

RESILIENCE AND/OR VULNERABILITY
OF THE CIVIL SPHERE

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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Civil Sphere Theory (CST), as elaborated by Jeffrey Alexander (2006), is fitting to address the challenges of our times, interrogating the twin resilience and fragility of democracy. Today, we are facing acute struggles on a global scale over rising numbers of far-right political actors and exclusionary agendas: immigration and minority belonging; and rapid technological change, entailing connectivity and at the same time the dissolution of social bonds. As we confront these issues of polarization and democratic erosion across the world, notions of solidarity, justice and inclusion—all of which lie at the core of Civil Sphere Theory—are vital to understanding societal possibilities and transformations.

The civil sphere is a normative and aspirational democratic space of justice and inclusion. It is distinct from other spheres of social life, e.g., the market, the state, family, ethnicity and race, etc. (cf. Walzer 1984). At the same time, it is a “real” social location, a project in which individual and collective strivings interact with communicative institutions in order to foster democratic inclusion. Based on feelings of solidarity that forge at once inclusionary and exclusionary social structures, unifying and divisive societal forces are enacted in the civil sphere. Research on the civil sphere to date thus primarily addresses questions of inequality and violence in ethno-racial, religious, and gender hierarchies, and the justice-seeking potentialities of democratic and multicultural projects.

This special issue arose out of a conference hosted at Heidelberg University “The Civil Sphere: Global Perspectives on Culture and Politics,” from October 18-19, 2023. The conference united scholars working in the field of cultural sociology from across the globe, with the shared goal of engaging with and further developing Civil Sphere Theory, considering its global dimensions, in particular. While the conference provided an intellectual opportunity for scholars across neighboring disciplines to employ cultural sociological theory and methods in order to speak to key sociopolitical shifts, including contemporary refugee and migration waves, global environmental degradation, enduring racism, and political waves of populism, we have since entered into a time of notably increased democratic crisis. We believe that the contributions



in this special issue, both as individual papers and as a whole, are therefore more relevant than ever—both in and beyond the academy.

The portent of democracy as being in “crisis” today comes from several directions. Perhaps, no one individual is as noted a factor in the erosion of democracy as U.S. president, Donald Trump. Douglas Kellner discusses rise of authoritarian populism and assaults on democracy in the United States today, arguing that “Trump’s presidency, along with other authoritarian regimes in the twenty-first century, is characterized by autocracy, theocracy, and kleptocracy” (2025, p. 383). We must at the same time consider other factors, such as the decline in freedom or the growing lack of trust in political institutions worldwide. As Freedom House researchers (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2025) point out: “Global freedom declined for the 19th consecutive year in 2024. Sixty countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, and only 34 secured improvements” (Freedom House 2025). They stress that democratic solidarity will be “crucial” in the coming year. In a study of trust in institutions, the OECD (2024) asserts that democratic governments today stand at “a critical juncture.” Its *Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions* shows the levels and drivers of trust in public institutions across 30 OECD countries in 2023 and their evolution since 2021. Of those surveyed, levels of trust are extremely low: “39% of those surveyed trust their national government, 37% are confident that their government balances the interests of current and future generations, and 41% believe their government uses the best available evidence when taking a decision” (OECD 2024). Clearly, questions of resilience and/or vulnerability of the civil sphere, the focus of this special issue, are more salient than ever.

One of the major contributions of this special issue is thus the understanding of *the civil sphere as dynamic*, with democratic fragility in notable tension with democratic resilience. We see this in our authors’ explorations of the noncivil foundations of democratic solidarities, processes of bridge-building and depolarization, social movements and mass surveillance. At the same time, this special issue provides *deep empirical contributions from across the globe*, with cases in the United States, Sweden, and Bolivia, showcasing civil performance and strength in times of uncertainty. Through these contributions, as well as publication in a leading academic journal in Serbia, this special issue further *adds notable geographical breadth* to the study of the civil sphere. This reach has been one of the primary goals of Civil Sphere Theory, since it was introduced by Jeffrey Alexander (2006) nearly two decades ago.

We thus seen this contribution as continuing in the line of myriad publications on Civil Sphere Theory since 2006, most notably edited book volumes that contribute to efforts to globalize Civil Sphere Theory, including: *Solidarity, Justice, and Incorporation: Thinking Through the Civil Sphere* (Kivisto and Sciortino 2015); *The Civil Sphere in Latin America* (Alexander and Tognato 2018); *The Civil Sphere in East Asia* (Alexander et al. 2019); *Breaching Civilization: Radicalization and the Civil Sphere* (Alexander, Stack and Khosrokhavar 2019); *Populism in the Civil Sphere* (Alexander, Kivisto and Sciortino 2020);

The Nordic Civil Sphere (Alexander, Lund and Voyer 2020), *The Courage for Civil Repair: Narrating the Righteousness in International Migration* (Tognato, Jaworsky, and Alexander 2021), *The Civil Sphere in Canada* (Alexander and Horgan 2025), and *The Indian Civil Sphere* (Alexander and Waghmore 2025).

The Articles in this Special Issue

This special issue opens with “Civil Society IV: Democratic Solidarity and the Non-Civil Scaffolding of the Civil Sphere,” in which authors Gallen Watts and Mervyn Horgan argue that to fully grasp the vitality and resilience of the civil sphere, we must also consider its relationship with non-civil spheres, particularly family, school, and voluntary associations/public life. The article explores the interdependence between civil and non-civil spheres, emphasizing the positive contributions the latter can offer to strengthen and sustain the civil sphere. Watts and Horgan’s article makes a theoretical contribution to CST by expanding our understanding of democratic socialization, democratic dispositions, and the forms of interactions and actions that foster civic engagement. Additionally, it seeks to establish a close connection between the decline in democratic quality and the corrosion of these non-civil spheres, which has occurred due to the increased economic inequalities and political polarization in American society. While the article primarily examines challenges facing American democracy, its insights extend beyond the U.S. context, offering a valuable framework for analyzing how non-civil spheres can invigorate the civil sphere across different societies.

While Watts and Horgan’s article primarily explores the role of non-civil spheres in strengthening civil capacities and fostering solidarity among those who are here and now as members of a nation-state society, the following article, “Membership, Migration, and Inclusion in the Civil Sphere,” by Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino, broadens the perspective by addressing the issue of international migration. The article analyzes the intersection of migration, membership, and inclusion through Civil Sphere Theory (CST), offering a more nuanced understanding of immigration as the crossing of geographical, political, and symbolic boundaries. This study extends the original conceptualization of the civil sphere by placing greater emphasis on the horizontal processes of inclusion, the challenges that accompany the transformation of outsiders into insiders, rather than focusing solely on the inclusion of marginalized groups, second-class citizens to full membership. Directing attention to the role of symbolic codes in shaping inclusion and exclusion, this article offers a significant contribution to understanding the complex and tense dynamics between membership in the civil sphere and national belonging.

Rather than approaching migration from a theoretical perspective, “The Civil Sphere and its Resilient Tribal Discontents: A Muslim Ban Cloaked in Sacralized Binaries,” explores migration on an empirical level through a case study of media representation of the Muslim Ban policies (2015–2021) in the United States. Starting from an analysis of policies enacted under the Trump

Administration to restrict migration from Muslim-majority countries, Daniel Joseph Belback examines how civil sphere discourse functions as a tool for exclusion. Through an examination of newspaper articles dedicated to this issue, he argues that civil discourse is used to justify repression by portraying imagined Others as not only incapable of upholding the liberty-based values, relationships, and institutions seen as fundamental to a self-sustaining democracy, but also as representing threats to them. In short, the article argues that the civil sphere is more deeply rooted in maintaining primordial rather than universal ties, which suggests that exploring tribalistic tendencies within the civil sphere is crucial for understanding contemporary phenomena related to the process of de-democratization.

The following article, “The Ordinal Civil Sphere: Algorithmically Automated Surveillance and the Fight for Creativity and Control,” explores the impact of technology on the civil sphere, specifically its vulnerability in the face of increasing surveillance and control. Jessica Dawson argues that while technology was once seen as a tool for democracy and social movements, it has now become a mechanism of control, placing particular emphasis on the study of commercial surveillance and data collection, which restricts participation in public life. The article highlights how commercial entities engage in mass surveillance, gathering personal data through phones, social media, facial recognition, and biometric systems, raising critical concerns about privacy, the illusion of consent, and the erosion of traditional democratic structures, solidarity and trust.

Following these portrayals of the social challenges that lead to the strengthening of exclusionary tendencies in the civil sphere and the erosion of solidaristic capacity, the next set of articles in the special issue place a greater emphasis on civil repair and the reinforcement of solidarity. In her article “Rehearsing Civility: Bridgebuilding in Polarized America,” Emily Campbell explores the scope and limitations of bridgebuilding organizations that unite individuals from opposing political sides to engage in dialogue, with the goal of reducing polarization. Polarization, identified by Galen Watts in the first article of the special issue as a key pathology of contemporary societies, is further examined in Campbell’s paper, which employs a qualitative case study approach to explore one potential method for addressing this polarization. The article concludes that bridgebuilding, as a practice, fosters themes and civil discourse that unite participants, enabling them to “rehearse civility” and experience the goodwill they long for in their own lives and wish to see in society, all within a relatively safe and controlled setting.

Continuing the discussion about social solidarity, the next article “The Potential for Civil Resilience: Staging Inequalities in a Stigmatized Neighborhood” explores art’s transformative role in fostering civil repair. Through a case study of a Swedish theatre, Anna Lund, Rebecca Brinch, and Ylva Lorentzon illustrate how the dramatic arts can serve as a powerful platform for civil repair and the social inclusion of marginalized communities by activating symbolic structures of meaning and emotion. Drawing on a meaning-centered analysis of the

Husby Theatre, its place within the urban landscape, and a selected play from its repertoire, the article concludes that meaningful theatre is not only achievable but also has the potential to drive positive social change by fostering inclusion and increasing recognition of immigrants and stigmatized communities.

The final article in this special issue also explores solidarity but primarily focuses on the indigenous context. In “‘TIPNIS somos todos’: Discourse of Indigenousness Within and Beyond a National Civil Sphere,” Daniel Moller-icona Alfaro analyzes the environmental movement that emerged in Bolivia when indigenous groups marched in protest against a contested state highway project set to be built on indigenous land. The study demonstrates how the indigenous sphere embodies universalistic aspirations for solidarity, in contrast to the civil sphere, where solidarity is largely fostered within the framework of the nation-state. It defines the indigenous sphere as a distinct and relatively autonomous sphere of solidarity; characterized by active, peaceful, and collectivist relations; guided by non-rational motives deeply connected to nature and Mother Earth, rooted in a pre-millennial cosmology; and inclusive, grounded in communal ties, shaped by millennia-old traditions and institutions. This article offers a valuable contribution to discussions on the potential for global solidarities and alternative solidaristic discourses that emerge from non-Western traditions, unburdened by the legacies of colonialism.

Concluding Remarks

This special issue of the journal *Philosophy and Society*, published by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade, is the first issue in Serbia dedicated to Civil Sphere Theory. While the journal has previously introduced some aspects of cultural sociology to the Serbian academic community, such as the study of everyday life in cultural sociology (Prodanović 2013) and an analysis of the strong program through Burawoy’s distinction between critical and public (engaged) sociology (Petrović Trifunović 2016), it has not yet engaged with CST. Epistemological and methodological questions concerning the interpretivist turn in sociology and thick description have been presented and debated within the Serbian sociological community (Spasić 2012; Spasić 2013; Resanović 2018). However, CST has largely remained on the margins of sociological literature in Serbia and the broader region, despite its introduction into Serbian-language academic discourse through critical reviews of major works such as *The Performance of Politics* (Alexander 2010) and *Populism in the Civil Sphere* (Alexander, Kivisto, and Sciortino 2021) (Spasić 2011; 2022). As exceptions, a few empirical studies employ a cultural sociological approach (Spasić 2013; Zvijer 2022), and more specifically, some apply Civil Sphere Theory (Resanović 2021).

The special issue *Resilience and/or Vulnerability of the Civil Sphere* seeks to fill this gap by featuring a collection of articles dedicated, on the one hand, to advancing theoretical questions regarding CST, and on the other, to applying CST in the analysis of contemporary challenges while exploring ways to

strengthen democratic capacities through civil repair across diverse social contexts. As we write, massive student protests are taking place in Serbia, sparking the emergence of a new form of solidarity and forging new alliances in the fight against an authoritarian and corrupt government between previously ideologically divided groups. Even though it may be too soon to dedicate an article to this social movement, we did not want to fail to mention how relevant the issues of solidarity and civic repair in Serbian society are today. In the coming period, CST offers us the capacity to explore how this extraordinary energy was created and sustained over several months by students and the non-student citizens who supported them. It could also contribute to interpreting the outcomes of the protests, which remain unknown at this moment, as we witness both the students' unwavering dedication and the extreme backlash from the ruling political elite.

Over the past two decades, CST has been used to explore questions of democracy and social solidarities in a rapidly changing world. Here we extend this intellectual terrain to focus on democratic resilience and vulnerability on a global scale. Through a combination of new theoretical insights and empirical cases, we contribute to broader conversations on democracy at a critical juncture. Civil Sphere Theory allows us to actively confront, analyze and seek answers to the challenges of our time. Crucially, it gives us hope. As Edith Eger (2023: ix) writes "Hope is about being free to choose how we engage with our circumstances. Choosing what we hold in our minds, choosing to be curious."

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