to explain why people believe, doubt or reject it.

Between truth and conviction lies the further question of how a truth claim is justified. On which observations, data, arguments and methods does it rest? Have alternative explanations been examined? Can the sources used be checked? What circumstances would give reason to revise the statement? A conviction may be true without being well founded. Conversely, careful inquiry may lead someone to a conviction that later proves false. Sound justification offers no absolute guarantee of truth, but it increases the possibility that errors will be discovered and corrected.

Political convictions also rarely consist exclusively of factual claims. They generally combine descriptions, causal explanations, expectations, normative judgements and proposals for action. Different kinds of disagreement may therefore overlap in political conflict. People may disagree about what happened, its causes, the expected consequences of policy, what is just, or which means are permissible. These elements must be analytically distinguished. A difference in values is not the same as a disagreement about facts. Agreement about facts does not automatically produce agreement about political purposes. Nor does a mistaken expectation prove that someone is incapable of reasonable political participation.

Pathologisation blurs these distinctions. The conviction is no longer broken down into separately examinable claims, norms and proposals. It is interpreted as a whole as an expression of the person who holds it. The question shifts from:

Is this conviction factually or normatively tenable? The classificatory question instead asks what deficiency someone must possess in order to hold it.

This constitutes an unwarranted transition from substantive evaluation to classification of the speaker. The conclusion that a conviction is false, poorly founded or socially deviant does not entail that its bearer is ill, irrational or unfit for political participation. People may acquire false convictions through incomplete information, misleading sources, limited experience, cognitive

errors or historically formed interpretative frameworks. Such causes occur both within established institutions and within oppositional groups. They are normal possibilities within every civilising process and do not in themselves indicate a mental disorder. Even where a person has actually been diagnosed with a mental disorder, that diagnosis does not by itself determine the truth or falsehood of a particular statement. The content of a claim must still be assessed on its own factual and argumentative merits. A diagnosis may in some circumstances be relevant to understanding conduct, but it cannot replace substantive refutation.

Institutional authority is a distinct category in this respect. In a complex society, people cannot personally investigate every factual claim. They depend on a cognitive division of labour in which scientists, physicians, judges, journalists, civil servants and other specialised functionaries gather, evaluate and transmit knowledge. Civilising therefore teaches people not only particular convictions, but also which sources count as reliable, which forms of training certify expertise, which methods are considered rigorous and which institutions are authorised to make authoritative statements.

This institutional trust performs a necessary function. Without provisional trust in expertise, methods and procedures, coordinated social action would become almost impossible. Institutional authority may therefore provide a reasonable indication that a claim has been carefully produced and merits serious examination. It does not, however, constitute independent proof of truth. Experts may be mistaken, institutions may perpetuate outdated views and selection procedures may systematically privilege particular perspectives. The status of the source and the substantive quality of its claim must therefore remain analytically distinct.

An epistemic loop arises when that distinction disappears:

- a claim is regarded as reliable because it is confirmed by a recognised institution
- the institution is regarded as reliable because it produces claims recognised as true and reasonable within the dominant civilisation.

This loop does not demonstrate that the claim concerned is false. It does show that social credibility and institutional recognition may mutually confirm one another. As independent testing and organised contestation weaken, institutional authority may increasingly substitute for substantive justification. This can have far-reaching consequences for the person expressing a dissenting conviction. When the institutionally confirmed position functions as the standard of reasonableness, divergence from it is not treated merely as a substantive error. It may be used as evidence that the person concerned lacks sufficient knowledge, judgement, responsibility or psychological stability. A pathologising line of reasoning then emerges:

- reasonable people recognise the institutionally confirmed truth
- this person does not recognise it
- their dissent therefore demonstrates that they are not reasonable, reliable or fit to participate.

This inference is circular. The established conviction is regarded as reasonable because reasonable people accept it, while people count as reasonable insofar as they accept the established conviction. The possibility that the person concerned relies on a different experience, source, value or interpretation is therefore insufficiently examined.

The same analytical principle must be applied to the critic. They too have learned within social relations which sources to trust, which institutions to distrust and which alternative experts to invest with authority. Self-confirming loops may likewise arise around oppositional move-

ments. A claim may be regarded as credible because it comes from someone considered independent or courageous, while that person's independence is inferred precisely from their opposition to established institutions. Dissent is therefore no more proof of truth than institutional agreement. A conviction is not correct because it is socially dominant, but neither is it correct because it is suppressed or marginalised. Analytical symmetry requires established and dissenting convictions to be subjected to comparable substantive standards. The social position of a statement may explain why it enjoys greater or lesser credibility, but it must not decide in advance either its truth or the mental condition of the person expressing it.⁷

This position does not entail relativism. The fact that people acquire their convictions through social processes does not imply that all convictions are equally true or equally well justified. It means only that no one's certainty proves its own correctness and that socially recognised truth claims must also remain open to inquiry and revision.

The reflexive question is therefore not only: Why do others fail to see what I regard as true?

It is also: How did I become convinced that my own perception, sources and reasoning are reliable, and under what conditions would I be prepared to revise my judgement?

Nobody stands entirely outside the process of civilising that they investigate in others. This does not make the pursuit of truth impossible. It does make social procedures necessary through which convictions can be confronted with facts, alternative explanations and criticism. The possibility that a conviction is false does not abolish the distinction between refutation and pathologisation. A false conviction may be investigated, criticised and rejected. Only when it is used, without separate evidence, to call into question the reasonableness, health or fitness of its bearer does assessment of the conviction shift into classification of the person. Institutional authority may support inquiry, but it cannot replace it. Personal certainty may motivate inquiry, but it cannot prove truth. Social consensus may facilitate cooperation, but it is not an adequate test of the correctness of a conviction.

Precisely because truth, conviction, social recognition and personal fitness do not coincide, a society requires mechanisms through which not only dissenting convictions but also classifications of those who hold them can be questioned and corrected.

14 Open contestation and the possibility of correction

The argument in this section rests on an explicit normative premise: political orders should preserve opportunities to challenge factual claims and consequential classifications of persons. This premise does not follow simply from an explanation of institutional stability. It states the value assigned here to accountable authority, participation and the correction of error. Given that premise, open contestation has two distinct functions.

First, it makes substantive examination of convictions possible. Factual claims can be confronted with evidence, causal explanations compared with alternatives, normative premises clarified and the likely consequences of political proposals discussed.

⁷ Analytical symmetry is a methodological requirement of the present framework. It concerns comparable standards of evidence and justification; it does not imply equal institutional power, equal factual credibility or moral equivalence between the positions being assessed.

Second, open contestation makes it possible to examine the social classification of the speaker. Not only the dissenting conviction, but also the judgement that it is extremist, irrational, dangerous or pathological must remain open to criticism.

This second corrective mechanism is especially important for the analysis of pathologisation. As long as a conviction is substantively examined, it remains possible to distinguish a factual error, a normative conflict, a genuine danger and a wrongly attributed personal deficiency. Once the speaker has already been classified as deficient, that distinction threatens to disappear. Pathologisation may acquire a self-confirming character. The defence offered by the classified person is then no longer treated as a possible refutation of the judgement, but as a new symptom of the alleged deficiency. Their distrust counts as evidence of paranoia. Their persistence counts as evidence of fanaticism. Their anger at exclusion confirms their supposed unreasonableness. Their attempt publicly to challenge the classification is interpreted as further evidence of dangerousness or lack of insight. A closed loop then arises:

- a dissenting conviction leads to classification of the speaker
- resistance to that classification is interpreted as a symptom
- the symptom confirms the original classification
- the confirmed classification justifies further exclusion.

Within such a loop, it becomes difficult to imagine any response by which the person concerned could disprove the classification. Agreement confirms the authority of the institution; dissent confirms the alleged deficiency. The classification thereby withdraws from possible falsification. Open discussion can break this loop by treating the classification not as a starting point but as a separate claim. The assertion that someone is irrational, dangerous or unfit likewise requires arguments, criteria and evidence. It must be distinguished from the mere fact that the person defends a dissenting conviction.

This does not mean that every conviction confers an unlimited right to every form of dissemination or institutional access. No political order can dispense with limits on threats, violence, intimidation and concrete violations of the rights of others. Nor must every institution treat every claim as an expert contribution. The decisive distinction is between evaluating demonstrable conduct and classifying persons on the basis of their convictions. A call to violence may be restricted because of its content and likely consequences. It does not follow that every fundamental criticism of the existing order may be treated as a precursor to violence or mental disturbance. An open political order must therefore distinguish at least three forms of response:

- substantive refutation of a conviction
- limitation of concretely harmful or unlawful conduct
- pathologisation of the person expressing a dissenting conviction.

These responses may overlap in practice, but they must remain analytically distinct. Without that distinction, a political order may effectively suppress dissenting convictions while formally continuing to profess respect for freedom of expression. The view is not directly prohibited; its bearer is excluded from relevant social positions as unreliable, dangerous or unfit.

Open contestation therefore protects not only the social and political position of the person expressing a dissenting conviction. It also serves society as a whole. It makes visible information that may be ignored within the dominant institutional order, compels institutions to justify

their concepts and decisions, and prevents social consensus from being mistaken for proof of truth.

Open discussion does not guarantee that truth or the best proposal will prevail. People may be obstinate, ignore facts, defend interests and weigh arguments poorly. Power differentials affect who is heard, which subjects reach the agenda and which language counts as legitimate. Exclusion and self-censorship may persist even within formally free debate. Yet without contestation, society loses an important mechanism for examining and correcting internalised convictions and classifications. Other people possess different experiences, information and perspectives. They may reveal blind spots barely visible from the dominant position.

Pathologisation weakens this corrective mechanism by disqualifying a potential source of correction in advance. The dissenting speaker is no longer treated as someone who may possess relevant information or arguments, but as a problem to be managed. Their contribution is judged through their classification rather than their classification through their contribution. A society may thereby achieve short-term calm and agreement while reducing its capacity to learn and adapt. Dissenting information does not necessarily disappear because it is false, but because those who express it are no longer regarded as reliable participants. The tension between social stability and corrective capacity therefore reappears. A society requires sufficient agreement to act in a coordinated manner. It must be able to rely on procedures, roles and shared expectations. At the same time, it requires sufficiently protected institutional dissent to prevent those expectations from closing themselves off from changing circumstances and new knowledge.

Durable coordination requires sufficiently shared procedures and expectations, while learning requires opportunities to revise them. Free scholarly inquiry, independent journalism, political opposition and public argument can contribute to this corrective capacity. Their effectiveness depends on access, the quality of evidence, institutional responsiveness and the power relations within which discussion occurs. An open political order must therefore allow authoritative claims, boundaries of participation and classifications of persons to be investigated and revised. The relevant question is whether dissenters remain possible interlocutors whose arguments can be assessed, rather than being treated solely as symptoms of a social problem. Open contestation neither prevents every exclusion nor guarantees truth. It preserves opportunities to examine both dissenting convictions and the classifications used to disqualify them.

The framework thus proposes a tension between coordination and correction. A political order needs sufficient agreement to act and sufficient opportunities for dissent to learn. Determining how institutional arrangements sustain or weaken either capacity requires investigation beyond the conceptual argument developed here.

15 Conclusion

This essay has developed a theoretical proposal connecting Eliasian accounts of interdependence and internalisation with the political classification of dissent. It suggests that learned standards of credibility and legitimate participation may help explain how disagreement becomes a judgement about the fitness of those who express it. The conceptual argument does not establish the prevalence, causal force or historical reach of this mechanism.

Elias relates changes in social figurations to changes in conduct, affect regulation and personality structure. His work on knowledge and established–outsider relations also supplies re-

sources for examining learned interpretations and group classification. The framework proposed here connects those resources to the internalisation of political convictions and to the circulation of classifications among authoritative institutions.

When conceptions of reality and expectations of conduct are sufficiently widely shared and embedded in language, routines, functions and institutions, they acquire institutional continuity. Institutions not only record these norms, but also contribute to the standards by which knowledge, conduct and persons are judged. A loop of institutional self-confirmation may thereby arise: institutions derive authority from the assumption that they act expertly and lawfully, while their conduct is regarded as expert and lawful partly because it originates from recognised institutions. Implementation of institutional decisions then confirms their effective power to act.

This loop connects La Boétie's emphasis on the cooperation that sustains power with Elias's analysis of the social constraint towards self-constraint. Modern power is produced daily by people acting in accordance with internalised expectations of lawfulness, expertise, responsibility and decency. This process does not require continuous central direction and may acquire a partly autonomous character.

Pathologisation may perform a socially stabilising function. By placing particular convictions and persons beyond the boundaries of the reasonable and acceptable, a society reinforces shared norms, reduces uncertainty and increases the predictability of cooperation. Elements of civilisation that are effectively transmitted, institutionally embedded and protected against erosion are also more likely to persist socially. Yet this functionality does not establish that the classification is factually correct, morally justified or lawful.

The consequences for classified persons may be severe: exclusion from social functions, loss of professional credibility, restriction of public participation and prolonged social or psychological pressure. Pathologisation may also become self-confirming when resistance to the classification is interpreted as a further symptom. The classification then becomes difficult to refute and may replace substantive dialogue.

A tension thereby arises between stability and corrective capacity. The same mechanism that supports social agreement and institutional continuity may eliminate sources of criticism and new information. Truth, conviction, institutional recognition and personal fitness must therefore be analytically distinguished. A conviction is not true because it is socially dominant, but neither is it true because it is marginalised.

Open contestation performs a dual corrective function within this tension. It makes it possible to test factual and normative claims and also keeps classifications of persons and groups open to criticism. An open society is distinguished not by accepting every conviction or setting no boundaries, but by preserving the distinction between substantive refutation, limitation of concretely harmful conduct and pathologisation of the person expressing a dissenting conviction.

The framework provides a research programme rather than a demonstrated general law. Comparative and historical studies should identify when political disagreement is addressed on its merits, when it is translated into an attribution of deficiency, and how that attribution changes access to participation or institutional resources. Claims about stabilisation, social harm and reduced corrective capacity must be examined separately rather than assumed to follow from the presence of a label.

Empirical assessment would require evidence of the sequence connecting dissent, classification, institutional circulation and consequences for participation. A description such as extremist or irresponsible is not a sufficient indicator without examination of its grounds and use. Institutional self-confirmation likewise requires evidence that reciprocal endorsement substitutes for an independently assessable justification. The account would be weakened in cases where classifications follow documented harmful conduct, institutions engage substantively with contrary arguments, or the predicted reduction in opportunities for correction does not occur.

The central question is ultimately not only how people learn what they regard as true, reasonable and responsible, but also how a society treats those who diverge from it. Where divergence can be treated as a possible error, a normative conflict or a source of correction, political dissent remains possible. Where divergence itself counts as evidence of deficiency, a dominant civilisation protects not only its social order but also its convictions against the risk of being called into question.

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