The social pathologisation of political dissent

Extending Elias's theory of civilising processes to the social role of political convictions

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November 2026 · Version EN-02

"At this moment, I would simply like to understand how it is possible that so many people, so many villages, so many towns, so many nations, sometimes tolerate a single tyrant who has no more power than they grant him; […] not because they are forced to do so, but solely (so it seems) because they are spellbound and fascinated by the name of a single person, whose power they need not fear, since he is alone, and whose qualities they need not admire, given that he is inhuman and cruel towards them."

Étienne de La Boétie (c. 1553)[1]

"The social constraint towards self-constraint."

— **Norbert Elias** (1939)[2]

"The process through which deviant conceptions or conduct are not assessed primarily on their content, but are treated as indications of a cognitive, moral, psychological or social deficiency in the person who holds or displays them."

— **Dick H. Ahles** (2026)

[1] La Boétie (1997), pp. 9–10.

[2] Elias (1994), vol. 2, p. 312, 'Der gesellschaftliche Zwang zum Selbstzwang'.

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; process of civilising; personal civilisation; political dissent; social pathologisation; institutional self-confirmation; self-restraint.*

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the pathologisation of political dissent.

This phenomenon has taken various historical forms. A striking example is the treatment of political dissidents in the former Soviet Union, where opponents of the established political order could be given psychiatric diagnoses and admitted to psychiatric institutions against their will.[3] Similar practices are known to have taken place in Ceaușescu's Romania and in China. During the era of American McCarthyism, individuals were regarded as untrustworthy or socially unfit on the grounds of alleged communist sympathies, sometimes with far-reaching consequences for their social standing[4] .

Even in more recent times, people may perceive the way they are treated as pathologising. For example, some people who chose not to be vaccinated during the COVID-19 pandemic felt that, because of their differing views, they were classified as irrational, irresponsible or a danger to society[5] . Whether, and in which cases, pathologisation in the sociological sense used here actually took place is not the subject of investigation in this article.

The examples differ in terms of political context, severity and social consequences. However, they point to the same potential mechanism: a divergent political conviction is not primarily assessed on its merits, but treated as an indication of a presumed shortcoming on the part of the person who holds it. That classification can then be used to justify the absence of substantive argumentation.

This paper examines how such classifications arise, why they may be regarded as justified by those involved, under what circumstances they acquire social authority, and what consequences they have for the individuals and groups classified. The explanatory framework builds on *Norbert Elias's* theory of civilising processes, his research with *John L. Scotson* on established and outsiders, and its extension in **The Art of Revolution** (Ahles, 2026).

2. Power cannot exist without cooperation

Analyses of social change often focus first on the formal distribution of power. Who controls the state, dominates the media, writes the laws, allocates resources, appoints administrators and ultimately issues the orders? This can lead to a simple explanatory model: a relatively small group acquires power, utilises the available resources and subsequently imposes its will on society. Social change then appears primarily as the result of decisions made by those in power.

This model is incomplete.

A command that nobody carries out is not power. A law that no civil servant implements, no judge applies and no police officer enforces is nothing more than text. Nor does an ideal that nobody understands, promotes or incorporates into their actions change society. Formal po-

[3]Van Voren (2010), pp. 33–35.

[4]Goldstein (2006).

[5]EenVandaag (2021), 'Almost half of those vaccinated avoid unvaccinated friends and family', 23 July 2021. Public statement by an unvaccinated participant in the Opinion Panel.

wer alone therefore does not bring about lasting social change. Changes in what people regard as true, right and worthy of pursuit provide power with its social legitimacy and continuity. A government may decide, but others must formulate, substantiate, explain, administer, implement and enforce that decision. The administrator decides, the civil servant drafts, the expert justifies, the journalist interprets, the judge confirms, the police enforce and the citizen accepts — or at least learns that resistance is unreasonable, inappropriate or pointless. Most of those involved do not constantly make a conscious choice between good and evil. Broadly speaking, they act in accordance with what they have learnt to regard as responsible, just, decent, normal or inevitable. Anyone who wishes 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, beliefs, norms and behaviours. In this article, I refer to this broader process as the process of civilising. In doing so, I broaden the concept beyond Elias's original analysis, which primarily concerned the regulation of behaviour and emotions.

This paper examines how political convictions and the criteria for their social assessment arise, are transmitted and institutionally affirmed within processes of civilising. Central to this is the question of under what circumstances deviant political convictions are no longer primarily assessed on their merits, but give rise to pathologising classifications of those who hold them.

This working version develops a conceptual and explanatory model. It does not yet include systematic empirical testing or detailed historical case studies. The analysis therefore distinguishes between conceptual definitions, mechanisms derived from existing theory, and hypotheses that require further comparative research.

This paper builds on **The Art of Revolution** (Ahles, 2026), in which a general theory is developed concerning the emergence, reproduction and transformation of personal civilisations, circle civilisations and social institutions. This theory aligns with Norbert Elias's analysis of civilising processes and social relations of dependency, but extends the explanatory framework to the formation and social functioning of beliefs, norms, values and goals. Within this broader theoretical framework, this paper examines one specific mechanism: the social pathologisation of political dissent. The complete conceptual framework and the associated propositions of **The Art of Revolution** have been published on artofrevolution.science.

3. Civilising is not the same as moral improvement

In everyday language, the concept of civilisation often carries a normative connotation. It is associated with civility, reasonableness, self-control and social progress. For a sociological analysis, however, this connotation is problematic, as it already presupposes that civilising necessarily leads to morally desirable outcomes. In this article, I use the process of civilising in a broader and analytical sense. It refers to the social processes through which people learn:

- which statements they regard as true or false;
- which values, norms and goals they judge to be desirable or reprehensible;
- what behaviour they perceive as normal, permissible, obligatory or prohibited in various social contexts;

- which individuals, sources and institutions they accord authority and credibility to.

The outcomes of these processes are not predetermined in moral terms.

Civilising can contribute to tolerance, cooperation, mutual restraint and respect for personal freedom. However, it can also normalise obedience, exclusion, enemy stereotypes and oppression. Even a repressive social order can be based on strongly internalised rules of conduct, specialised roles, training, procedures, legal categories and moral justifications.
Within the conceptual framework employed here, a repressive social order is also an outcome of processes of civilising. The analytical question is not whether the internalised norms are morally desirable, but how they enduringly shape perception, judgement and conduct, and how they are institutionally perpetuated and transformed.

The term 'civilising' is used here in a descriptive-analytical sense. The analysis focuses on the processes through which conceptions of reality, norms and forms of behaviour are transmitted, internalised, coordinated and institutionally continued. The question of whether the beliefs in question are factually correct and whether the norms or practices are morally justified is analytically distinguished from this; this paper does not settle such substantive or normative questions. This separation between sociological explanation and substantive assessment requires a symmetrical application of the explanatory model. It must be possible to use the same model for beliefs which the researcher endorses and for those which he himself rejects. This principle may be referred to as analytical symmetry.

The concept of 'civilising' used here bears a resemblance to the concept of 'socialisation' commonly used in sociology. Both relate to the way in which individuals acquire conceptions of reality, norms, values and forms of behaviour within social relationships. However, within **The Art of Revolution**, the term 'civilising' is explicitly used to refer both to the transmission and internalisation of existing elements of civilisation and to their addition, reinterpretation, modification and disappearance. This does not imply that such processes of change fall outside the scope of existing socialisation theories. The distinction concerns the chosen theoretical definition of the concept.

4. Conceptual distinctions

The term 'civilisation' refers to the historically formed configuration of worldviews, beliefs, norms, values, interpretative frameworks and behavioural repertoires existing at a given moment. In the case of an individual, I speak of a **'personal civilisation**'.

A group is a collection of individuals who are collectively designated on the basis of certain characteristics or a particular description, without there necessarily being any lasting social relationships between them. A social circle, by contrast, is a distinct and identifiable social formation whose members are connected by relatively enduring relationships and are therefore interdependent. A social circle can fulfil various functions for its members and provide a reason to join or to continue membership. Every social circle consists of a group of individuals, but not every group forms a social circle.

For a social circle, I use the term ‘circle civilisation’. By this I mean the sufficiently shared and socially effective elements of the personal civilisations of a social circle’s members, insofar as these enable common expectations, judgement, cooperation and cohesion within that circle. A circle civilisation does not presuppose a collective consciousness, nor does it require complete agreement. It is sufficient for members to share relevant elements or to recognise them as valid in order to enable predictable cooperation.

Civilising refers to the process by which elements of a civilisation are transmitted, internalised, interpreted, combined, added to, modified, reinforced, weakened or discarded. This process never begins from a social zero point, but always takes place within already existing personal and social civilisations. The process of civilising therefore encompasses both continuity and change.

In this article, **‘social classification’** is understood to mean the process whereby individuals, groups, views or behaviours are categorised, on the basis of certain characteristics, into socially recognisable categories to which meanings, expectations or judgements are attached. A classification need not be negative, nor does it have to be based on an incorrect assessment. It can function in a descriptive, evaluative or normative manner.

In the pathologisation of political dissent, the shift whereby a classification of a political conviction turns into a classification of the person who holds that conviction is of particular significance. The content of the conviction is then used as an indication of a supposed shortcoming on the part of the individual.

Where this paper refers to Elias’s civilising process, it concerns his specific analysis of the interrelationship between changing social figurations, behavioural regulation, control of affect and self-constraint. For my broader theoretical approach, I use the expression ‘the process of civilising’. In this article, the term dominant civilisation is used when certain conceptions of reality, norms and behavioural expectations are not only widespread in society, but also occupy a privileged position within authoritative institutions and thereby significantly determine the prevailing standards of reasonableness, normality and legitimacy.

5. Elias’s theory of civilising processes as a starting point

Central to Elias’s theory of civilising processes is the connection between long-term changes in social figurations and changes in the personality structure of the people linked within them. Elias analyses this connection as a link between sociogenesis and psychogenesis. In this context, the individual and society do not constitute separate realities that interact with one another retrospectively; changes in social relations and changes in behaviour, affect regulation and habitus are mutually intertwined. As the social division of labour increases and people become part of longer and more complex chains of interdependence, they must coordinate their behaviour more precisely with that of others. They must look further ahead, take longer-term consequences into account, control their impulses and better assess the possible reactions of others. Elias links this development, amongst other things, to state formation, the concentration of the means of coercion, the pacification of social relations and the expansion of economic and functional dependencies.

The expression ‘social constraint towards self-constraint’ encapsulates an important aspect of this process. Social constraint does not disappear in the process. It remains present in re-

lationships of dependency, expectations, sanctions and balances of power. However, part of this external regulation is internalised in the form of more automatic and enduring self-regulation[6] . Rules of conduct are no longer observed solely because others are immediately monitoring compliance or imposing sanctions. They can become part of the habitus and are underpinned by feelings of shame, embarrassment, aversion and personal responsibility. For Elias, this development is not a deliberately designed programme of civilising.

Individuals, and those holding specific roles within organisations and institutions, may take targeted educational measures, formulate rules of conduct or pursue social reforms.

However, the course and long-term outcomes of the overall process are not controlled by a single actor or group. They arise from the interweaving of the largely purposeful actions of people who are mutually dependent. Furthermore, individuals do not necessarily react in the same way to comparable forms of social constraint. Each individual processes social influence through their already established personal framework, partly influenced by differences in cognitive abilities and personality traits. Consequently, the same social influence can lead to divergent interpretations, internalisation, adaptation, resistance or rejection. This individual variation, in interaction with the interdependencies between people, contributes to the limited predictability of the social consequences of purposeful influence. The process of civilising is thus human-generated and structured, but as a whole largely unplanned and only to a limited extent predictable.

The fact that the overall process is largely unplanned does not mean that all civilising influence is unintended. Parents, teachers, religious leaders, administrators, political movements and social institutions may deliberately seek to transmit certain beliefs, norms and behaviours and make them socially dominant. In politics in particular, language, education, the media, legislation, rituals and organisations are consciously employed to disseminate perceptions of reality and standards of right and wrong. However, a targeted civilising intervention does not entirely determine its social outcome. Every recipient interprets it from the perspective of an already established personal civilisation and under the influence of many other, partly coincidental, experiences and dependencies. The elements transmitted may be accepted, rejected, modified or combined with other elements. Civilising influence can therefore be purposeful, whilst the broader process and its long-term consequences remain largely unplanned and only to a limited extent steerable and controllable. Within such figurations, socially prestigious groups can function as model-forming centres. The behavioural standards of the courtly elite arose in part from status competition and mutual interdependencies within the court. Other groups were able to adopt these manners, tastes and forms of self-control because they were associated with social standing, access and social advancement[7] . This was not a simple, one-way process in which a fully autonomous elite imposed its norms on passive subjects. As power relations shifted and interdependencies became more reciprocal, the pressure on established groups to adapt their behaviour to that of less powerful groups also increased.

[6]Ahles (2026), **The Art of Revolution**, definitions of the terms ‘Group’, ‘Social Circle’, ‘Personal Civilisation’ and ‘Circle Civilisation’, published on artofrevolution.science.

[7]Elias (1994), Volume 2, pp. 319–320.

Elias therefore examines both the norm-forming influence of groups higher up the hierarchy and the increasing pressure from below. The social norm can thus become part of the personality, but this does not happen in the same way or to the same extent for every individual. Within the framework proposed here, the actual internalisation is partly determined by biological and psychological predispositions, the already formed personality structure, cognitive abilities, previous experiences and the position a person occupies within various social figurations. That personality structure is itself partly shaped by earlier processes of civilising. It is therefore not a matter of an unchangeable individual core onto which a society subsequently imposes its rules, but rather an ongoing interplay between individual processing and social influence. Nor does a process of civilising begin from a social zero point. Every society consists of people who already possess a personally shaped repertoire of beliefs, norms and behaviours. The language, institutions, power relations and social expectations with which new generations are confronted have also emerged from earlier processes. Civilising therefore does not mean solely the transmission of an existing civilisation. It encompasses both continuity and change. Existing elements may be continued, strengthened, weakened, interpreted differently or linked to other elements. They may disappear, whilst new knowledge, norms, concepts and forms of behaviour are added. In this sense, civilising is always a process of continuation, addition, reorganisation and transformation of already existing civilisations.

Technological changes are a key driving force within this dynamic.

They do not originate from outside society, but are generated by people and institutions that themselves operate within existing civilisations. New technologies subsequently alter the scope for action, chains of dependency, forms of communication and social relationships within which people coordinate their behaviour. As a result, they can also alter perceptions of reality, norms and values. The development of a technology may be purpose-driven, whilst its broader social consequences remain largely unplanned. Far-reaching innovations can visibly disrupt existing behavioural expectations and cause social conflicts. Gradual innovations, by contrast, can normalise new behaviours almost imperceptibly. In both cases, technological development and the process of civilising interact with one another. Consequently, technological changes can also shift what is classified within a society as appropriate, threatening or pathological.

The concept *of 'civilising'* used in this article thus has a broader meaning than Elias's original analysis of the civilising process.

In **The Civilisation Process**, Elias focuses primarily on long-term changes in behavioural standards, emotional regulation, shame, aversion, aggression control and foresight. In **The Art of Revolution**, a broader concept of civilising is employed, which also encompasses the formation, transmission and transformation of perceptions of reality, political convictions and criteria for credibility. Social pressure to exercise self-restraint may play a role in this, but is not a necessary condition. This paper examines how, within such processes, standards for legitimate political dissent emerge and under what circumstances deviation from them gives rise to pathologising classifications.

The research by *Elias and John L. Scotson* into the relationship between the established and the outsiders in an English community provides a complementary theoretical framework. Their analysis demonstrates how the balance of power between groups is linked to the abili-

ty to establish group images and make them socially effective. Established groups can present their own group on the basis of its most highly valued members, whilst outsiders are judged on the basis of the least valued members of their group. The resulting difference in collective reputation can contribute to the maintenance of social distance and unequal power relations. These mechanisms form part of *Elias and Scotson's* analysis and are not presented here as new findings.

The extension proposed in this paper concerns its application to political convictions and the institutional assessment thereof. It examines how an established classification of a dissident group can shift from social stigma to an assessment of its members as unreasonable, unsuitable or pathological, and how institutions may mutually reinforce such classifications. The fact that this extension is theoretically plausible does not mean that it has already been fully empirically demonstrated by research into established and outsiders.

6. Personal civilisation

To analyse how processes of civilising operate at the individual level, I use the concept of 'personal civilisation' as defined in *The Art of Revolution* (Ahles, 2026). Every individual possesses biological and psychological characteristics, including aptitudes, temperament, cognitive abilities, sensitivities, and physical capabilities and limitations. These characteristics develop over the course of a lifetime through constant interaction with upbringing, social relationships, education, language, institutions and social experiences. By 'personal civilisation', I mean: *the historically shaped, largely learnt and only partially conscious repertoire through which an individual interprets reality, assesses situations and behaviours, and acts within social relationships. For the purposes of this description, the elements of civilisation distinguished in AoR are grouped here into three interrelated domains; goals and ideals are discussed alongside norms and values*[8] .

I. **Perceptions of** reality and interpretative frameworks People acquire knowledge, explanations, concepts and narratives through which they interpret reality. However, they learn not only what is considered factually correct according to their environment, but also which sources are deemed reliable, which individuals are regarded as experts, which institutions hold authority, and which forms of evidence are accepted as convincing. These views of reality may be factually correct, partially correct, outdated or incorrect. When explaining behaviour, it is not only relevant how reality actually is, but also how an individual perceives it and which interpretations they regard as credible.

II. **Norms, values and ideals** People also acquire criteria by which they evaluate behaviour, situations, institutions and individuals. They learn what is regarded as desirable, just, decent, reprehensible or unacceptable. These norms and values help to determine feelings of approval, admiration, aversion, guilt and shame. They also form the basis for ideals concerning one's own life, social relationships and the organisation of society.

[8]Elias (1994), Vol. 2, pp. 342 ff., 433, and 442 ff.

III. **Behavioural repertoires and practical routines** Finally, people acquire patterns of behaviour for a wide range of social situations. They learn how to speak, greet others, cooperate, obey, disagree, reward, punish, mourn and celebrate.

A significant part of this behavioural regulation takes place without constant conscious deliberation. Through repetition, social reinforcement and internalisation, forms of behaviour can become routine and be taken for granted.

Each individual's personal civilisation is unique. It is shaped by a specific combination of innate disposition, life history, social position, upbringing, education, profession, relationships, media, organisations and particular experiences. No two people are exposed to exactly the same influences or process them in exactly the same way. Even in the most egalitarian society, therefore, individual differences persist. Such variations can serve as starting points for gradual changes within a civilisation when they are adopted by others, further developed and institutionally embedded. In this limited sense, a comparison with biological evolution is possible: variation provides the material upon which transmission and selection can act. Moreover, a personal civilisation does not constitute a fully coherent and unchanging system. It may contain conflicting beliefs, divergent norms, partially internalised rules of behaviour and ideals that are difficult to reconcile. New experiences can reinforce, weaken, reinterpret or link existing elements with others. Which parts of this repertoire come into play in a specific situation depends in part on the social context in which a person finds themselves. The same person may apply different behavioural expectations and standards of judgement within a family, a friendship, a workplace or a political institution. This does not mean that behaviour is arbitrary. It means that personal civilisation is activated situationally. Different social spheres and power relations draw upon different parts of the same acquired repertoire.

People do not act on the basis of a single, fully coherent and unchanging programme, but on the basis of a personally shaped repertoire, different elements of which come into play in different social figurations.

7. Language as a medium of transmission and classification

Not all transmission and internalisation within civilising processes takes place through language. People also learn through observation, imitation, repetition, reward, disapproval and participation in social practices. For example, children acquire social distances, facial expressions, physical routines and expectations regarding appropriate behaviour at an early age, even before they have (fully) mastered the corresponding concepts. However, language takes on a special significance when experiences, behaviours and social relationships are explicitly named, classified, assessed and transmitted. It makes it possible to translate implicit behavioural expectations into universally applicable concepts and rules. Words do not merely describe behaviour; they also place it within a normative and social framework of interpretation. An action can, for example, be described as:

- decent or vulgar;
- honest or deceptive;
- courageous or reckless;
- critical or extremist;

- erotic or obscene;
- concerned or paranoid;
- independent or antisocial.

The choice of term therefore influences not only how an action is described, but also how it is judged and what response is deemed appropriate. In this sense, language forms part of the social organisation of perception and behaviour. Through language, implicit customs can become explicit norms. These norms can then be enshrined in upbringing, education, professional codes of conduct, political programmes, media discourse, journalistic conventions, legislation and court rulings. Language thereby enhances the transferability, generalisability and institutional durability of elements of civilisation. Language also contributes to the alignment between publicly expressed beliefs and observable behaviour. People are generally expected not to act in constant contradiction to the norms they themselves endorse. When such a contradiction becomes apparent, it can lead to labels such as 'hypocritical', 'untrustworthy' or 'indecent' and, where institutionalised rules are breached, to formal sanctions. This alignment need not be complete. People may harbour inner doubts, conceal certain behaviours, adapt strategically or tactically, or simultaneously – sometimes unconsciously – subscribe to conflicting norms. Civilising processes therefore do not produce complete unity between belief, language and behaviour, but they do generate social pressure to maintain a certain consistency between them.

Furthermore, the assessment of behaviour does not depend exclusively on the physical act or representation itself. It is partly determined by the socially interpreted nature of the situation. The actual shooting of a person and the depiction of a shooting in a film may contain physically similar images for an observer, but are assessed entirely differently within different social frameworks. This distinction shows that the process of civilising not only regulates behaviours, but also shapes interpretative frameworks through which behaviours, beliefs and individuals are classified. That classification can shift from an assessment of the act or statement to a judgement of the person performing or making it. A behaviour or belief is then not merely labelled as incorrect, inappropriate or prohibited, but as an indication of irrationality, dangerousness, unsuitability or some other personal or social deficiency. This shift forms an important part of the process of pathologisation, which is defined in more detail in Chapter 11.

8. Social spheres and shared civilisations

People do not function within a single, undifferentiated social space. They form part of various social figurations, such as families, circles of friends, labour organisations, associations, scientific communities and state institutions. Within these formations, there are varying relationships of interdependence, behavioural expectations and standards for appropriate conduct. Behaviour that is regarded as self-evident or desirable within one social relationship may be judged as inappropriate or unacceptable within another. Obedience, confidentiality, dissent, loyalty and openness, for example, take on different meanings within a family, a company, an academic institution or a parliament.

An individual's personal civilisation is therefore not activated in the same way in every situation. Which beliefs, norms and behavioural repertoires come into play depends in part on

the configuration in which a person finds themselves, the position they occupy within it, and the expectations associated with that position. When this article refers to the civilisation of a social circle, organisation or society, this does not imply that a group possesses a single shared consciousness. What is at stake are the sufficiently overlapping and socially effective elements of personal civilisations, insofar as these are embedded in language, expectations, routines, functions and institutions. This overlap enables coordinated and predictable action, but is never complete. Within every figuration, differences persist in perceptions of reality, norms, interests and interpretations. Such differences become political when they relate to the organisation of shared relationships, the distribution of powers and the limits of legitimate participation. The very same social figuration that enables cooperation thereby also generates standards by which deviant behaviour and deviant beliefs are judged. The question then arises as to when such deviations are still treated as normal variation or political dissent, and when they are classified as unreasonable, dangerous or pathological.

9. Political struggle as a struggle between beliefs

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 organisation should guide society.

People do not generally regard their political ideals and convictions as mere random preferences. They consider them to be factually correct, morally justified or socially desirable, and therefore strive to ensure that others share these convictions. Political convictions often have a moral component. When actors identify their own position with the good, rejection of that position can be interpreted as a rejection of the good itself. The political opponent then appears not merely as someone with an incorrect or undesirable view, but as a morally deficient person or group.

At that point, the battle between beliefs shifts to the categorisation of those who espouse these beliefs. The opponent no longer needs to be explained or refuted on the merits of their case, but can be unmasked, excluded, shamed or removed from the public debate. This observation does not preclude sharp criticism of political ideas, means and consequences. Political beliefs may indeed be factually incorrect, normatively unjust or practically dangerous. For sociological analysis, however, it remains necessary to investigate why people acquire such beliefs and how those beliefs are socially sustained. Anyone who treats the opponent solely as the embodiment of evil or deficiency loses the ability to explain their beliefs and, with it, an important means of combating or changing them.

10. The civilising of legitimate political opinion

A society does not merely teach its members what they ought to believe in substance. It also teaches them which political views are regarded as reasonable, decent and legitimate. A repertoire of legitimate political debate emerges. Within that repertoire, people may differ in their views on taxation, policy, political parties, leaders and the distribution of resources. But not every possible view is treated as an equal contribution to the political discourse.

A society also civilises its members regarding:

- which goals are open to discussion;

- which words a decent politician uses;
- which opponents are regarded as legitimate participants;
- which means are permissible;
- where the line between reform and extremism lies;
- and what criticism is regarded as reasonable opposition or as a threat to public order.

The crucial question, however, is: *who draws the line, on what basis, and can that line itself still be debated?*

In political systems where elected representatives take an oath or make a pledge upon assuming office, this ritual can mark a visible distinction between the acceptance of constitutional procedures and the substance of political convictions. An elected representative may oppose the existing government and seek to change the state order through constitutional means, whilst being required to respect the applicable procedures. In this institutional context, a distinction is thus drawn between the acceptance of procedures and the substance of political convictions.

However, a shift occurs when three distinct 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 administrators. In such cases, criticism of policy may otherwise be interpreted as hostility towards the rule of law. Criticism of an institution becomes mistrust of democracy. And criticism of the moral self-description of the established order becomes evidence that the critic apparently stands outside the sphere of decent politics.

11. Pathologisation of political dissent

Not every rejection or restriction of a political conviction can be regarded as pathologisation. Political struggle presupposes, in fact, that statements can be challenged on factual grounds, proposals can be rejected on normative grounds, and the likely consequences of policy can be critically examined. Nor does setting limits on threats, violence or directly harmful actions automatically constitute a pathologisation of political dissent. ***Pathologisation occurs when the focus shifts from the content of a belief to a presumed 'flaw' in the person who holds it.***

The dissenting belief is then no longer treated primarily as a potentially incorrect, unjust or undesirable idea, but as a symptom of a cognitive, moral, psychological or social defect. In such cases, the opponent is not merely regarded as someone who has reached a different conclusion. Their belief is explained in terms of characteristics that call into question their suitability for reasonable or legitimate participation in the debate. For example, they may be labelled as irrational, uncivilised, backward, pathologically distrustful, morally corrupt, psychologically deranged or socially unfit.

These characterisations may be descriptive in nature and may be justified in specific cases. The analytical problem arises when they replace the substantive assessment of the conviction. The argument then no longer needs to be examined separately by the political opponent, because the very fact that someone holds the dissenting conviction is already interpreted as evidence of their deficiency.

Pathologisation need not, however, be the result of a deliberate strategy by an established elite. Politicians, experts, journalists and citizens may be sincerely convinced that they are defending a reasonable, humane and peaceful order. However, the more the associated norms, concepts and interpretative frameworks are internalised, the less they are perceived as historically shaped components of a particular political civilisation. They then appear as self-evident expressions of reasonableness, decency and responsible citizenship. From this perspective, it becomes increasingly difficult to conceive of fundamental deviation as the result of a different, equally socially shaped conviction. The critic does not simply appear to hold a different interpretation of reality, but, according to the established classification, demonstrates that they are either unable or unwilling to recognise the evident reasonableness of the order.

This process is reinforced because established and deviant groups are judged by different standards. The established group can identify with its nuanced formal principles, its most exemplary representatives and its stated intentions. The deviant group, by contrast, is judged on the basis of its most extreme statements, its least restrained representatives and the most harmful consequences that can be attributed to its ideas.

In **The Art of Revolution* (Ahles, 2026),* **pathologisation** is defined as *the process whereby dissenting views or behaviours are not primarily assessed on the basis of their content, but are treated as indicative of a cognitive, moral, psychological or social deficiency on the part of the person who holds them.* Within that theory, pathologisation constitutes a specific form of person-centred delegitimisation, which can contribute to the legitimisation of social sanctioning or exclusion.[9]

This paper is limited to the **pathologisation of political beliefs**. The possible pathologisation of behaviours therefore falls outside the direct scope of this study. Whilst behaviours may play a role in the social classification of political opponents, they are examined here solely insofar as they contribute to the pathologisation of their beliefs or of those who espouse them.

Through this asymmetrical assessment, a difference in social status can be portrayed as a difference in reasonableness, reliability or suitability. The established group appears responsible and reasonable; the deviant group as unruly, unreliable or dangerous outsiders.[10]

This definition does not imply that all deviant beliefs are reasonable, factually correct or morally acceptable. Nor does it rule out the possibility that certain individuals do indeed suffer from mental disorders or that certain movements pose real dangers. It merely requires that the substantive assessment of a belief be analytically distinguished from the classification of its adherents. In this article, the term ‘pathologisation’ is used exclusively in a sociological sense. This does not deny that mental and neurological disorders exist and that these can influence people’s perception, judgement and behaviour. Whether a specific case involves a medically or psychologically diagnosable disorder is a clinical question that falls outside the scope of this analysis. A societal classification of a person as irrational, pathological or mentally unfit may coincide with an actual condition, but it may also be partially or entirely incorrect. This article does not examine the medical accuracy of individual diagnoses, but ra-

[9] Ahles (2026), **The Art of Revolution**, definition of the term ‘Personal Civilisation’.

[10] Ahles (2026), definition of the term ‘Pathologisation’.

ther the social process through which such characterisations gain authority and have consequences for the social position of individuals and groups. Nor does this paper examine the extent to which the beliefs or behaviours of someone with an actual mental disorder can be adopted by others. Insofar as such transmission takes place through influence, imitation, language, upbringing, organisation or institutionalisation, sociologically it proceeds via the same general process of civilising. However, the fact that a belief or behaviour is socially transmitted does not imply a medical diagnosis of that belief or of those who adopt it.

Pathologisation becomes particularly politically relevant when such characterisations are not confined to informal language use, but are adopted by the media, professional bodies, educational institutions, administrative organisations or legal institutions. The deviant belief may then have consequences for the access of individuals and groups to public debate, social roles, institutional protection and legitimate political participation. The social consequences may arise without the belief in question being formally prohibited. The classifying actors may perceive their judgements as reasonable and justified on the basis of internalised norms. This raises a further analytical question: how can institutions affirm and disseminate social classifications, whilst their own authority is partly based on the reasonableness and legitimacy they attribute to themselves and to one another?

Pathologisation should not be understood as a simple dichotomy of classification being present or absent. The phenomenon can take various forms, ranging from implicit suggestions regarding the reasonableness or suitability of a political opponent and suggestive framing to explicit stigmatisation, institutional exclusion and, in exceptional historical circumstances, compulsory psychiatric measures or deprivation of liberty. These forms differ in intensity, social scope and consequences. They do not necessarily follow on from one another: less drastic forms do not necessarily lead to more severe measures.

The severity of potential sanctions is not decisive in determining whether pathologisation occurs. What is decisive is the shift from a substantive assessment of a belief to an assumed shortcoming on the part of its adherent. The result may be that the individual's arguments are no longer examined in their own right. This effect of argumentative substitution constitutes a distinct analytical dimension alongside institutional reinforcement and the severity of the potential consequences.

For empirical research, at least three dimensions must be distinguished separately: the degree of argumentative displacement, the degree of institutional endorsement, and the nature and severity of the consequences for the person classified. A harsh personal characterisation can bring a debate to a close without institutional sanction; by contrast, a far-reaching measure may follow a substantive assessment without this necessarily constituting pathologisation. It is not the mere existence of a negative label, but the demonstrable shift from an assessment of arguments to a disqualifying personal or group classification that is central to this theory.

In this contribution, the argument-substituting effect constitutes a specific application of the definition of pathologisation used in **The Art of Revolution** and of propositions 47–48[11] concerning its legitimising effect. The precise mechanism at work in political dissent and institutional self-confirmation is examined here as a theoretical elaboration.

[11]Elias & Scotson (1994), p. 7.

12. The loop of institutional self-confirmation

The classifications described in the previous chapter acquire a more far-reaching social impact when they are adopted by authoritative institutions. An informal judgement that a political conviction is unreasonable, dangerous or socially unacceptable can be relatively easily challenged or ignored. When a similar judgement is endorsed by administrative bodies, academic institutions, the education system, the media, the judiciary or other authoritative bodies, it takes on a more widespread and enduring character. Institutions do not merely codify existing social norms; they also contribute to the formation and reinforcement of the criteria by which beliefs, individuals and behaviours are assessed. They help to determine:

- what knowledge is regarded as expert;
- which individuals are authorised to make authoritative statements;
- which interests are regarded as public or private;
- which behaviours deserve protection or sanction;
- which forms of political dissent are classified as legitimate, irresponsible or dangerous.

The state occupies a special position within this process. It can not only formulate and disseminate classifications, but also **link them to binding rules, administrative decisions and, ultimately, coercion.**

At the same time, a state cannot function solely through coercion. Decisions must be prepared, interpreted, administered, implemented and accepted by large numbers of people in diverse roles and within chains of dependency. The functioning of institutions therefore also rests on expectations regarding their legitimacy, expertise and good intentions. Citizens and officials learn, for example, that the government serves the public interest, that the courts administer justice, that the police protect public order, that civil servants are expected to act impartially and that experts base their judgements on relevant knowledge. Such expectations can support cooperation and the performance of institutional tasks.

Not every citizen or public official can independently re-examine every technical calculation, legal decision or administrative act. Institutional trust enables coordinated action and reduces the need to fully re-evaluate every decision on every occasion it is implemented. A self-reinforcing cycle arises when legitimacy, expertise and good intentions no longer function solely as verifiable expectations, but also become part of the institutional definition itself:

- the institution is regarded as legitimate because it is deemed to act reasonably, competently and in the public interest;
- its actions are regarded as reasonable, expert and in the public interest because they originate from a legitimate institution.

A similar mechanism can arise in relation to expertise:

- an institution derives its authority from the experts associated with it;
- these individuals are regarded as authoritative experts because they have been selected, certified or consulted by recognised institutions.

This mutual confirmation does not demonstrate that the institution is acting unlawfully or that the expert is wrong. It does, however, reveal that the source of authority and the judgement expressed by that source do not arise entirely independently of one another. As alter-

native scrutiny and public debate weaken, institutional recognition can increasingly function as independent proof of correctness. This cycle relates not only to beliefs and judgements, but also to behaviour.

People working within institutions learn which tasks, powers and responsibilities are associated with their position. Many rules are implemented without every official re-examining their factual and moral foundations for every single action. The civil servant applies the applicable rule, the judge uses recognised legal categories, the expert applies the standards accepted within their field, and the citizen follows the procedure perceived as lawful and normal. This need not be blind obedience. It generally involves routine and role-bound actions within an order whose legitimacy is not called into question anew with every action. Here, the question raised by *Étienne de La Boétie* regarding the dependence of power on human cooperation takes on a sociological significance.[12] The ruler possesses no more power than the many grant him through their cooperation. In a modern society, however, this power is not conferred solely through personal admiration for a single monarch or administrator. It arises within an extensive network of people who formulate, substantiate, administer, implement, enforce and accept decisions. From the perspective developed here, this cooperation is not necessarily the result of a conscious decision to obey, taken time and again. It also stems from the process of civilising. People develop convictions about which institutions are authorised, which procedures should be followed and what behaviour is expected of a responsible official or citizen. The social constraint towards self-constraint described by *Elias* thus also takes on an institutional dimension.[13] Rules are not enforced solely because breaches can be punished, but also because compliance is perceived as professional, responsible, decent or legitimate.

This creates a second loop:

- institutions derive their power to act from people's willingness to carry out their rules and decisions;
- the regular implementation then confirms the authority and the actual power to act of those institutions.

The institutional order thus helps to generate the behaviour on which its functioning depends, whilst that behaviour in turn reaffirms the institutional order. This connection links *La Boétie's* insight that power is conferred through cooperation with Elias's analysis of social constraint towards self-constraint. Moreover, this cycle contributes to the continuation and social dissemination of a civilisation. Perceptions of reality, norms and behavioural expectations that are embedded in enduring institutions, functions and routines are more likely to be passed on and applied in new situations. They thereby acquire an institutional continuity that is not dependent on the original individuals who developed them. In this sense, one can speak of a selective process: elements of civilisation that enable coordinated action, are institutionally enshrined and protected against erosion, are more likely to continue to exist within society. This selection does not presuppose a consciously acting society, nor does it presuppose a pre-designed goal. It arises from the interdependence and the largely routine actions of individuals, including those who fulfil specific functions within institutions. The

[12]Ahles (2026), **The Art of Revolution**, propositions 47 and 48.

[13]La Boétie (1997), pp. 9–10.

loop of institutional self-confirmation is therefore not pathological in itself. It is, in part, a prerequisite for continuity, predictability and cooperation in complex societies.

The judiciary provides an example of how institutional self-confirmation can also contribute to the pathologisation of political convictions. Individual judges, like other public officials, possess a historically shaped personal civilisation. Shared professional standards, expectations and criteria for assessment are also at work within judicial panels and the judiciary as a whole. Where pathologising views regarding certain political convictions or their adherents form part of a judge's personal civilisation, these may influence their interpretation and assessment of a case. This need not be the case: legal standards, rules of evidence, professional expectations and institutional safeguards can limit or correct such influences.

When a judicial ruling nevertheless confirms a pre-existing pathologising classification, the socially recognised authority of the judiciary may confer additional legitimacy upon it. Even a judgement that does not itself contain a pathologising characterisation may be interpreted by other social actors as confirmation of their existing classification. In this way, the authority of the judiciary may contribute to the further dissemination and perpetuation of a pathologising view, without the judge having intended this social effect.

Two mechanisms can be distinguished here: the potential carry-over of already internalised classifications into judicial decision-making, and the legitimising effect that others subsequently attribute to the judicial judgement. When both mechanisms are at work, a self-reinforcing interaction can arise between social classification and institutional authority.

However, it is precisely because institutions depend on sufficient consensus for their functioning that standards are also created by which deviation is classified as acceptable, disruptive or threatening.

13. The pathologising effect of institutional self-confirmation

The process of civilising does not merely give rise to shared perceptions of reality, norms and behavioural expectations. It also produces criteria by which deviations from these are observed, identified and classified. Whilst shared elements of civilisation facilitate cooperation and institutional continuity, divergent views may also be treated as unreasonable, dangerous or pathological. Under certain circumstances, this can contribute to the maintenance of a dominant circle civilisation[14]. The extent to which such classifications actually have a stabilising effect is an empirical question.

Pathologisation, in itself, says nothing about the mental state of the person who deviates. This is not a medical diagnosis, but a social classification. It primarily reveals which circle civilisation is socially dominant and capable of imposing its own conceptions of reality, norms and behavioural expectations as standards of reasonableness and normality. Moreover, the classification of deviance is historically variable. Beliefs and behaviours that are regarded as irrational, immoral, dangerous or pathological within a dominant civilisation may be considered normal, legitimate or even self-evident within a later civilisation. Conversely, behaviours that were previously accepted may later be placed beyond the bounds of what is reasonable and permissible. This changeability does not mean that every belief is equally correct or every behaviour equally harmless. It does, however, make it clear that the

[14]Elias (1994), Volume 2, pp. 319–320.

societal classification of a deviation must not be equated with a timeless determination of pathologicalness. It also says something about the civilisation dominant at that time, its available knowledge, its technological and social conditions, and its standards of normality.

The loop of institutional self-confirmation does not necessarily lead to pathologisation. It can contribute to this when institutionally affirmed standards are no longer perceived as historically shaped and subject to scrutiny, but come to function as self-evident standards of reasonableness, expertise and responsible citizenship. In this context, the interplay between the dominant circle civilisation, the authority of existing institutions and the assessment of deviant beliefs is significant

The more firmly the notions of reasonableness, expertise and legitimacy prevailing within a circle civilisation are embedded in authoritative institutions, the more these notions can also determine the standards by which criticism of those very institutions is assessed. When fundamental criticism conflicts with such institutionalised standards, it may not only be rejected on its merits but also interpreted as an indication that the critic lacks the qualities regarded within the circle as prerequisites for a reasonable or responsible judgement.

When such a classification is subsequently confirmed by authoritative institutions or regarded by other actors as institutionally endorsed, its social credibility may increase. This can reinforce the shift from substantive assessment to personalised delegitimisation, whilst the institutional endorsement may simultaneously serve as justification for refraining from further substantive discussion.

Within this mechanism, an **asymmetrical burden of proof** arises. The institution does not need to demonstrate its reasonableness anew in response to every individual criticism, as its reasonableness is already deemed to be inherent in its social position and self-description. The critic, on the other hand, must first demonstrate that their dissenting judgement does not stem from ignorance, irrationality, bad faith, a lack of responsibility or social unsuitability. The substantive question — is the criticism factually or normatively tenable? — can thus fade into the background.

It is replaced by the classificatory question — what does the expression of this criticism say about the person voicing it? Such a shift can, for example, become apparent when fundamental criticism is labelled as extremist, paranoid, anti-scientific, undemocratic or a threat to the state, without first examining separately which factual claims, normative principles and political proposals the critic is defending. The classification of the speaker then takes precedence over the assessment of their argument. This does not mean that such characterisations can never be justified. Certain political movements may indeed promote violence, disseminate demonstrably false information or seek to abolish constitutional procedures.

Moreover, the pathologising effect may extend to the self-image and behaviour of those who are categorised. This potential consequence is examined in Chapter 15.

The analytical problem arises when the classification does not stem from research into such characteristics, but from the mere fact that a belief fundamentally deviates from the institutionally dominant political civilisation. Once the associated classifications have been sufficiently internalised and institutionally embedded, they can be applied independently by journalists, civil servants, experts, administrators and citizens, without constant direction from political leaders or a ruling elite. The further dissemination of such classifications can

therefore rest on the routine actions of individuals who perceive their judgements to be reasonable and justified.

When the media, scientific organisations, educational institutions, administrative bodies and legal institutions employ comparable classifications, these can reinforce one another. One institution relies on the judgement of another, whilst this joint confirmation then serves as an indication that a broad and reasonable consensus exists. The institutional loop then takes on a pathologising dimension:

- the recognised institutions determine which beliefs are considered reasonable and legitimate;
- anyone who deviates fundamentally from these is classified as unreasonable or unsuitable;
- the exclusion or marginalisation of this critic subsequently reduces the visibility of dissent;
- the decline in visible dissent reaffirms the impression that the institutional view is reasonable and widely accepted.

Pathologisation can thus reinforce the continuity and stability of a dominant circle civilisation. It increases the social costs of deviance, reduces the visibility of dissent and reinforces the impression amongst other members that established views are universal, reasonable and self-evident. However, this stabilising function does not constitute proof of the factual accuracy, moral justification or legitimacy of the classification. A person thus labelled as deviant may be excluded, persecuted, barred from social roles or subjected to intense social and psychological pressure, without having a mental disorder or having committed a specific infringement of the rights of others. The very mechanism that promotes cooperation and institutional continuity can therefore discourage public dissent, restrict the exchange of dissenting views and diminish the capacity of institutions to correct themselves and adapt. This potential tension is consistent with Karl Popper's analysis in **The Open Society and Its Enemies** (1945), in which the ability to critically examine existing beliefs and institutions occupies a fundamental place. From the sociological perspective developed here, it can be assumed that pathologisation contributes to the stability of an existing social order in the short term, but under certain circumstances reduces its capacity for correction and adaptation in the longer term. Whether and to what extent this occurs is a question to be investigated empirically.

The process of civilising thus encompasses not only the continuation and transformation of a civilisation, but also the possibility that that civilisation *may immunise* itself against deviance. In this context, pathologisation is not evidence of the pathological nature of the deviant individual, but an expression of the dominance and self-protective capacity of the civilisation from which he or she deviates. This mechanism, too, must be treated analytically in a symmetrical manner. It is not tied to any particular ideology, social class or historical group. Any group that acquires sufficient social and institutional dominance can establish the perceptions of reality and norms shared within that group as standards of reasonableness and normality, and classify fundamental deviation from them as a defect in those concerned.

A group whose views were previously marginalised or pathologised is therefore not permanently protected against this mechanism. When it later succeeds in establishing its views as

socially dominant norms, it can, in turn, classify criticism of those views as irrational, dangerous or pathological. The shift in power then changes those who apply the classification, but not necessarily the classifying mechanism itself.

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

14. Substantive assessment and the classification of the bearer

The pathologisation of political dissent is made possible in part when different questions are not sufficiently distinguished from one another. The question of whether a statement is true is not the same as the question of why someone believes it. Nor does the social recognition of a belief coincide with its factual correctness. Finally, the inaccuracy or deviance of a belief does not automatically prove that the person who holds it is cognitively, morally or psychologically deficient. Insofar as factual statements are concerned, their truth depends on the reality to which they relate.

An event either did or did not take place, regardless of how many people accept a particular interpretation of it. A physical, economic or historical connection does not become true simply because a majority, a government or a scientific institution agrees with it. Nor does it become untrue simply because it is defended by a socially marginalised person. The social origins of a statement therefore do not determine its truth. They are, however, relevant to the question of why people find the statement plausible, what meaning they attribute to it, and which sources and arguments they regard as reliable. A belief is, first and foremost, a psychological and social fact. A person may be sincerely and firmly convinced of something. That conviction may profoundly shape their perceptions, behaviour and political choices. However, sincerity, firmness and inner certainty do not in themselves constitute proof that the content of the conviction is correct.

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

Furthermore, between truth and belief lies the question of the justification for a claim to truth. On what observations, data, arguments and methods is it based? Have alternative explanations been investigated? Can the sources used be verified? What circumstances would give cause to revise the statement? A belief may be true without being well-founded. Conversely, someone may, on the basis of careful investigation, arrive at a belief that later turns out to be incorrect. A sound justification offers no absolute guarantee of truth, but it does increase the likelihood that errors will be detected and corrected. Moreover, political beliefs rarely consist solely of factual statements. They usually contain a combination of descriptions, causal explanations, expectations, normative judgements and proposals for action. In a political disagreement, therefore, different types of conflict may be intertwined. People may disagree about what has happened, about the causes of events, about the expected consequences of policy, about what is just, or about which means are permissible. These elements must be analytically distinguished from one another. A difference in values is not the same as a difference over facts. Agreement on facts does not automatically lead to agreement on political aims. Nor does an incorrect expectation prove that someone is incapable of reasonable political participation. Pathologisation blurs these distinctions. The belief is then no longer bro-

ken down into claims, norms and proposals to be examined separately. It is interpreted as a whole as an expression of the person who holds it.

The question 'Is this belief factually or normatively tenable?' is replaced by the question *'What deficiency must a person possess to be able to hold this belief?'*

This results in a transition – which is not analytically justified – from an assessment of the content to a classification of the speaker. The observation that a belief is incorrect, poorly substantiated or socially deviant does not imply that the person holding it is unwell, irrational or unsuitable for political participation. People may acquire incorrect beliefs due to incomplete information, misleading sources, limited experience, cognitive errors or historically shaped interpretative frameworks. Such causes occur both within established institutions and within opposition groups. They are normal possibilities within any process of civilising and do not, in themselves, constitute an indication of a mental disorder. Even when a person has actually been diagnosed with a mental disorder, that diagnosis does not automatically determine the truth or falsity of an individual statement. The content of a claim must still be examined on its own factual and argumentative merits.

A diagnosis may, in certain circumstances, be relevant to understanding behaviour, but it cannot replace a substantive refutation.

Institutional authority constitutes a separate category in this regard. In a complex society, people cannot personally investigate every factual statement. They rely on a cognitive division of labour in which scientists, doctors, judges, journalists, civil servants and other specialised professionals gather, assess and convey knowledge. The process of civilising therefore teaches people not only certain beliefs, but also which sources are regarded as reliable, which qualifications confirm expertise, which methods are considered rigorous, and which institutions are authorised to make authoritative statements.

Institutional trust can facilitate coordination, as it means that not every assessment needs to be carried out independently from scratch. Institutional authority can therefore serve as a reasonable indication that a statement has been arrived at with due care and deserves serious consideration. However, it does not constitute independent proof of truth. Experts can be mistaken, institutions can perpetuate outdated views, and selection procedures can systematically favour certain perspectives. The status of the source and the substantive quality of its statement must therefore remain analytically distinct from one another. An epistemic loop arises when that distinction disappears[15] :

- a statement is regarded as reliable because a recognised institution endorses it;
- the institution is regarded as reliable because it produces statements that are recognised as true and reasonable within the dominant civilisation.

This loop does not prove that the statement in question is incorrect. It does, however, reveal that social credibility and institutional recognition can mutually reinforce one another. When independent scrutiny and organised dissent weaken, institutional authority can increasingly come to function as a substitute for substantive justification. For those who express a dissenting view, this can have far-reaching consequences. When the institutionally affirmed view serves as the benchmark of reasonableness, deviation from it is not merely treated as a

[15]Ahles (2026), **The Art of Revolution**, definition of the term 'Dominant Circle Civilisation'.

substantive error. It can be used as an indication that the person in question lacks sufficient knowledge, judgement, responsibility or mental stability. This gives rise to the pathologising line of reasoning:

- reasonable people recognise the institutionally established truth;
- this person does not recognise it;
- their deviation therefore shows that they are not reasonable, reliable or fit to participate.

This line of reasoning is circular. The established belief is regarded as reasonable because reasonable people accept it, whilst people are regarded as reasonable insofar as they accept the established belief. The possibility that the person in question draws on a different experience, source, value or interpretation is therefore insufficiently examined.

The same analytical principle must be applied to the critic. He, too, has learnt within social relationships which sources he trusts, which institutions he distrusts and to which alternative experts he accords authority. Self-reinforcing loops can also arise in relation to opposition movements. A statement may be regarded as credible there because it comes from someone considered independent or courageous, whilst their independence is in fact derived from the very fact that they contradict established institutions. Deviation is therefore no more proof of truth than institutional consensus.

A belief is not correct simply because it is socially dominant, nor is it correct simply because it is suppressed or marginalised. Analytical symmetry requires that both established and dissenting beliefs be subjected to comparable substantive criteria. The social standing of a statement may explain why it enjoys a great deal or little credibility, but must not predetermine its truth or the mental state of the person uttering it.

This position does not lead to relativism. The fact that people acquire their beliefs through social processes does not imply that all beliefs are equally true or equally well-justified. The pursuit of truth is always important. It merely means that no one's certainty proves its own correctness, and that even socially recognised claims to truth must remain open to scrutiny and revision.

The reflexive question is therefore not only: *'Why do others not see what I regard as true?'* It is also: *'How have I come to be convinced that my own observations, sources and reasoning are reliable, and under what conditions would I be prepared to revise my judgement?'*

No one stands entirely outside the process of civilising that they are examining in others. This does not make the search for truth impossible. It makes the investigation of the circumstances under which beliefs are tested and revised sociologically relevant. The possibility that a belief is incorrect does not negate the distinction between refutation and pathologisation. An incorrect belief can be examined, criticised and rejected. Only when it is used, without separate evidence, to call into question the reasonableness, sanity or suitability of its holder does the assessment shift from the belief to the classification of the person. Institutional authority can support research, but cannot replace it. Personal certainty can motivate research, but cannot prove truth. Social consensus can facilitate cooperation, but does not constitute a conclusive test of the correctness of a belief.

Since truth, belief, social recognition and personal suitability do not coincide, they must be distinguished separately in the sociological analysis of pathologisation.

15. Responses to pathologisation: adaptation, withdrawal and counter-formation

Pathologisation influences the scope for action of classified individuals and groups, but does not unambiguously dictate their response. Possible responses depend in part on pre-existing beliefs, material and institutional dependencies, available social relationships, opportunities for withdrawal and the capacity for collective action.

The consequences of pathologisation may also extend to formal measures taken against those concerned. When a pathologising classification is adopted by authoritative institutions, it may contribute to the justification of administrative sanctions, criminal prosecution, deprivation of liberty or compulsory admission to a psychiatric institution.[16] In such cases, the presumed personal shortcoming may be used to present measures against the individual concerned as necessary, responsible or justified. These measures may restrict their ability to express their beliefs and to oppose the classification. The question of whether such measures are justified in legal or constitutional terms falls outside the scope of this sociological analysis.

Furthermore, such measures may serve as an example to others who hold similar political convictions or are considering expressing them. When they observe the consequences that dissenting views have for those concerned, they may decide not to express their own views, or to do so less openly. The sanctioning of individual persons may therefore contribute to self-restraint amongst others and to a reduction in visible political dissent. This effect need not be the conscious aim of the sanctioning party, but may also be pursued as such. Whether this exemplary effect actually occurs depends, amongst other things, on the public awareness of the measures, the way in which they are interpreted, and the power dynamics within which the observers find themselves. The consequences may also turn out differently: under certain circumstances, persecution or deprivation of liberty may, in fact, strengthen resistance and collective counter-movements.

These consequences do not necessarily occur. Furthermore, measures legitimised in part by pathologising classifications must be analytically distinguished from measures taken on the basis of specific behaviours or legal offences without any element of pathologisation.

Analytically, various reactions on the part of those who have been pathologised can be distinguished. In the case of **internalisation**, the individual incorporates the attributed shortcoming into their own self-image. In the case of external adaptation, they retain their convictions but conceal them or adjust their behaviour to avoid sanctions. In the case of **withdrawal**, they leave the public debate, an organisation, a profession or any other setting in which the classification is in force. **Individual resistance** involves rejecting the classification, without having sufficient support to substantially alter its social consequences. In the case of reactive **counter-identification,** the attributed stigma is transformed into a consciously affirmed group identity. Finally, in **collective counter-formation,** individually classified persons develop a shared interpretation of their position, mutual organisation and, possibly, their own institutional infrastructure.

[16]Ahles (2026), **The Art of Revolution**, definitions of the terms ‘Legitimising Civilisation Loop’ and ‘Reproductive Civilisation Loop’.

The consequences of pathologisation are not limited to the social assessment and treatment of those who espouse deviant political beliefs. In **The Established and the Outsiders**, Elias and Scotson demonstrate that stigmatisation can also permeate the self-image of the stigmatised group. When established groups possess sufficient social power, outsiders may partially adopt the criteria by which they are judged by the established groups. As a result, they may come to perceive their socially subordinate position as an indication of their own inferiority. The classification, originally imposed from outside, then becomes part of their assessment of themselves and of the social group to which they belong.[17]

Based on the conceptual framework used here, this process can be understood as a form of civilisation. The pathologising judgement can be internalised and become part of the personal civilisation of the person subjected to it. As a result, external social pressure can partly translate into self-restraint: the individual may be less likely to express their views, withdraw from discussions or question their own judgement, even when no direct sanction is applied.

However, this outcome is not inevitable. The extent to which such classifications are adopted depends, amongst other things, on existing personal civilisation, power relations and the presence of other circles in which the beliefs in question do find recognition. Pathologisation can therefore contribute to both internalisation and self-restraint, whilst also provoking resistance, counter-identification and the formation of alternative networks.

Internalisation of the pathologising assessment, outward conformity and withdrawal can all reduce the public visibility of political dissent. Those who conform or withdraw partially disappear from the visible conflict. Moreover, those who internalise the pathologising judgement may begin to doubt their own judgement and thus be less inclined to defend dissenting beliefs in public. The resulting decline in the visibility of dissenting beliefs may in turn reinforce the impression that the dominant view is widely shared. However, the relative absence of dissent does not in itself constitute independent evidence of substantive agreement.

Even resistance can, under certain circumstances, reinforce the existing classification. When exclusion provokes anger, mistrust or provocative behaviour, these reactions – regardless of the circumstances in which they arose – can be interpreted as additional evidence for the original characterisation. The potential self-confirming effect of this is examined in Chapter 16.

Another development becomes possible when individuals classified separately begin to interpret their experiences as an expression of a shared social position. Mutual contacts, organisations, the media and alternative institutions can transform individual resistance into collective counter-power. A category constructed by established institutions can thus develop into an organised group that not only challenges the classification, but also the power relations on which its social authority is based.

Pathologisation can thus contribute both to fragmentation and withdrawal and to the formation of organised counter-power. Which development occurs, and under what circumstances, must be determined empirically. Relevant factors include, amongst others, the costs of withdrawal, the density of mutual relationships, access to communication and resources, the

[17]Van Voren (2010), pp. 33–35.

presence of recognised representatives, institutional openings and the expectation that collective action can have an effect.

16. Response to attempts at substantive discussion following pathologisation

One of the possible effects of pathologisation is that the classifying party can justify to itself and others why it does not engage substantively with a divergent political conviction. The belief is then already regarded as an indication of a shortcoming on the part of the person who holds it. This justification need not be a deliberate evasion strategy: the classifying party may sincerely believe that a substantive discussion with the person concerned serves little purpose.

The person concerned is not obliged to accept the classification. As described in the previous chapter, they may object and attempt to discuss the substance of their beliefs. This gives rise to a specific situation: one party wishes to have its view assessed, whilst the other party may see that very view as a reason not to treat the speaker as a credible discussion partner.

The classifying party may then respond to the substance of the argument, reconsider its judgement, or uphold the classification. However, it may also interpret the objection to the classification itself as evidence of the alleged shortcoming. In the latter case, the classification may take on a self-confirming character. For example, the person concerned's mistrust may be interpreted as evidence of paranoia, their tenacity as evidence of fanaticism, and their anger at being excluded as confirmation of their alleged unreasonableness. Even an attempt to publicly challenge the classification may then be interpreted as an indication of dangerousness or a lack of self-insight.

In this possible scenario, a self-confirming loop may arise:

- a dissenting belief leads to a pathologising classification of the speaker;
- the person concerned contests that classification and attempts to engage in a substantive discussion;
- their resistance is interpreted as a symptom of the presumed deficiency;
- this alleged confirmation is used to uphold the classification and to justify, once again, the absence of a substantive discussion.

Within such a loop, it becomes difficult to refute the classification with arguments. Counterarguments can be dismissed because their source is already deemed untrustworthy; attempts to challenge that assessment are then interpreted as confirmation of it. As a result, the classification becomes difficult to falsify in social practice. That in itself says nothing about its factual accuracy.

When the classifying party possesses social or institutional authority, other actors may adopt this interpretation without independently assessing the original arguments. Even a judgement that is not itself pathologising can be used by third parties as confirmation. This is consistent with the mechanism of institutional self-confirmation described in Chapters 12 and 13.

The outcome is not predetermined. Other participants may challenge the classification, scrutinise the reliability of the source used, or address the belief itself. Such a substantive exami-

nation need not lead to agreement with the dissenting belief. It merely means that an assessment of the arguments is not superseded in advance by a person-centred classification.

This gives rise to a hypothesis that can be tested empirically: *the more widely a pathologising classification is shared within relevant circles and institutionally reinforced, the less likely it is that the individual's attempts at a substantive discussion will be accepted, whilst the likelihood may increase that their resistance will be regarded as confirmation of the classification.* Whether and when this mechanism occurs depends, amongst other things, on the personal and social contexts involved, power relations and the availability of alternative sources and discussion partners.

17. Conclusion: civilising, stabilising and pathologising

This paper has examined how the social pathologisation of political dissent can be explained by an extension of *Norbert Elias's* theory of civilising processes, as elaborated in **The Art of Revolution**. In doing so, political convictions, criteria for credibility and standards for legitimate dissent have been regarded as components of historically formed personal civilisations and circle civilisations. Elias's analysis of social figurations, relationships of dependency and the interconnection between social and individual changes forms a theoretical starting point for this. This paper proposes that people acquire not only rules of behaviour and affective inhibitions, but also interpretative frameworks, norms and views on reliable sources, legitimate institutions and acceptable dissent. Together, these elements form personal and circle civilisations that are constantly perpetuated, modified and reorganised. When conceptions of reality and behavioural expectations are sufficiently widely shared and embedded in language, routines, functions and institutions, they acquire institutional continuity. Institutions not only establish these norms, but also contribute to the criteria by which knowledge, behaviour and individuals are assessed. This can give rise to a loop of institutional self-confirmation: institutions derive their authority from the assumption that they act competently and legitimately, whilst their actions are also regarded as competent and legitimate because they originate from recognised institutions. The implementation of institutional decisions subsequently confirms their actual power to act.

This cycle links *La Boétie's* insight that power depends on the cooperation of many with *Elias's* analysis of social relationships of dependency and internalised behavioural regulation. Modern power is partly generated by people who act in accordance with established expectations regarding legitimacy, expertise, responsibility and decency. This process does not require constant central control and can sustain itself through routine behaviour.

Within the theory developed here, 'pathologisation' refers exclusively to the social classification process whereby a divergent political conviction is no longer judged primarily on its content, but is interpreted as a symptom of a cognitive, moral, psychological or social deficiency on the part of the person or group espousing it. This meaning must be distinguished from a medical or psychiatric diagnosis. A political conviction cannot, in itself, be taken as evidence of a mental disorder.

Not every negative characterisation or restriction constitutes pathologisation. Political movements may promote violence, disseminate demonstrably false information or threaten the rights of others. The analytically decisive moment arises when the assessment of a belief is

replaced by a classification of its adherent, and the belief itself comes to be regarded as evidence of that person's deficiency. Under certain circumstances, pathologisation can contribute to the stabilisation of an existing social order. When deviant beliefs and their adherents are placed beyond the bounds of what is reasonable and acceptable, shared norms can be reaffirmed and the visibility of political dissent may diminish. Whether this actually enhances institutional stability requires empirical investigation. Furthermore, elements of civilisation that are effectively transmitted, institutionally embedded and protected against erosion are more likely to endure within society. However, this functionality does not prove that the classification is factually correct, morally justified or legitimate.

The consequences for those classified in this way can be far-reaching: exclusion from social roles, loss of professional credibility, restrictions on public participation, and long-term social or psychological pressure. In certain circumstances, pathologising classifications may also contribute to the legitimisation of criminal prosecution, deprivation of liberty or compulsory psychiatric admission. Such measures may also discourage others from publicly expressing their dissenting views, but under different circumstances they may, conversely, strengthen collective resistance. Pathologisation can, moreover, become self-perpetuating when opposition to the classification is itself interpreted as a symptom. The classification then becomes difficult to refute and may supplant substantive dialogue.

This can create a tension between institutional continuity and the processing of dissenting information. Pathologisation can legitimise the omission of substantive argumentation and diminish the social credibility of those involved. Whether this impairs a group's capacity for adaptation is a question that requires separate empirical investigation. Truth, belief, institutional recognition and personal suitability do not analytically coincide: a belief is not true simply because it is socially dominant, nor is it true simply because it is marginalised.

When pathologised individuals challenge their classification and nevertheless attempt to engage in a substantive discussion, their resistance *may* prompt a re-evaluation. *However,* it *can also* be interpreted as confirmation of the attributed shortcoming. In that case, the reaction to pathologisation reinforces the original classification and a self-confirming process may arise in which the arguments of the person concerned are no longer examined separately.

The extension of *Elias's theory of civilising processes* proposed here thus yields a research programme. Comparative and historical research should determine under what circumstances political dissent is challenged on its merits, when it devolves into the classification of those who hold such views, which institutions disseminate such classifications, what social consequences ensue, how those classified react, and under what circumstances their attempts at substantive discussion are accepted or rejected.

The central question is therefore how a dissenting political conviction within a given circle civilisation can be transformed into a judgement regarding the alleged shortcomings of those who hold it, and how that classification is confirmed, contested or modified by social and institutional processes. The mechanisms proposed here require empirical testing without any prior preference for a particular political order or the content of a political conviction.

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Imprint

Publisher: Open Civitas.

Series: Academic publications

Publication date: 15 November 2026

Version: 10

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Language versions: This paper was originally written in Dutch. The English version is a translation, reviewed for consistency of terminology. Where interpretation of an argument or theoretical term is in doubt, the Dutch original is authoritative.

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