

# Perspectives

Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section

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## Chair's Corner: Theoretical Pragmatics and Cubist Art

I'd like to welcome you all to a new year of theoretical discussion, and thank you for your vigorous participation in this past year's Theory Section events at the ASA. The section mini-conference on Extreme Theory, organized by outgoing Chair Karin Knorr-Cetina, was a resounding success, with overflowing attendance, high quality papers, and lively commentary. The roundtable sessions, organized by Neil Gross, also sparked some exciting conversations, as did the second annual Coser Lecture and Salon, which featured a provocative talk by Coser award winner George Steinmetz, followed by food, drink, and more talk (thanks to organizer Andrew Perrin). I'd like to thank Karin Knorr-Cetina for her excellent stewardship of the section, as well as express our hearty appreciation to Mathieu Deflem, who has served as our webmaster for many years, providing the section with an attractive and well-organized public portal. We're welcoming a new webmaster, Ellis Goddard, and have a relatively new team as co-editors of this newsletter:

Dustin Kidd, Omar Lizardo, and Erika Summers-Effler.

This fall I'm in the somewhat unusual position of teaching both a theory class (undergraduate contemporary) and a methods class (graduate introduction). These two foci of my attention are in dialogue with one another. For example, in my contemporary theory class, I ask my undergraduates to reflect on the ways in which abstract theoretical ideas help (or fail to help) in understanding their real life experiences. Likewise, in my graduate methods class we are wrestling with how different methodological approaches use theoretical ideas to gain insight into the empirical world. In my own scholarly life, as I begin a new project (on the role of the future in sociological analysis), I find myself asking: How much theory? How much empirical analysis? How do I generate a productive conversation between these?

Since these are quite general questions that all of us, as practicing sociologists, struggle with in different ways, I'm proposing that next year's Theory Section mini-conference focus on the theme of

"Theoretical Pragmatics: Methodological Challenges." With the term "pragmatics," I'm invoking two related ideas: (1) the pragmatist ideal of reflection upon the problematic dimensions of experience; and (2) the equally pragmatist attempt to overcome the dichotomy between ideas and experience, between theoretical abstractions and the empirical world. These challenges have to do with what Charles Peirce calls the "hardness" or the "resistance" of the world, which is not necessarily malleable to our representations of it.

In our discussions, I'd like to see us engage the following set of questions. What is the relationship between theory and method? How do different approaches to "theorizing" involve different assumptions about how we come to observe, understand, and explain social phenomena? How do theoretical orientations invite or preclude particular methodological approaches (e.g., observational vs. hermeneutic approaches, formal modeling vs. rich description, historical vs. experimental research, deep case studies vs. comparative pattern analysis, conjunctural vs. law-based approaches)? How are methodological choices guided by theoretical conceptions of structure, action, and agency? How do we wrestle with methodological "bad fits" for our preferred theoretical orientations? Conversely, what happens when our theories seem a bad fit to phenomena revealed through our chosen methods? And how do decisions about theory and method shape each other through the mutual challenges they pose over a research career?

I'll start the debate by suggesting that researchers face four main problems in bringing their ideas to bear on

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## A Message from the Editors

This issue takes on an important new book of social theory: Jeffrey Alexander's *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford, 2006). John Hall, Peter Kivisto, and Larry Griffin offer helpful commentary and constructive criticisms, while Alexander presents a response that demonstrates that our theoretical concerns are ongoing conversations, not closed statements.

This is a format we would love to repeat. If you would like to suggest a book or article for further analysis, or want to write a response of your own, let us know. Send your ideas to Erika Summers-Effler at [eeffler@nd.edu](mailto:eeffler@nd.edu). Use this same address to send us your essays on any topic, theory teaching tips, upcoming events and other announcements.

Finally, as you enjoy these essays on *The Civil Sphere*, do not miss the announcements on page 16. Nominations are needed for multiple awards and the Junior Theorists conference is returning at ASA 2008 in Boston!

—Dustin Kidd, Erika Summers-Effler, Omar Lizardo

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## Comments on Alexander's *The Civil Sphere*

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Jeffrey Alexander premises this huge, ambitious book on the notion "that societies are not governed by power alone and are not fueled only by the pursuit of self-interest" (3). Instead, he says, feelings for and obligations to others matter as well, and that such "(s)olidarity is possible because people are oriented not only to the here and now but to the ideal, to the transcendent, to what they hope will be everlasting" (3). Where this solidarity is instantiated—where it becomes real—is in the realm of the civil sphere, which Alexander defines as "a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time. Such a sphere, he continues, "relies on...our putative commitment to a common secular faith" (4).

But the very binary language of civil society itself—the civility of self in contradistinction to the incivility of the other—especially when coupled with the fact that actually existing civil societies are, as Alexander might say, always and everywhere concretely situated in, and limited by considerations of, time and space means that even as universalistic solidarity is broached as possibility it is restricted as fact (213). So, as Alexander notes, civil society can be repressive, exclusionary,

and undemocratic. Yet, civil society's contradictions and oppositional binaries make it "restless," he says, and the very dynamics that distort civil societies—that separate deed from creed—provide symbolic and organizational resources—that is, social movements—for translating its restlessness into demands for progressive social change.

Though resting on a cultural structure of values, the civil sphere, Alexander tells us, works as it does because it is filled with such communicative institutions as public opinion, the mass media, and voluntary associations, and such regulative institutions as political parties, the franchise, and law. These ideally permit the civil sphere a degree of autonomy from intrusive social institutions around its borders (and upon which the civil sphere depends for resources or other inputs), institutions such as the state, the family, and the economy, and also either partly insulates civil society from particularistic allegiances of race, ethnicity, and religion or provides a corrective for them. Communicative institutions project representations that have communicative force and that sometimes, as in the case of Alexander's test case here, the Civil Rights Movement, can induce regulative institutions to widen and deepen civil mutuality, to make more equal cultural differences once treated invidiously, to foster full integration and participation.

Way too simply, and no doubt incompletely, the

above is a rough outline of his theory, a theory he believes a decided improvement over older theories of civil society and progressive social movements. There is, indeed, much to admire in *The Civil Sphere*. In no particular, order I especially appreciated:

a) how he very effectively used the notion that civil societies' binary discourses are inherently contradictory;

b) his spirited defense of multiculturalism as a mode of incorporation that frames a new type of civil society, a multiculturalism in which collectivities employ a binary discourse of their own to assert the right to be admired for being different while all the time granting other collectivities the exact same right and cultural latitude, a multiculturalism that strengthens not weakens the civil sphere;

c) his insertion of Martin Luther King into the very heart of American civil discourse. To be sure, the modern civil rights movement did not begin or end with King, and the Movement succeeded only because of the sacrifices and heroism of untold thousands of southern African Americans. But King is equal to Abraham Lincoln as America's most influential civil theologian, and Alexander, though hardly the first to do so, shrewdly uses this to advance his theory;

d) his construction of arresting phrases or concepts—the "charisma of time," about the cultural legitimacy and weight given to founders who were

## Griffin, continued

“here at the beginning” (200), “compensatory symbolic action,” which are actions of the state primarily issuing from and aimed at structures of meaning and designed, in Alexander’s words, “for civic repair” (317), and, multiculturalism as “achieved ascription,” an arresting, potentially productive oxymoron connoting a voluntarily embraced and performed identity once thought ascriptively rooted (452).

With any work of this size and scope, however, arguments are apt to be less than transparent or seem unduly arbitrary, and readers are likely to want more on this or that point than the author delivers. *The Civil Sphere* is no exception.

First, Alexander does not appear much interested in social class and makes no effort to incorporate it into his theory. This, to me, is a serious omission and both weakens the theory and limits its applicability.

Second, the argument would have benefited from clearer exposition of communicative institutions. Are public opinion, the mass media, opinion surveys and polls, and selected civic associations the only communicative institutions? What about science and the humanities, especially as institutionalized in high education? Do they not quite literally create, sustain or transform, and disseminate to people much of what they know of civic life but also even the concepts and frames—such as assimilation, multiculturalism, evolution, and the American

Creed—through which they experience it? What, too, of other communicative (and perhaps regulative) practices centered on mnemonic socialization and ways of acknowledging and incorporating but also transcending the past—practices revolving around commemorative discourses and remembrance rites? All civil societies use the past to legitimate and illuminate, and all must come to grips with their pasts, especially with the histories of serious breaches with solidarity, and they often do with memory projects such as restorative justice. I could not help but

incorporated into his discussion the political theorist (and Alexander’s mentor) Michael Walzer’s notion of the doubly-hyphenated American, first elaborated in Walzer’s *What It Means to be An American*.

On the modes of incorporation more generally—assimilation, hyphenation, and multiculturalism—Alexander might have fruitfully explored their interdependencies. True, he notes that the three modes blend into one another in practice, and that identity groups may pursue all three simultaneously. But I’m suggesting

flect unbridled Americanization. Thus did assimilation foster cultural and linguistic pluralism.

My fourth area of modest complaint concerns what I see as a pattern of overly skewed or truncated readings of American political culture and even of some of the work he cites. Here are a few examples.

During the great waves of in-migration from southern and eastern Europe, Americans of northern European stock, as historian Matthew Jacobson shows in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, often constructed these Serbs, Italians, Poles, and Jews to be members of races different from the “Nordic” race. They were “whites of a different color.” They became fully white, officially white, in time, though, and they did so in contrast and opposition to blacks. Here was ethnic and religious exclusion transmuted into racial inclusion which, in turn, was used to further racist exclusion.

Likewise, in his discussion of the promise of multiculturalism and the deconstruction of conventional racial categories (453), Alexander refers to Mary Waters’s study, *Ethnic Options*, in which she documents the voluntary, symbolic, costless nature of ethnicity—for some. What he does not tell readers is that Waters quite explicitly argued that ethnicity is in no sense voluntary or costless for communities of color. In fact, in her last chapter, “The Costs of a Costless Community,” she discusses both exactly what those costs are—the legitimation of racist beliefs

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*“How pervasive and binding are the bonds of solidarity and reciprocity? How deep is Americans’ commitment to the universalism so essential to an autonomous civil sphere?”*

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wonder if how and why they do so is not integral to a comprehensive theory of the civil sphere.

Another problem is that his treatment of assimilation lacks nuance. Milton Gordon’s classic *Assimilation in American Life*, though in the book’s bibliography, is not used, and that’s too bad. Gordon delineated many forms of assimilation—cultural, structural, identificational, civic, seven in all—and had Alexander engaged these he would have enriched his discussion of assimilation. This would have been true, too, had he in-

something more. George Sanchez, for example, in *Becoming Mexican American*, demonstrates how a particular form of assimilation by Chicanos in Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s—here as consumers of American goods in American markets—advanced and extended a distinctly “Mexican” Mexican-American identity. By listening so avidly to radio, Mexicans-Americans created a lucrative market for Anglo advertisers and broadcasters in Spanish-language programs (especially music), a cultural production that Chicanos then deployed to de-

## Griffin, continued

among white symbolic ethnics—and exactly who bears those costs, African Americans.

There is also the breathtaking brevity of this sentence: “When northern whites themselves began to be targeted as anticivil enemies [of the Civil Rights Movement], the possibilities of enthusiastic identification with the movement substantially declined” (387). True enough, but not nearly enough. Sixty pages later, Alexander asserts, with no reference to his previous disclaimer, that “white Americans in the North experienced an increasingly intense identification” with the Movement (446). I suspect that the successes of the “heroic” phrase of the black freedom struggle, from 1955 to 1965, rested less on the “enthusiastic identification” of northern whites than on the demonization of the white south, not at all the same thing. After all, how thick and adhesive, really, was this glue of solidarity if, as early as 1966, whites in Cicero, Illinois, would threaten violence to thwart an SCLS open-housing drive; if, in February 1970, whites in Denver would use 12 sticks of dynamite to blow-up 24 empty school buses to express their anger over court-ordered busing; if, a few years later, white Bostonians would throw bottles and stones at buses carrying black school children into south Boston to desegregate that city’s schools. To this very day, only a minority of whites—North or South—support busing, affirmative action, or racially redistributive federal programs. So, again, where is restorative justice?

Finally, let’s throw in a few statistics. According to the 2004 GSS, the most recent data on such issues that are publicly available, 83% of Americans said that “it was very important” for people to speak English to be “truly American.” Another 14% said it was “fairly important.” That’s 97% of the sample. Fifty percent believed that “being a Christian” was very important to be “truly American.” Another 16% said it was “fairly important.” Both sets of statistics, by the way, suggest greater particularism than observed in the 1996 GSS. Again, how pervasive and binding are the bonds

of solidarity and reciprocity? How deep is Americans’ commitment to the universalism so essential to an autonomous civil sphere? Though, as I noted, Alexander is quite aware of anticivil potential of civil society, had his reading of America, past and present, been less selective, his theory would have been more satisfying and his empirical illustrations more convincing.

To conclude these remarks with the book’s shortcomings, however, would be churlish. It would be unfair, as well, both to a major piece of scholarship with so many virtues and to its author, a person of great learning, obvious goodwill, and generosity of mind and spirit. In fact, there are insights or, in the very best sense of the term, intrigues every few pages, and for a book that is primarily theoretical in style and intent, surprisingly many valuable empirical nuggets scattered throughout. Read it: you’ll be a better sociologist for having done so.

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### Note

1. Presented at the 2007 Southern Sociological Society meetings and revised for publication in *Perspectives*.

## Mische, continued

social phenomena: (1) the problem of *reflectivity*, that is, the role of the researcher in the research, and how she comes to know her object/subject of study; (2) the problem of *distortion*, or alternatively, of *selection/reduction/exaggeration*, i.e., the simplifying representations that all research involves in order to reduce, focus, and illuminate the complex buzz of social life; (3) the problem of *generalizability*, i.e., how the researcher draws implications from the study beyond the case(s) at hand; and (4) the problem of *contingency*, i.e., how the researcher deals with particularities and uncertainties of time and place, which are often resistant to theoretical prediction.

Of these four problems, the question of distortion has perhaps received the least theoretical attention. I see some raised eyebrows at this rather strong term, so let me say that I don’t think distortion is necessarily negative. A few years ago I heard a talk by Ira Katznelson, in which he argued that social science modeling is like Cubist portraiture. All theoretical modeling (whether formal or interpretive) involves distortion of reality in some form or another. However, as in Picasso’s paintings, we distort in order to approach the subject from different angles and perspectives, thereby providing insight into the hidden life of the subject that would not be available in a realist portrait. Some people prefer to call this “translation” or “representation,” but I believe the stronger term is useful in forcing us to think carefully about our theoretical practice. To what degree are these simplifying distortions useful, revelatory, generative? Or to what degree do they obscure, rather than reveal, the dynamics of social life? In the theory section, we have different answers to this question, and we often disagree fiercely about what serves as legitimate vs. illegitimate distortion. I’d like to see us engage these differences in our debates this coming year.

—Ann Mische

## Comment on Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*

Peter Kivisto,

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Jeffrey Alexander has written a large and ambitious book that many will read selectively. Alan Wolfe's lengthy review in *The New Republic* is a case in point. This is unfortunate because insofar as readers rivet solely on sections of the book that are of particular interest to them, they will miss the subtlety and complexity of Alexander's thesis—and thereby fail to appreciate the significance of his achievement while also being unable to specify with any precision those aspects of the argument calling for critical scrutiny. However, given space limitations here, I will do precisely what I am cautioning against, namely focusing on one aspect of the argument.

In self-defense, in a longer essay that will appear in *Thesis Eleven* I have attempted to trace out and offer critical commentary on the argument in its entirety and on its own terms. A dust jacket summary of the book could say something like this: "At its core, *The Civil Sphere* is an exercise in forging theory as a tool for democratic practice, one that is accomplished by thinking through the long tradition of civil society discourse and articulating a novel perspective that is grounded in sociological realism. Alexander has, in my opinion, made a singular contribution to our understanding of the internal dynamics and the historically contingent character of the civil sphere. In his view, the viability of democracy is predicated on the health of this sphere, for it constitutes the space where justice and solidarity are made possible, and where universalistic values manifest themselves most fully compared to the other spheres of society." While an accurate summary, such a brief description cannot begin to get at the argument in its fullness. For that to occur requires considering the book as a whole.

That being said, the part of the book that I will explore below concerns the discussion of "modes of incorporation." In a footnote to the chapter on "The Three Pathways to Incorporation," Alexander gently chides immigration scholars associated with the "new assimilationist" literature, identifying in particular Rogers Brubaker, Richard Alba and Victor Nee, and me. He is quite right that the way we and others (e.g., Ewa Morawska) have framed the discussion to date "elides the distinctions

among the modes of incorporation that I have emphasized here" (Alexander 2006: 684–685). In my case, I quite agree with the argument that multiculturalism is a novel mode of incorporation that came into its own relatively recently, and in fact I attempted to make a comparative case along these lines in *Multiculturalism in a Global Society* (2002). At the same time, I have argued that assimilation if properly understood can coexist with rather than be antithetical to multiculturalism. I continue to think this is so, though part of the problem with discussions about this subject is that assimilation is not only a contested topic, but one that is defined in remarkably different ways. Thus, I am quite prepared to buy into the argument of coexistence while using another term for assimilation in the interest of promoting a common understanding of what is at issue.

This leads us to Alexander, who if I am not mistaken, uses the term assimilation in a rather distinctive way. Or perhaps to be more precise, the way he historicizes assimilation is unique. Let me briefly sketch out how he develops his "three pathways" argument. Alexander contends that one of the unintended consequences of the civil rights movement was that it laid the groundwork for rethinking what he refers to as "modes of incorporation," reevaluating two existing forms and paving the way for the development of a novel mode, multiculturalism. The final section of the book—five substantive chapters and a brief conclusion—is devoted to exploring the matter of incorporation. The first three chapters cumulatively add up to the theoretical statement, while the two longer empirical chapters explore "The Jewish Question."

Alexander begins by introducing the idea of multiculturalism and immediately locating his position as an alternative to both conservative critics (Samuel Huntington, Roger Kimball, Hilton Kramer, and so forth) and radical proponents of multiculturalism (pointing to both the Afrocentric ideologue, Molefi Kete Asante and the philosopher Iris Marion Young). Quite correctly I think, he contends that conservatives and radicals share a perspective on multiculturalism, viewing it as identity politics devoid of any concern for solidarity. Of course, in the case of conservatives, this is to bemoan the "disuniting" consequences, while radicals either applaud or appear in their writings to be unconcerned about the matter of solidarity. The alternative

## Kivisto, continued

position that Alexander stakes out is intended to proceed from a sociological realism that he thinks is lacking in the work of both conservative and radical commentators on multiculturalism.

This discussion places into context his theoretical contribution to the varied ways that the other is encountered and incorporated. The focus of his concern is with modes of incorporation into democratic societies, noting in passing that different uncivil modes of incorporation occur in nondemocratic societies. In democratic societies, the prerequisite for incorporation is that “members of the core groups become communicatively convinced that subordinate group members actually share with them a common humanity, and thus are worthy of respect” (Alexander 2006: 410). He identifies three incorporation regimes, which he treats both as ideal types and as occurring in a particular historical sequencing: assimilation, ethnic hyphenation, and multiculturalism. His point of reference is clearly the United States, but he considers the first two modes to be in evidence in other democracies as well. Multiculturalism is a historically novel mode of incorporation, having arisen more-or-less simultaneously in a number of democracies during the past quarter century.

With assimilation, individuals are admitted into the civil sphere only when and insofar as they are willing and able to shed their ethnic cultural identities—in his language replacing their “polluted primordial

identities” with the “civilizing” identity of the core group (Alexander 2006: 421). In this scenario, there is no intercultural dialogue between the center and the periphery. Instead, the out-group remains forever the alien “other,” while its members opt to obtain an admission ticket into the civil sphere. Assimilation thus defined requires that the ticket can only be purchased once the deracination of those polluting traits associated with the marginalized ethnic group has been accomplished. Although most historical accounts consider this mode to be the dominant one at least until the passage of immigration restriction legislation in 1924 but more often seen as taking us through mid-century, Alexander sees it as losing out to the next mode beginning in the period after the Civil War, chiefly due to its inherent instability.

The hyphenation mode allows for greater fluidity insofar as it permits, to varied degrees, the maintenance of certain “primordial” features at the same time as the individual outsider is also taking on the cultural characteristics of the core. This mode becomes increasingly viable as the civil sphere gains strength and the core society is less inclined to see itself threatened by the presence of the other. There is some level of tolerance for the cultural traits of outsiders and a lessened demand to abandon all such group attributes. It’s this mode and not assimilation that Alexander thinks should be associated with the popular image of the melting pot. Here ethnic identities can be maintained as long as they are confined to the private realm and people embrace the values of the core while in the public realm, thus rendering “outsider qualities invisible” (Alexander 2006: 432). In his view, American history during the

first part of the twentieth century can be described as one in which European immigrants from the great migratory wave that occurred between 1880 and 1924 were incorporated chiefly via this mode, while in the case of racial minorities exclusion rather than incorporation characterized their relationship to the core.

Multiculturalism arose as a repudiation of hyphenation. As Alexander (2006: 450) puts it, “Only very recently in democratic societies has such a possibility for repair emerged. It opens a new chapter in the history of social integration.” What differentiates it from the other two modes is that rather than individuals extirpating themselves from their particularistic ethnic identities, either totally or partially, those identities are revalorized and permitted to enter the civil sphere. In the process, the separation between the private and public realms becomes increasingly blurred. Although he does not put it this way, Alexander’s argument suggests that it is not only individuals who enter the civil sphere, but minority groups, too. This occurs in a process whereby rather than purifying polluted individuals, the process entails the purification of qualities (Alexander 2006: 451). The result is an enlarged, increasingly complex, fragmented, and heterogeneous civil society that make possible the expansion of democratic participation.

This produces a new relationship between the universal and the particular, which in the other two modes were seen as antithetical. In a multicultural society, “incorporation is not celebrated as inclusion, but as the achievement of diversity” (Alexander 2006: 452). This then makes possible a politics of difference in place of the previous goal of a unified and homogeneous

## Kivisto, continued

core. There is a family resemblance between Alexander's views and those of liberal multiculturalists such as Will Kymlicka, Bhikhu Parekh, and Joseph Raz. Like them, he is convinced that difference can be respected and solidarity across difference can be achieved. Like them, he knows that this is not inevitable, as heated group attachments can prevent people across groups from developing a sense of a shared humanity and similarly shared core values that valorize and promote trust, mutual respect, justice, and equality. Given the relative newness of multiculturalism, its potential is not fully apparent. However, the promise it offers is as an alternative to the failure of hyphenation to solve the problem of race—where the prospect of invisibility is not an option (other than for the few who can “pass”).

It might be useful to complement Alexander's “three pathways,” with its temporal sequencing, with Doug Hartmann and Joseph Gerteis's (2005) effort to map multiculturalism. Their typology does not address sequencing, but instead offers what might be construed as a spatial grid in which particular societies can be identified in terms of one of their four modes of incorporation: assimilation, cosmopolitanism, fragmented pluralism, and interactive pluralism. Aside from the first, they consider

all three of the other types to be versions of multiculturalism, with fragmented pluralism being the potential unattractive outcome of societies where the center does not hold (as in failed states). The point of their grid is to suggest that one could distinguish the existing liberal democracies as being instances of assimilation, cosmopolitanism, or interactive pluralism. This implicitly calls into question Alexander's view of assimilation as inherently unstable—or it suggests that their

Perhaps it was inevitable that someone from outside the ranks of race and ethnic studies scholars would get the conversation off the mark and move it in a new and theoretically productive way. For that Alexander should be thanked. But what he has offered ought to be seen for what it is: a starting point and not an end point. To understand, as Hartmann and Gerteis propose, that there are two distinctive types of viable multiculturalism with different sensibilities about the relative autonomy of individuals from their ethnic groups represents one direc-

tion for both future theoretical development and empirical inquiry. And this gets back to the matter of the new assimilationists. While whether or not they have to date managed to frame the conversation productively remains an open question, they have managed to raise the issue of whether or not, once a society opens itself up for multicultural incorporation, individuals will choose to articulate their new societal voice by opting to exit their particular group identity—not because it was formerly polluted and still may carry a lingering stigma, but because they see no compelling reason to remain loyal. Multiculturalism must grapple with individualism and the desire for voluntary rather than imposed group commitments. Current interest in cosmopolitanism—a term that like the rest needs considerable definitional refinement—can be read as a reflection of a growing appreciation of this reality. It suggests that the next step in developing Alexander's modes of incorporation is to consider theoretically the agency of current or former marginalized group members.

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## Politics, Culture, and the Civil Sphere

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*The Civil Sphere* addresses one of the most critical issues of our times – civil inclusion and the Other. It is Jeffrey Alexander’s most historically grounded book, and his most theoretically compelling. It self-confidently, seamlessly, and successfully bridges history and theory, and equally important – the empirical and the normative. Along the way, Alexander connects the civil sphere to the mass media – in particular, the news media and “fictive” idealizations of the good society. And to public opinion and civil associations, religion, the “private sphere,” the family, and the everyday lifeworld. And to social institutions of politics, political power, the State, and legal cultures. And, perhaps with greatest import, to social movements.

Forging a *general* multidimensional theoretical discourse that connects these diverse spheres is a tremendously important accomplishment, for two interconnected reasons. First, it challenges the all too prevalent insularity of various sociological subfields in recent decades, by exposing the sometimes limited agendas of those subfields to broader intellectual stakes and marking out a general sociological discursive arena in which sociologists can connect and debate the connections of diverse theoretical formulations with one another. This benefit transcends Alexander’s own substantive argument.

As firm as Alexander can be in critiquing theories and arguments (both in sociology and in other bailiwicks – e.g., philosophy, history, political science, cultural studies), his engagement with diverse ideas, and the basic fairness and generosity of his discussion, have a second broad benefit. They foster anew what once was the hallmark of American sociology in the work of scholars such as David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and Daniel Bell – a form of analysis through which the general reading public can consider both the enduring and the pressing issues of societal organization for society

as a whole. Utopian commitments are firmly in place, but there is no pie-in-the-sky, Panglossian optimism. Instead of positing a teleology or some hollow metanarrative of the democratic civil sphere triumphant, Alexander (p. 129) embraces an expansive, universalizing solidarity, but emphasizes the fragility of the social, reminding readers that the civil sphere is a *project*, never more than tenuously established, always subject to uncivil assaults, so long as “history” continues, inevitably beset with contradictions. Those who believe in democracy can neither wallow in despair over its passing nor bask in optimistic self-assurance about its durability.

*The Civil Sphere* is the best book in sociology that I have read in many years, and one that deserves to reach general readers far beyond our discipline. It will find its place on the shelf with the other great classics of sociology. Yet any great work is important not only for what it accomplishes, but also for the questions that it raises, and the possibilities that it opens up. *The Civil Sphere* offers a new synthesis, and one benefit is that we all are challenged to struggle with, revise, and build upon and out from its project and its formulations. In this vein, I want to raise two interconnected sociological issues – the first centered on the *theoretical logic* of the civil sphere *per se*; the second, on the *environments* that connect with, but lie outside, the civil sphere.

### Logic of the theory of the civil sphere

First, the basic question of how the civil sphere and its social processes are theorized. Anyone familiar with Alexander’s work will know the importance that he attaches to the play of democratic and counterdemocratic codes (pp. 57-59) in the dramatic episodes whereby meanings are made within the civil sphere. I have previously critiqued this emphasis on a binary code as insufficiently sensitive to the existential hermeneutics of meaning-making in the play of politics. Now, *The Civil Sphere* demonstrates hermeneutic facility in showing how binary oppositions get deployed. However, positing such a code raises a thorny theoretical issue concerning the ontological status of the democ-

atic code. To treat the binary code set as “real” or a “social fact,” or “existing in consciousness” (p. 48), following the formulation of Levi-Strauss that Alexander invokes, resurrects all the problems raised by Parsons in his critique of Durkheim in *The Structure of Social Action* (1968), about the ontological status of Durkheim’s *conscience collective* and the mechanisms of its development, maintenance, and modification. The code model similarly runs the danger of unhistorical reification and hypostatization. The simple poststructural circumstance is that such a code cannot be definitively specified outside of history, and can be known only through occasioned invocations.

Moreover, the book’s substantive analyses demonstrate that the binary code in the full set of oppositions specified by Alexander is analytically unnecessary to the project of examining how various individuals and parties seek to construct the Other. All one need posit is that inclusion/exclusion operates in relation to one or another meaningful invocation of democratic legitimation versus counterdemocratic exclusion. The substantive *contents* of such invocations are historically open, and open to cultural historical analysis of parallels, reformulations, and so on.

As *The Civil Sphere* shows so well, any given invocation of inclusion/exclusion always refers to *particular* distinctions that yield a distinctive complex of meaning, rather than to any putative code as a totality. Thus, in the discussion of women versus men in an issue of the periodical *Ladies Museum* in 1825 that Alexander discusses, strong, daring men are juxtaposed to tender, tasteful, merciful women. The highly dated character of this contrast demonstrates what Alexander occasionally seems to acknowledge – that there is no transhistorical binary code as such. Rather, various efforts to include or exclude invoke distinctive binary contrasts, and the kinds of contrasts that can plausibly be invoked shift according to time and situation.

Thus, the democratic versus counter-democratic code can only plausibly be construed as an *ideal typification*. If this is so, Alexander ought to make

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explicit the nature and (normative?) basis of the ideal type. One of the projects announced by Alexander is tracking whether and how the dynamics of the civil sphere as a social space change over time, under ever new historical conditions. To do so, it is important not to reify the democratic code as a construct.

### The civil sphere and its environments

The civil sphere is so important to democracy that its construction might be mistaken for democratic societal politics *tout court*. Alexander tries to guard against such an error by locating it in relation to other fields, spheres, and institutions that are either central to democratic politics, or directly impinge upon it, namely, the media, public opinion, power, politics, the state, and law. Culture and the social are institutionally intertwined.

Still, the threats that most concern Alexander impinge on the *internal* viability of the civil sphere – notably, threats whereby people are wrongly excluded. His account thus may overestimate both the importance and relative autonomy of the civil sphere. There are broader threats to democracy, and broader challenges and opportunities. While enlarging the civil sphere will always be an accomplishment in its own right, it is the beginning rather than the end of democratic politics. The good society is something more than a world in which there is an inclusive solidarity in the civil sphere. To be sure, an entire second book would be required to develop a broader theorization of democratic politics and the good society. But three topics seem especially relevant: critical theory, cultural change, and politics.

*Critical theory.* Alexander gives considerable attention to critical theorists' alternatively pessimistic (Adorno) or utopian (Habermas) assessments of the possibility of democratic civility. However, I think he does not take seriously enough the historically emergent threats to democratic politics that critical theorists identify. To take the most proximate example, Alexander seems to read Habermas's account of the 'system' colonizing the lifeworld in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) as primarily of concern if and insofar as such colonization captures the civil sphere itself. But Habermas ought to be read more broadly as concerned with the colonization of the lifeworld not just in the civil sphere, but in civil associations, in social groups of all kinds, and most centrally, in the courses of everyday identity construction that are increasingly mediated from *outside* the lifeworld – in the rationalization of connections among credit-card data,

*“While enlarging the civil sphere will always be an accomplishment in its own right, it is the beginning rather than the end of democratic politics. The good society is something more than a world in which there is an inclusive solidarity in the civil sphere.”*

consumer research, focus groups, targeted marketing, and so forth.

*Culture.* Beyond critical theory's concern with capitalist culture lies the more general issue of how culture is thematized in *The Civil Sphere*. Oddly, for the work of a cultural sociologist, *The Civil Sphere* seems somewhat thin in its concerns with culture, at least if we are to consider democratic politics at its broadest. Yes, there is a great deal of truly evocative cultural analysis in the book, for example, about news and entertainment media, and issues of inclusion, exclusion, and the solidary boundaries of society. Yet because the book is concerned with the civil sphere *per se*, it treats social movements largely in relation to their *political* goals relevant to social inclusion. The feminist movement, the youth movement, the gay-rights movement, and various multicultural identity movements are salient for how they have negotiated inclusion *within* the civil sphere.

Yet these goal-oriented *social* movements have ridden the waves of much broader *cultural* changes – shifts in women's gender identities, the 1960s counterculture, the consolidation of gay public communities, and so on. To focus only on developments that directly shape the civil sphere runs the risk of underestimating the degree to which the civil

sphere is itself a mirror of more pervasive cultural developments.

*Inclusion and politics.* Finally, struggles over democratic inclusion and exclusion from the civil sphere are themselves political. But these struggles do not begin to cover the terrain of politics in general, and as important as these struggles are, if they become a preoccupation, they may undermine the effectiveness of those who support them on other political fronts.

The history of the Democratic Party in the U.S. during the last two decades of the 20th century is a case in point: by 1980, the Democrats had lost their grip on the once solid South, for the good reason that they cast their lot with racial inclusiveness in the civil sphere. Yet what the Democrats also lost was their capacity to sustain solidarity among their various constituencies

in a multi-issue coalition party. Key actors in the civil-rights movement, labor, women, gays, environmentalists in many cases opted for what Weber called an “ethic of ultimate ends,” refusing to compromise the sanctity of their goals by becoming strange bed-partners with other interest groups that did not share the passion of their own commitments.

Multicultural identity politics, Alexander convincingly argues, can create the basis for a new kind of civil solidarity, based in a tolerance and even appreciation and embrace of difference. We are, many of us, as he says, a bit Jewish these days (and for that matter, black, and gay too). But identity and single-issue politics also can narrow people's identities, and their political horizons. Thus, during the last quarter century, multiculturalism may have broadened the solidarity of the civil sphere yet paradoxically undermined the bases for solidarity in politics.

### Conclusion

To speak normatively at the end: As Max Weber reminds us in “Politics as a vocation,” “Politics means slow, powerful drilling through hard boards, with a mixture of passion and sense of proportion,” (1946). We should welcome Jeffrey Alexander's vision of nurturing a democratic civil sphere under the sign of moder-

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## Keeping Faith with *Civil Sphere* and My Critics

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I appreciate this engagement with *Civil Sphere*, and the questions my colleagues have raised. In keeping with the informality of this *Perspectives* format, I will not try offering to these challenges an integrated, synthetic response<sup>2</sup>. Instead, I will engage with one question and one critic at a time, hoping that the dotted lines in between become clear.

I begin with some general observations. My aim in this book has been to produce a new “social fact,” the civil sphere, which has not yet been conceptualized in classical or modern social science. This new thing is what ordinary people refer to when they evoke the authority of “society” or when they speak heatedly about “justice.” It is not the nation, much less the state; nor is it religion, the family, science, or economic, ethnic and racial groups. It is not, either, an institution, like the law, a bureaucracy, private or public, or a symbol, like the flag.

The civil sphere is field of solidarity. This is a we-feeling, that we are “all in it together,” which means we suffer the bad together and share the good. Solidarity has rarely been a topic in the macrosociological tradition, which is a shame, because, while just under the surface, it is a very palpable thing, and vastly important in social life. The problem, perhaps, is that it is difficult to measure and see. In its civil form, solidarity cannot be read off such reliable indicators as religious, racial, or gender affiliation, nor does it equate with high or low position on various stratificational domains. It is not a product of state, on the one side, or family, on the other. But it is there, an extraordinarily powerful force for good and for evil that pulsates throughout associational and organizational life.

There is a minority stream that has recognized the importance of solidarity, the theoretical lineage that stretches from Durkheim to Parsons. While inspiring, this line of thinking has also been limited. It has treated solidarity in altogether too simple a manner: as something that grows

necessarily out of other things, like urbanization, education, the law, or modernity; as something that is mostly good; and as something that is like a black box, whose innerworkings are barely understood.

In *Civil Sphere*, I consider solidarity on the macro-level – in its civil and uncivil forms – and take it apart, uncovering its inner-workings and its boundary relationships to forces and organizations on the outside. I show first that civil solidarity depends on the reach, and definitions, of a detailed, rather systematic, and surprisingly sturdy culture structure. Solidarity is articulated by a discourse about motives, relations, and institutions: How we relate to each other in the self-regulating associations we call democratic; what the motives of people who are capable of such democratic relationships are like; and what kinds of institutions such motivated persons, who can establish such relations, must build.

But civil solidarity is not only dependent on a culture; it is also a field of institutions. One of my ambitions in *Civil Sphere* is to show that the fictional and factual media, polls, and associations, on the one hand, and voting, parties, office, and law, on the other, must be understood not simply as value or interest maximizing organizations – pace the garden varieties of neo-institutional theory – but as a structured level of mediations between civil discourse and events, powers, and movements, as structures that, civilly and uncivilly, mediate the flows of everyday social life. I consider each of these institutional domains in some detail, not only empirically but conceptually, and evaluate their social science literatures as well.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to developing a much more elaborate and substantive conceptual structure, *Civil Sphere* departs from the Durkheim/Parsons stream by emphasizing the connection of solidarity, not only with the emancipation and the good, but with exclusion and evil.<sup>4</sup> Durkheim and Parsons were evolutionists. I am not (Alexander 2005a). After what humankind has experienced in the last century, the progressive narra-

tive has no (scientific) place. Modernity’s record has been a bloody one, progress always mixed with tragedy.

It is not that the dark side of modernity has gone unnoticed. Marx and Foucault, and their mediators Nietzsche and Weber, actually concentrated upon it. But the discourse of suspicion concentrates on darkness without understanding its relation to the light, on the peculiar manner in which repression has so often been produced by, and has not eliminated, aspirations for, and realities of, self-regulating democracy. In *Civil Sphere*, I insist on this entwinement. I show that the sacred ideals of civility have never been understood without relating them to profane and polluting qualities, and I document, in ample empirical detail, how the binary discourse of civil society has provided a vocabulary for exclusion and repression, on the one hand, and criminality and deviance, on the other.

The repressed otherness that has always been hidden inside modernity has, of course, been at the heart of the new sociological genealogies of race, sex, and gender that have powerfully emerged inside our discipline over the last three decades. I draw on these literatures, but I also avoid what I regard as their failures to connect to democratic social theory. As John Hall implies, these literatures are often quite insular. What their new sociological genealogies have ignored is precisely the manner in which these and other forms of repression – class, ethnicity, religion, and region – are imbedded within the same putatively civil discourse and institutions. In *Civil Sphere*, by contrast, the discourses of civil repression are treated as homologous, whatever their substantive referent and particular domain. I conceptualize them inside a macrosociological theory that explains general process of repression and emancipation. I also pay attention to the manners in which these different hierarchies are not simply interrelated with one another, in a self-confirming manner, but to how they distort, and therefore are persistently subjected to critical dispute by, the horizontal solidarity promised by the emancipatory

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ideals of civil society.

*Hall*

John Hall asks whether, in laying out the systematic and pervasive nature of this civil discourse, I am not hypostasizing it in a manner that resists the suppleness and flexibility upon which democracy depends.<sup>5</sup>

To assert that there is, indeed, an organized cultural language does not suggest that it is applied in a mechanistic, deterministic, or all or nothing way. That it need not so imply is the take away from Roman Jakobson's century-spanning debate with Saussure. One can acknowledge the structural element of cultural language, Jakobson explained, while also insisting upon the fact that it will be applied pragmatically, according to the exigencies of time and place. Charles Morris was getting at the same idea when he postulated, alongside the semantic, the syntactic and pragmatic. While Wittgenstein insisted that language could be revealed only in its actual use, he also underscored the restricting scope of the language game, such that actually spoken or written words make sense only inside the context of an invisible set of bounded associations. Marshall Sahlins shows that there are structures inside of every conjuncture, that the contingencies of history pass through already established sets of historical metaphors. Jacques Derrida believed that actors could never exactly reproduce pre-existing cultural meanings, even when they most earnestly tried. There would always be the moment of difference. But Derrida did not, for a moment, think that the impossibility of exactly reproducing prior structures meant these structures failed to exert powerful influence. As for my own work, to conceptualize the simultaneity of cultural structure and contingent process, and to relate these to different conjunctions of social structures, has been the ambition of my performative approach to cultural pragmatics (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006).

John complains that I treat this complex discursive structure as "real," as if it actually exists in "consciousness," and he suggests that the existence of such a language is falsified if it is empirically revealed only in this or that subset or part. I would ask, first, where else can a culture structure exist except in consciousness? Collective consciousness itself can be "seen" only through its individual parts; certainly, the collective doesn't speak, but it possesses, nonetheless, emergent properties of its own. We say there is an English language, even if no single individual speaker or consciousness could possibly reproduce it.

When we speak of parts and wholes we are back to Dilthey's courageous insistence on the circularity of the cultural sciences.<sup>6</sup> Dilthey explains that we cannot demonstrate that a cultural whole exists -- whether a broad theme, like "individualism", or a social narrative, like "progress" -- in any other manner than by pointing to the existence of its parts, to this particular statement of individualism or that particular evocation of forwardness and hope. Vice-versa, we cannot interpret the meaning of any particular cultural part, without assuming, for the sake of analysis, that it exemplifies some whole. Most meaning, after all, is typification. No wholes without parts, no

parts without wholes. Wholes exist only through their parts, but parts can be understood as having meaning, as parts of something, only by postulating wholes. Dilthey's hermeneutic circle is as famous and it is unavoidable, and it limits the interpretive validity of claims, no matter how devotedly empirical, to have extracted the meanings of social life. This should not mean that we refrain from asserting wholes, but that we must be assiduous in demonstrating the repeated occurrence of parts, and how they make sense in terms of some proffered whole. If we can do so, we will have proven, in an indexical manner, that the posited cultural whole holds good, that it provides an interpretive master key for what John calls its "occasioned invocations."

John suggests, in fact, that we can actually do without the substantive vocabulary of the civil code, that all we need is to examine how "various individuals and parties seek to construct the Other," understanding this as a process that relates to democratic inclusion and anti-democratic exclusion. But is it, in fact, simply parties and individuals trying to gain advantage and closure, or wishing to establish solidarity, either for their own situated reasons or because they are situated by theorists inside of some philosophical anthropology? Do these parties not construct the Other also because they are imbedded inside particular language games?

Insofar as there is a civil sphere, individuals and parties can establish otherness only by evoking a distinctive discourse, which is, first, binary and grossly simplifying and, second, establishes clear "behavioral" conditions for othering somebody or some group. We cannot simply examine parties and individuals, because they themselves do not think this language up. The discourse of civil society thinks them, as much as they think it. Insiders and outsiders learn the binary otherings of the discourse like mother's milk, and it is sewn into every action and institution that professes to sustain some relation to civil society. It is the language of the poll, the law, the civil association, the vote, the complaint about office corruption, the down and dirty language of the street, the highbrow language of political philosophy.

What is democracy? Is it only structurally differentiated social actors, group pluralism, a democratic class struggle? Surely democracy is also a system of meanings and the organizations that try to institutionalize them. In *Civil Sphere*, I show these meanings have been impressively consistent, and depressingly stubborn, over the course of centuries. Are the contents of these structured invocations historically open? Of course they are, just as the contents of any particular, historically situated speech act is contingent vis-à-vis the more generalized patterns of a language. It is a matter of structured signifiers and contingent signifieds. What was "rational" and "open" for Greek society was not what was open and rational for the English revolutionaries, and the same difference applies to French versus American liberal and conservative activists today. But that openness and rationality are both vital for each of these efforts at institutionalizing the inside and outside of a civil sphere, and that they are always both contrasted with secretive and irra-

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tional, is a matter of vast significance, patterning not only the discourses but the institutional rewards and punishments, the crises and civil repairs, of the day.<sup>7</sup>

So *Civil Sphere* is not only about the inclusion and exclusion of outgroups, but about the nature of modern and democratic legitimation. It suggests the need to replace Marxist notions of manipulation, and Weberian notions of the rational-legal, charismatic, and traditional, with a much more richly textured and nuanced understanding of how individuals, groups, and institutions gain legitimacy in modern societies where claims for civil solidarity are at stake. Building on Durkheim's notion that authority depends on symbolic evocations of the sacred and profane, we need to go further still, understanding how public and private actions submit themselves to a complex moral language that, even while creatively and strategically applied, is both redolent and regulating. And we must connect this new mapping of legitimating structures to institutions of various kinds, not simply to the economy or the state.

Such a focus does, as John suggests, bracket some of the broader cultural meanings in which the new social movements and identity politics are enmeshed. But that is, in fact, one of my aims. I am not attempting, in *Civil Sphere*, a cultural sociology of these movements as such, but wish to demonstrate that, in some part, the meanings they have introduced were stimulated by, and projected toward, a desire to purify their standing in civil life. Post-1960s transformations typically are treated as issues simply of identity, as reflecting shifts in either "lower" social structures or "higher" social meanings. My aim has been to treat them politically, as cultural shifts that have had to situate their new identity claims not only in relation to self and psychology but in relation to democracy, its binary discourses and its various institutions. It is the result of such a necessity that these cultural transformations have changed and channeled ideas and feelings about civil solidarity.

I am more concerned with such transformations than with the by now

rather besotted thesis of rationalization, which assumes that a reified lifeworld has been produced by instrumentalizing pressures from the imperial domains of economic and political life. In the first place, my own Weberianism follows the Kantian Weber of Parsons, Bendix, Nelson, and Eisenstadt, not the Hegelian and romantic Weber of Lukacs and Habermas. Second, and more importantly, I do not find the idea of "lifeworld" sufficient for engaging in macrosociology. The phenomenal subject does not exist as such; it is constructed discursively and institutionally, filled with words and meanings, or "regimes of justification" as Boltanski and Thevenot would say. The intrusion of consumer research, credit data and targeted marketing, focus groups, and, we might as well add, secret domestic surveillance and spying does not, ipso facto, rationalize the lifeworld. These processes must be "discovered," or constructed, as intrusions. To be so named, moreover, is to be disputed: To the degree that there is an independent civil sphere, such cultural constructions are tensely debated, and the moral appropriateness and legality of the practices to which they refer are scrutinized to the third degree. They might be sustained, but they might also be hemmed in by restrictions, or even eliminated. The lifeworld is not only phenomenological; it is a structure of feelings defined by the civil sphere.

### Kivisto

John raises a final point about multiculturalism leading to single-issue politics and destroying the coalitions empowering progressive political parties. A similar, though not identical, concern animates the criticisms of Peter Kivisto, who suggests, invoking the "new assimilationism," that my understanding of multiculturalism as a new mode of incorporation underplays its centrifugal possibilities. Peter worries that, in making the case for this new mode, I am insufficiently sympathetic to individual freedom, underplaying the costs of the "imposed group commitments" that multiculturalism implies. At the same time, however, Peter also draws attention to my understanding of

multiculturalism as "achieved ascription." What I argue in *Civil Sphere* is that multiculturalism need not necessarily be understood as ascriptively imposing group identity, but as something chosen. Only from the perspective of the assimilative mode does multiculturalism seem imposed. To be connected to a tradition's culture, to wish in some manner or shape to continue to live with it or inside it, is not to deny one's individuality. Cosmopolitanism sets great store on the idea of being free of any substantive commitment to traditional ideas, but, as Hartman and Gerteis (2005: 228) point out, cosmopolitanism is a "largely individualized, voluntaristic vision," a "thinner, more procedural understanding" than the notion of multiculturalism as a mode of civil incorporation that I propose in *Civil Sphere*. We might, indeed, wish to embrace cosmopolitanism as ethical ideal, as antidote to the primordial triumphalism of ethnicity and the primordial biases of assimilation. Nonetheless, we should reject cosmopolitanism as a useful understanding of sociological reality.

Nobody is a free individual quite in that modernist way. We may not be part of this or that group, but we will be part of others, not only the usual group suspects -- gendered, sexual, racial, and economic -- but those less commonly designated as ascriptive -- national or regional, spiritual or atheist, short and tall, big or small, one of those impatient New Yorkers or one of those serene Califolk. We cannot, nor do we wish, to separate ourselves completely from such "primordial" attachments. What we wish, rather, is to be allowed to have them, and to indulge in them, without being pushed outside the civil community, without having these primordial identity commitments constructed by intolerant others in an antidemocratic way. In *Civil Sphere*, I argue that this process is under way. Insofar as it is, group commitments can become more chosen than imposed, more achieved than ascribed. They will continue to be experienced, however, in essentialized ways, as fundamental elements of our core selves, and they will attach us to groups, whether secondary and primary, that mediate our commitments to

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civil society as a whole. We can no longer be, and should no longer wish to be, republican in the assimilative, French sense.

### Griffin

These concerns segue to Larry Griffin's critiques. I do agree that, in my three fold typologizing, the more nuanced detail of Milton Gordon's model of assimilation has no chance to appear. As I see it, however, in Gordon's concentration on details, the forest is lost for the trees. Gordon and the other assimilation-assuming modernists see the trunk of the elephant, its big ears and feet, but they miss the animal itself -- the macro-environment within which assimilation can take place. What is it that groups are being allowed, or compelled, to assimilate into? Gordon variously suggests nation (America), economic order (the market, businesses), class (working, middle, or upper), ethnicity (Anglo-Saxon), and religion (Protestant or Catholic). What he misses is the field upon which these groups interrelate, the culture, action, and institutions that are the civil sphere. It is only by means of this mediating world -- which is more and less relatively independent from economics, religion, nation, and ethnicity -- that incorporative movements and processes can proceed.

If we understand this, we see another limitation of Gordon's model as well. He assumes that the pathway for incorporation is, in fact, assimilation. But if, first and foremost, outgroups must be evaluated in terms of their fitness for the civil sphere, then this might not always be the case. The civil sphere may become less primordially restricted to core group qualities. When this happens, the core group goes outwards, "exhilitating" its longstanding qualities, not just demanding assimilation to them. Hyphenation is, indeed, an unstable halfway house in this transformation. Mexican-Americans may have deflected the one-way direction of markets and advertisements, but the Mexican side of their qualities remained stigmatized as "Chicano." As the Los Angeles "zoot suit riots" demonstrated, hyphenation is as vertical as it is plural.

Larry is also right that I do not take up, at any great length, the issue of social class. I hope he is wrong, however, in his sense that I do "not appear much interested" in the topic. I know he is not correct in suggesting that I make "no effort to incorporate it" into my theory. While it is true that, among the case studies that occupy the second half of *Civil Sphere*, social class is not a topic, it actually plays a central position in Chapter 8, "Contradictions: Uncivilizing Pressures and Civil Repair," the conceptual chapter that stands as an archimedean point between the more conceptual analyses of Parts I and II and the more empirically-oriented considerations of social movements and modes of incorporation that take up Parts III and IV.

In this brief but pivotal eighth chapter, I develop a model of how the emancipatory and repressive sides of civil discourse and institutions become instantiated historically, geographically, and functionally. The potential for functional contradictions exists because hierarchies and inequalities produced in non-civil spheres -- religion, family, economics, politics -- become translated into positions inside the civil sphere itself. They then become, not only matters of religious, economic, or familial character, but civil qualities. As such, they often drastically restrict capacities for participating in democratic life, for becoming fully part of the solidary community that distributes rights and recognitions.

This laundering process means that civil discourse and institutions often have the effect of reinforcing, not challenging, the hierarchies produced by other spheres, which conservatives can now elegize as producing important "facilitating inputs" for democracy. Insofar as the civil sphere sustains some autonomy, however, its more universalizing ideals of solidarity and justice persistently shadow such anti-civil compromises and corruptions. The boundary relations are tense, and money, religion, race, and gender are declared, by more progressive forces, to be not facilitating inputs but "destructive intrusions" into the civil sphere. Conflict emerges and

social movements arise, and there develops the possibility for "civil repair."

It is in the context of this explanation that I approach the topic of class in capitalist societies. Earlier in the book, in Chapter 2, while reinterpreting the intellectual history of the civil society debate, I had criticized Marx's "Civil Society II" contention that, with capitalism, the civil sphere becomes simply a breeding ground for egoism and profit. A more empirically realistic and morally generative model, "Civil Society III," would allow "us to revisit the 'capitalism problem' in a more productive way" (34). I make this new visit in Chapter 8, in the section entitled "Function: The Destruction of Boundary Relations and Their Repair."

There is a dangerous and fundamentally illusory tendency in classical and modern social theory to understand functional differentiation as a process that contributes primarily to stability and individuation. Functional differentiation may be integrative and ennobling, but it is by no means necessarily so. If the solidarity and universalism of civil society do, in fact, have the potential to form culture and institutions in one dimension of the social system, the actualization of this potential is challenged, and often blocked, by spheres abutting civil society that have radically different functional concerns and operate according to contradictory goals, employ different kinds of media, and produce social relations of an altogether different sort. (203)

While I proceed to illustrate this blocking process in regard to political power, religion, and family, I begin with the capitalist sphere of economic life: "The goal of the economic sphere is wealth, not justice in the civil sense; it is organized around efficiency, not solidarity, and depends more upon hierarchy than equality to meet its goals" (203). Noting how "the privileged accumulations in these other spheres to one degree

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or another routinely and systematically become translated into the sphere of civil society itself,” I point to the fact that “money is important not only because of its instrumental power but because its possession is typically taken to represent a distinctive and respect achievement in the world of economic life.” At the same time, however, money “becomes translated into the bifurcating discourse of civil society.”

To be rich often seems to suggest moral goodness; insofar as it does, wealth is translated into the discourse of liberty. To be poor often exposes one to degradation, to constructions that pollute an impoverished person in various ways. In one sense this translation is complicated; analogical threads are woven between different semiotic codes, metaphors, and narratives, and these establish homologous relationships among motives, relations, and institutions in different walks of life. In another sense, however, this translation is very simple. The privileged accumulations of goods in noncivil spheres are used to achieve power and recognition in civil society, to gain access to its discourse and control over its institutions, and to re-represent the elites of other spheres as ideal participants in the interactive processes of civil life. (205)

After describing the ways in which markets and private property do, in fact, often provide facilitating inputs for democracy building, I insist that “it must be clear to all but the most diehard free marketers, however, that an industrializing market economy also throws roadblocks in the way of the project of civil society.”

In the everyday language of social science, these blockages are expressed in terms of economic inequalities, class divisions, housing differentials,

dual labor markets, poverty, and unemployment... The stratification of the kind and availability of economic products, both human and material, narrows and polarizes civil society. It provides a broad field for the discourse of repression ... If you are poor or lower class, you are often constructed as irrational, dependent, and lazy, both in the economy and in society as such ... Inside this truncated language, it becomes much more difficult for actors without economic achievement or wealth to communicate effectively in the civil sphere, to receive full respect from its regulatory institutions, and to interact with other, more economically advantaged people in a full civil way. (207)<sup>8</sup>

Yet, to the degree that the civil sphere retains some independence, to that degree “economically underprivileged actors can be seen as having dual memberships.”

They are not just unsuccessful or dominated participants in the economy; they have the ability to make claims for respect and power on the basis of their partially realized membership in the civil realm ... They broadcast appeals through the communicative institutions of civil society; organize social movements demanding justice through its networks and public spaces; and create civil associations, such as trade unions, that demand fairness to employees. Sometimes they employ their space in civil society to confront economic institutions and elites directly, winning concessions in face-to-face negotiations. At other times, they make use of such regulatory institutions as parties, voting, and law to

create civil power and to force the state to intervene in economic life on their behalf. (207-08)

The result is that the civil sphere can colonize the capitalist sphere of economy; it is not, as per Habermas and Marx, only the other way around.

These efforts at repair frequently fail, but they have succeeded often enough to institutionalize a variegated and uneven set of worker rights. In this manner, civil criteria might be said to have entered directly into the capitalist economic sphere. Dangerous working conditions have often been prohibited; discrimination in labor markets has frequently been punished; arbitrary economic authority has sometimes been curtailed; unemployment and its most dehumanizing effects have been mitigated, sometimes to a significant degree; wealth itself has been periodically redistributed according to solidary criteria that are antithetical to those of a strictly economic kind. (208)

If class is, then, systematically incorporated into my theory of civil contradiction, why do I not devote to this topic a substantial case study, concentrating, instead, on the social movements and struggles over civil positioning triggered by the contradictions of religion, gender, and race? One reason is to substantiate my earlier argument against Civil Society II, that contemporary societies are not simply class societies. I have wished to demonstrate that the possibilities and contradictions of the civil sphere are primary, and that noneconomic spheres are as important as class divisions in creating the distortions that fragment civil life. But if, for this and other reasons, noneconomic kinds of destructive intrusions have been my principal empirical focus in *Civil Sphere*, its theoretical ambition has been to analyze anticivil domination and civil repair as such, in a generalized way. The struc-

## Alexander, continued

tures of economic class have changed, but they have not been resolved. The tense boundary contradictions between economy and civil remain, and that is as it should be.

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### Notes

1. I wish to thank Roger Friedland for his helpful reading.

2. The responses by Hall, Kivisto, and Griffin are from author-meets-critics sessions organized this last Spring at the annual meetings of the Pacific, Midwestern, and Southern Sociological Associations, respectively. For a more systematic, formal, and essayistic response to some *Civil Sphere* critics, which addresses written responses from participants in the session at the Midwestern Meetings—organized by Peter Kivisto—see Alexander 2007.

3. I do not, however, consider in any systematic manner what I regard as the third level of civil society, that of emotions and interaction.

4. There are other fundamental differences as well, among them: my insistence on conceptualizing three ideal types of asymmetrical linkages with other spheres; my emphasis on social movements and the agency of subordinate groups; my "Marxian" concern with contradictions; my Weberian concern with historical development and with controlling state power via regulatory mechanism; the openness of my connection with normative philosophical traditions.

5. I address critical remarks about the cultural codes, developing more and less elaborate responses and justifications, in the footnotes that form a midrash for *Civil Sphere* (see in particular the footnotes for Chapter 4, pp. 558-569). For discussion of these and related issues, see also Alexander 2007 and, as well, the exchanges with my critics in Alexander 2005b.

6. For an account of the hermeneutical circle and how it relates to the project of cultural sociology, see Alexander 1987: 281-301.

7. In my *Sociological Quarterly* reply (2007), I discuss in some detail the empirical origins of the code model and the surprisingly wide scope of its contemporary social science application. The most recent, to my knowledge, can be found

in the detailed investigation by the historian Michael T. Davis (2007) of the conflicts surrounding the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s. Before it passed from the historical scene, this fledgling working class group of radicals and reformers developed into a significant threat to property owning society, and it planted the seeds for such nineteenth century working class movements as Chartism. Davis shows that the binary civil "codes provide a way of understanding the construction of political relationships in the 1790s, of how society was polarized by the cultivation of respectable and unrespectable identities." That the LCS's enemies eventually succeeded in preventing them from gaining rights, according to Davis, was in no small part due to the fact that "in the 1790s, conservative characterizations of the LCS were shaped and informed by the negative side of the symbolic code" (24, 25). The detailed homologies and antinomies of the code were central to the thrusts and parries of this early class politics. For example, the fear that "the rough and rowdy tavern culture of the artisan counteracted – at least symbolically – motives of rationality and self-control" led LCS organizers to insist upon strict decorum and rule-rule following in their meetings, which paradoxically appeared to produce rigidity and hierarchy, qualities that were seized upon, and widely publicized, by their conservative enemies. Indeed, "conservative alarmists drew an analogical link" between LCS membership and every putative violation of civil behavior, even "passionate outbursts and transgressive conduct of Society members engaged in private, individual pursuits." While for the most part distortions and misrepresentations, Davis concludes that such polluting constructions were "a powerful and useful tool" that proved, in the end, "critically damaging" to this early movement for working class rights.

8. See my discussion of Davis' historical investigations of early class polarization in footnote 7, above.

## Hall, continued from page 9

nity. Yet equally, we all need to work – within *whatever* institutions and opportunities life affords us – to achieve political goals that as often as not, will lie beyond the construction of the democratic civil sphere, not within it.

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## Announcements

### LEWIS A. COSER AWARD FOR THEORETICAL AGENDA SETTING

The selection committee for the 2008 Lewis A. Coser Award for Theoretical Agenda Setting is soliciting nominations. The Coser Award recognizes a mid-career sociologist whose work, in the opinion of the Committee, holds great promise for setting the agenda in sociology. While the award winner need not be a theorist, his or her work must exemplify the sociological ideals Coser represented. Eligible candidates must be sociologists or do work that is of crucial importance to sociology. They must have received a Ph.D. no less than five and no more than twenty years before their candidacy. This year's nominees should have received Ph.D. degrees between 1988 and 2003.

Nomination letters should make a strong substantive case for the nominee's selection and should discuss the nominee's work and his or her anticipated future trajectory. No self-nominations are allowed.

The previous winners of the Coser Award are:

- 2005 Margaret Somers
- 2006 George Steinmetz
- 2007 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

The 2008 selection committee includes:  
 Andrew J. Perrin (University of North Carolina), chair  
 Charles Gattone (University of Florida)  
 Nancy Naples (University of Connecticut)  
 George Steinmetz (University of Michigan)  
 Ed Tiryakian (Duke University)

After nomination, the Committee will solicit additional information for those candidates they consider appropriate for consideration, including published works and additional letters of support from third parties. The Committee may decide in any given year that no nominee warrants the award, in which case it will not be awarded that year. Nominations should be sent to:

Andrew J. Perrin, Committee Chair  
 University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
 Department of Sociology  
 CB#3210, 155 Hamilton Hall  
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210

or, via e-mail, to [coser\\_nomination@perrin.socsci.unc.edu](mailto:coser_nomination@perrin.socsci.unc.edu)

Submission Deadline: December 3, 2007

### JUNIOR THEORISTS SYMPOSIUM—HARVARD UNIVERSITY, AUGUST 5, 2008

Save the Date!

Sociologists are invited to attend the second Junior Theorists Symposium, a day-long mini-conference at Harvard University, on August 5, 2008—the day after the conclusion of the ASA Annual Meeting. Young scholars will be invited to give papers presenting original work in sociological theory; Commentary and responses to the papers will be given by established scholars in the field. Those of you who attended the first JTS in Philadelphia will recall highly original papers, lively discussions, and a strong sense of cross-generational dialogue. Stay tuned for further information. This year's JTS will be organized by Isaac Reed, University of Colorado, and Erika Summers-Effler, University of Notre Dame.

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*Watch for notices in your email or on the section website with submission details for the following two awards. The submission deadline for both awards is March 1, 2008.*

### THE EDWARD SHILS-JAMES COLEMAN MEMORIAL AWARD

The Shils-Coleman Award recognizes distinguished work in the theory area by a graduate student. Work may take the form of (a) a paper published or accepted for publication; (b) a paper presented at a professional meeting; of (c) a paper suitable for publication or presentation at a professional meeting.

### THE THEORY PRIZE

The Theory Prize recognizes outstanding work in theory, communicates the principle that theory is plural and broadly defined, and promotes the interests of the Theory Section. The Theory Prize is given for a book or for an article, book chapter, or published or publicly presented paper. Only titles from the four years prior to the award year are eligible for the Theory Prize. Awards for books and articles are given in alternate years. In 2008, the Theory Prize will be awarded to the best book published from 2004-2007.