

Chapter 17

Guilt Economics: Rediscovering the Civilizing Process

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the effects of the recent pandemic on individual and collective behavior, and their implications for the functioning and effectiveness of socio-economic evolution. These effects are not treated as separate and self-existent, but in the context of the overall, historical civilizing process, according to the relevant position of Norbert Elias, i.e., as part of a long course of distancing from physical behavior, to serve the balance of a society with more extensive and intense inter-personal and -institutional relationships. In combination, the importance of rapid technological development, which among other things reduces the cost of control, is explored and the importance of the concept of ‘individual responsibility’ and ‘socio-economic guilt’ is highlighted. Following, in the last part the authors analyze not only the challenges and the risks, but also the opportunities that arise from the current phase of the civilizing process for social justice and economic sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The recent pandemic revealed and hastened the behavioral effects of an already ongoing, new phase in the “civilizing process.” Although it would be a mistake to ignore the importance of the deep socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19 outspread, we should not overlook that they are part of a rather accelerated, long-term, historical evolution. Norbert Elias (1939) described this as a long course of distancing from physical behavior, to serve the balance of a society with more extensive and intense inter-personal and -institutional connections.

As the intersocietal interrelations between people and collective identities expand and get deeper, the costs of externally imposing rules become unaffordable and thereby, the expansion of self-control absolutely essential for sustaining the necessary social order. The feelings of “shame” and following of “disgust” have been pointed out by Elias as the main mechanisms for self-imposing the socially (rather than naturally) induced behaviors, being essential for sustaining the functionality in the bourgeois reality.

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In the following pages we discuss in details this new phase in the “civilizing process” having in mind both, the deeper tendencies and the structural changes that provoke them, as well as the way how the recent pandemic served as a historical opportunity for speeding up the underlying course. In this approach we analyze two major trends: on the one hand the (re-) appearance of “guilt” as a tool for imposing self-control (therefore the term “guilt economics”) and on the other the social and political legitimization of the use of new technology towards exercising modern, more efficient and thereby affordable control over individual and collective behavior.

Finally, we conclude with a progressive approach of “guilt”, or better said of “responsibility” after recognizing the inevitable overcoming of the traditional bourgeois order. In that sense, in the present chapter we dare to extend the discussion in the normative socioeconomic debate, according to the challenges of our time.

THE (RE-) APPEARANCE OF GUILT AS A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ‘TOOL’

The usefulness of self-control mechanisms in order to align individual and collective behavior with social order is always there, regardless the form of the society and its degree of maturity. What changes is the degree at which self-control is necessary – as Elias pointed out – and the mechanisms that impose it.

According to the theory of social evolutionism (from the traditional contributions of Auguste Comte, Edward Burnett Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, Benjamin Kidd and Herbert Spencer in the 19th century till the work of Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse in the beginning of the 20th and even the school of Neo-evolutionism in the second half of the 20th century; Leslie A. White, 1957 and Julian H. Steward, 1955), society and human history progresses in subsequent, non-repeatable, unique forms and structures.

Nevertheless, social progress (meant in a positive rather than normative sense) does not necessarily imply a linear, monotone course of evolution. Cycles that repeat a certain format of development can (and do) appear in the frame of each specific socioeconomic paradigm. Korotayev et.al. (2006) and Turchin (2003), as well as together with Korotayev (2006) established the dominant model in the social cycle theory. Although this is mainly based on the sociodemographic development of the whole population and also of the elites (which, from a socioeconomic point of view, may be seen as a limitation), it provides a suitable framework for introducing the evolution of self-control mechanisms within the life cycle of a certain social paradigm.

In figure 1 we reproduce the four phases of the above-mentioned model of secular social cycles theory – the two integrative phases (expansion and stagflation) and the two disintegrative ones (crisis and depression). In this framework we see the different ways how and for what reasons self-control is being imposed through the feeling of guilt.

In the early evolution of a social paradigm, the determination of guilt, whether externally ascertained and imposed or as a feeling of self-guilt, arises as necessary instead of the institutional immaturity, in place of the lacking social order. Smith (1975) after reminding us of the “*distinctiveness of the political as a form of social organization*”, he proceeds with the “*systematic variation of modes of guilt with modes of government*”. According to the author, in order to propose this substitutional character of guilt and the idea of an “*economy of guilt*” he carries on the work of Nietzsche (1887) and he follows also etymological arguments – for instance:

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