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MEMBERSHIP, MIGRATION, AND INCLUSION IN THE CIVIL SPHERE[1]

ABSTRACT
In this article, we explore the intersection of migration, membership, and inclusion through Civil Sphere Theory (CST), the most powerful theory currently available for explaining social solidarity in modern, differentiated societies. While CST has amply proven its worth by deepening our understanding of social solidarity and civil repair within established polities, it has insufficiently addressed the boundaries that define inclusion and exclusion in the context of migration. We open the article by reconceptualizing immigration as the crossing of geographical, political, and symbolic boundaries. This perspective shifts the focus from linear processes of inclusion to the dynamic interplay between national membership, citizenship, and the civil sphere. Drawing on CST's nuanced approach to cultural and social boundaries, the paper makes explicit how in the contemporary world, national and civil memberships are tightly coupled. Concerning migration, the civil sphere must consequently mediate between the formal inclusivity of liberal-democratic ideals and the bounded character of national belonging. We further advance a critique of CST's limited attention to citizenship, emphasizing how citizenship remains a key conduit for universalizing national membership. To conclude, we identify the engine of potential membership change in the tension between social and symbolic boundaries embedded in differentiated societies. This approach bridges migration studies and cultural sociology, providing some preliminary insights into the mechanisms involved in civil incorporation.

KEYWORDS
sphere, democracy, inclusion, membership, migration, nation-state, solidarity

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Introduction

We believe Civil Sphere Theory (CST) provides the most powerful theory currently available for explaining social solidarity in modern, differentiated societies. It represents an important resource for scholars interested in issues of inclusion, incorporation, and civil repair. It offers a conceptual framework able to cover both expansions and contractions of civil solidarity in democratic states. In its current form, however, CST suffers from a theoretical limitation: it does not adequately define the conditions for being considered, no matter how minimally, a member of the civil sphere. Why are certain actors considered legitimate members of the civil sphere, while others are excluded? How is membership in the civil sphere related to membership in other forms of universalizing solidarities? How and why do the established boundaries of the civil sphere change, becoming strengthened or blurred? To what degree does the civil sphere depend on the political institution of the nation-state? Although the last decade has seen strong developments in the literature on CST (Kivisto and Sciortino 2023), researchers have examined civil repair *vertically*, with the processes moving (or failing to move) individuals or groups from marginalized, probationary, or second-class status to full, bona fide membership. Less attention has been paid to the *horizontal* processes of inclusion (and exclusion), the processes turning outsiders into insiders (and unfortunately sometimes vice versa). The latter processes, however, are of fundamental importance for the study of international migration, and particularly of the alchemical process through which former "aliens" may become (or fail to become) part of the body politic and, in due course, civil actors. Existing civil spheres are constantly challenged and strained by the social consequences of human mobility across political boundaries. How do the symbolic codes of the civil sphere shape the distinctions between national and alien, native and foreigner? Do non-members, as opposed to second-class members, still invoke the positive polarities of these codes and upon which grounds?

In the following pages, we provide preliminary explanations of and responses to these queries. We begin by reviewing the current migratory situation, defined as a contrast between a growing potential for mobility and a political system differentiated segmentally in nation states. As a full-fledged civil sphere exists only in (at least somewhat) democratic nation states, we suggest that civil membership is tightly coupled with national belonging. Although the existence of more (geographically) extensive imaginations must be acknowledged, they can have noticeable consequences only when refracted within some national civil sphere, as we discuss in Part 2.[2] We subsequently criticize CST's

2 Similar considerations apply to the much-studied phenomenon of migration-based transnationalism and diasporas. While transnational networks are sometimes culturally and structurally important in the life of many groups of migrants, their function is based only on familial or local solidarities. When they acquire a civil potential, it is through an explicit linkage with a specific national civil sphere. Similar considerations apply to the more politically inclined phenomenon of contemporary 'diasporas.' It should

limited attention to citizenship, which we see as a major conduit for translating civil solidarity institutionally. National citizenship also plays a central role in negotiating migrants' rights and duties, defining enduring criteria of inclusion and exclusion, as seen in Part 3. Having clarified the connection between nation, citizenship and civil membership, we offer a view of migration as a boundary-crossing phenomenon. We suggest migration processes cannot be conceptualized in terms of a single boundary crossing. Given the differentiated structures of contemporary society, migrant trajectories interact with a complex array of social structures. In Part 4, we argue that CST, thanks to its sophisticated understanding of the relationship between cultural and social boundaries and its non-naturalistic understanding of membership, is in a favorable position to build upon existing research on boundaries while offering a more nuanced account.

World Society, Nation States, Migration, and Boundaries: A Primer

To start our analysis, we must summarize some of the basic features of the modern social order that shape the relations between social, political, and civil memberships. Although globalization is an increasingly maligned word, there are few doubts that the only cogent understanding of contemporary "society" – the encompassing social system that includes all communications and constitutes meaningful horizons for any further communication – is in terms of a world society (Luhmann 1975, Luhmann 1982). Sustained by the powerful development of market structures, media systems, and logistic technologies, the connections between (and across) the different regions of the world have strengthened enormously in a few centuries, a relatively short span of time (Rosenberg 2012, Loth, Zeiler et al. 2014).

The global reach of communication, moving resources, ties, and information, as well as images of the good life, has direct consequences for the increased *potential* mobility of human populations over long distances (Hoerder 2002). To recognize the existence of a global set of connections, however, does not imply the existence of unifying political structures, even less of a shared cosmopolitan consciousness, not to mention solidarity. World society, for the time being, appears as an anarchical set of differentiated spheres, sectors, institutions (and structures of meaning, such as civil spheres) that operate increasingly according to their own logic and structure, each of them establishing their own territorial reference. "Global" issues, claims, and mobilizations always appear refracted through the functioning of these spheres, as soon as they are made differentially meaningful by their specialized codes.

In contrast to most other social systems which differentiate functionally, the international political system differentiates segmentally, generating an

never be forgotten that their structural bases – legislation on double citizenship, voting rights for emigrants, fundraising for opposition parties, etc. – are firmly rooted in the national legislation in the country of origin.

increasing set of formally equal sovereign nation states, each of them controlling a well-defined slice of the landmass. Although a relatively recent invention, the nation state is the leading political form on the planet (Poggi 1991).[3] The segmentary nature of the political system has direct consequences for migration, as nation states depend existentially for their operations on a geographical definition of their boundaries. Nation states, moreover, legitimate themselves claiming, with varying degrees of good faith, to exist for the purpose of ensuring the rights of their subjects or citizens. States thus need a precise definition of those that should be counted as part of their population. They also justify their existence with the need to protect and enhance the reproduction of a distinctive social and cultural group (a "people;" a "nation") that, albeit internally diverse and segmented, stretches from a common past far into the future. No matter how recent, or even shaky, the empirical evidence for such collective projection is, those who underestimate the power of the national imagination do so at their own peril. National membership is one of the major modern templates – if not *the* major one – for imagining the functioning of broader solidarities (Greenfeld 1992). From these three built-in features of nation states, the three main dividing lines defining migration in the contemporary world emerge. Migrants must have access to the territory crossing a political border,[4] they (very often) must face the consequences of belonging to a different polity, and they must negotiate their differences and chances of inclusion in a political community that is nearly always marked by a specific ethnic and cultural understanding of membership.

In an ideal world, none of these dividing lines represent an unsurmountable problem, although resolving them could require substantial investments and efforts. The reality, of course, is rather different. World society, as related to human mobility, is built on a two-pronged postulate: that, at the same time, (a) capital, goods, services, information, and ideas (including Taylor Swift's grudge against her past boyfriends) should – and indeed do – circulate as a matter of course across all political boundaries, but (b) nationality, geographical residence, and civil membership should nonetheless coincide. Unfortunately, the frantic economic development made possible in the last two centuries by (a) makes (b) increasingly unlikely. As the benefits of economic and political

3 Forty-two states were members of the League of Nations at its founding in 1920. Fifty-one states were members of the United Nations in 1945. Currently, 192 states are members of the same organization. Except for the Russian Federation, empires have largely disappeared. Other once popular political forms – such as border marches or galactic polities - have receded into remote memory.

4 The current definition of international migration implies the crossing of a state border. The distinction between international and internal migration is not always so sharp. There are many cases in which "internal" migration is heavily controlled and regulated. The regulation of domestic travel and resettlement through a system of internal passports and residence permits was a key feature of everyday life in the USSR, shaping the life chances of most subjects (Light 2012). The Hukou household registration system in contemporary China establishes an effective loss of civil and social rights for millions of internal migrants moving to industrializing cities (Chan 2018).

development are allocated unequally, being in the territory of one state rather than another has acquired a growing – and extraordinary in historical terms – significance for the life chances of individuals and households.[5] As if this fact were not enough, the Arendtian "right to have rights" is largely restricted to a relatively small number of (somewhat) liberal-democratic states (Arendt 1949). If membership in those polities is impossible, being physically present in their territory is usually the second-best option. The incentives to move towards more attractive destinations are consequently substantial, making the embedded violation of (b) more evident.[6] Unsurprisingly, migrants are often what Mary Douglas (1966) would call "matter out of place." Some migrants may be actively recruited, in what is today called the global race for talent. Many others are occasionally deemed necessary, but rarely welcomed (Zolberg 1987). All, however, are suspected, at least occasionally, of being potentially polluting.

If the number of migrants in the world population is quite low, the reason is that "destination countries" are usually quite effective in restricting access (Zolberg 1999). The public sphere of developed countries is consequently rooted in forms of systematic exclusion. At the same time, this exclusion is never complete. The borders of nation states are always (slightly) porous. Many are refused, but some are called. Here, a second phenomenon of particular importance for the civil sphere may be observed. Among destination countries, migration is a matter of concern primarily for (somewhat) liberal-democratic states than for authoritarian regimes. In fact, the latter – with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council the paradigmatic case – are able to manage, through a highly discriminatory regime, the presence of high numbers – sometimes *extremely* high numbers – of foreign workers without any noticeable discomfort among the native population. This is because those foreign workers are forced to live separate lives apart from locals. Liberal-democratic nation states (states CST considers endowed with the most established civil spheres), on the contrary, face migration with remarkable unease.[7] These are the nation states that have gone through a gradual transformation of original ethnic definitions of belonging through to the inclusion of varying dosages of valuation of individual autonomy and social pluralism (Alexander 1990). As these civil spheres have,

5 Economically, the current world society follows the basic principle that the place where something is done is more important than the content of what is done. Residence is consequently the main axis of global social stratification (Milanovic 2016)3. As better life opportunities are clustered in a small number of countries, international migration – the crossing of the geographical borders – is a main avenue for socio-economic mobility.

6 In 2023, 16 percent of adults worldwide told pollsters that they would like to leave their own country permanently, if they could. The potential migrants are more than a quarter of the adult population in North Africa, a little less than 30 percent in Latin America, and more than 35 percent in Sub Saharan Africa (Gallup 2024).

7 In 2024, 15 percent of eligible voters in the United States, and 17 percent of EU voters considered immigration *the* top issue for their country/region. For Europe, see https://www.bva-xsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Concerns-and-global-perception-of-the-EU-citizens-250424.pdf. For the United States, see https://www.as-coa.org/articles/poll-tracker-attitudes-immigration-2024-us-elections.

consequently, difficulties (at least, until now) in adopting a strategy of full ethnic closure, the physical presence of immigrants triggers, almost automatically, the anticipation of their (at least legal) inclusion. The fear of the potential pollution – the possible debasement of the value of membership through the arrival of "unfit" elements – is compounded by the fact that these are countries that, owing to their embedded liberalism, often end up admitting migrant individuals or groups that many natives (and their governments) judge as "unwanted" or "not welcome" (Zolberg 1987, Joppke 1998, Hollifield, Martin et al. 2022).

In differentiated civil spheres, the challenge of inclusion is endemic. Migrants are notonly physical bodies. They are the tea leaves through which participants in the civil sphere read what they think will be the nation's fate. Beyond the frequent polemics concerning demographic imbalances, estimates concerning labor market competition, and welfare burdens, the main focus of many civil spheres is always (explicitly or implicitly) on the civil attributes of potential and actual newcomers and their fit (or more often, lack of fit) with the imagined features of the respective nation (Kivisto 2005, Jaworsky 2021, Drewski and Gerhards 2024).

Unsurprisingly, reactions to migrant issues activate the same polarized codes that members apply to themselves and others within the civil sphere, oriented, however toward the outside and the future. In some cases, as often occurs with high-skilled migrants, potential migrants are seen positively, as members-in-waiting. As they are expected to foster economic development, provide much needed skills, revitalize inner cities, and raise dismal demographic rates, they appear as endowed with all the positive polarities of civil members: they are portrayed as young, dynamic, entrepreneurial, disciplined, and willing to assimilate. If something has to be blamed, it is the receiving nation itself; unwelcoming, backward, unable to be attractive enough for them. In the case of unwanted flows, the negative polarities of the same codes are activated: they are depicted as passive, backward, dependent, emotional, devious, wild, and fanatic. The polarities of the codes, of course, may also be switched. High-skilled migrants may suddenly appear snotty, pretentious, and unable to understand local customs; low-skilled migrants may, as happened (albeit briefly) during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, be suddenly portrayed as heroic workers providing key services. What is remarkable is that such polarized coding of immigrants is reproduced nearly identically over and over again, in different countries, throughout different historical epochs, and targeted at different immigrant groups (Lucassen 2005, Alexander 2013).

This combination of codes, moreover, produces discourses that are abstract enough to travel easily. Nativist literature and icons are often appropriated by different actors in different countries (and times) with relative ease.

One last important premise is that the following three elements should not be taken as a sequence: (a) the crossing of geographical borders, (b) the crossing of political borders, and (c) claims to inclusion in national membership. Such a linear process is a possibility, but far from a certainty. Migrants excluded from political membership (and sometimes even from legitimate residence)

may have access to certain civil and social rights. Some may even attain a kind of localized informal citizenship. Undocumented migrants may be shielded from deportation. On the other hand, there are those able to acquire citizenship of a country with minimal residence or even without having ever visited the country previously, provided they can claim an ancestor linking them to the mystical body of the nation (Joppke 2005, Dumbrava 2014). Citizens with a migration background may (rightfully) complain that such legal inclusion does not translate into actual inclusion in national life. Far from being linear, migration trajectories may appear much more like a bowl of spaghetti.

What is the role of the civil sphere within the bundle of boundaries constituted by the interaction of borders, legal statuses, and civil and national expectations? How does the civil sphere mediate between the ethnic legacies of nations (oriented toward closure) and the liberal-democratic complex (oriented toward openness)? To answer these questions adequately, it is necessary to make the relations between the civil sphere and two fundamental forms of symbolic memberships associated with the legitimation of inclusion or exclusion in liberal-democratic states more explicit. We discuss the first, the nation, in the following section, and the second, citizenship, in Part 3.

The Boundaries of Civil Spheres

The heart of CST is the willingness to provide, against a variety of power-obsessed social theories, an approach able to identify and ground the possibility (although by no means the certainty) of an effective civil solidarity in modern, differentiated societies. Civil sphere theory recognizes the empirical importance of power and oppression without, however, being utterly mesmerized by them; it wants to acknowledge the empirical existence of civil solidarity and the possibility of civil repair and inclusion without, however, adopting any whiggish philosophy of history (Kivisto and Sciortino 2021). Contrary to the frequent identification of civil society with some societal sector, with specific forms of organizations and structures, CST identifies the civil sphere as an imagined community, a symbolic-cum-emotional cultural structure. Such solidarity is an activating symbolic structure of meaning and emotions, relying on solidarity for others who are considered worthy of respect out of principle, not experience (Alexander, Lund et al. 2019). The implications of these cultural structures, informed by such feelings of common membership, are not universal nor uniform. Only in a few countries (and not necessarily forever) have they acquired the possibility, (albeit not the certainty), of shaping, through regulative and communicative institutions, the action of the state, making its power instrumental to the protection of such civil solidarity (Alexander 2006).

Civil solidarity is abstract. It is broader than the ties created by physical co-presence, emotional attachment, common interests, repeated interaction, resource exchange, and political or religious homophily. It is a solidarity among strangers: its *bona fide* members know they will never know personally the other members, nor necessarily do they wish to know them (Anderson 1983).

They just take *for granted* that they are legitimate travelers on the same journey. Civil membership comes, if sometimes recalcitrantly, with some consequences: a fellow member can advance claims and seek redresses invoking the rights and duties associated with this common membership (Alexander 2024).

Why do certain actors recognize someone else as a fellow member? How do they distinguish between those who have a voice that deserves to be heard and those who can be safely ignored? What exactly is contained in the stock of common symbols and group markers that any member can take for granted? Are those who are denied membership in the civil sphere (the case for a large proportion of migrants) able to mobilize other forms of universalistic solidarity to advance their claims? In itself, the codes of the civil sphere do not have a built-in limitation: "we, the people" may refer to some hundreds of thousands or more than a billion. Nor do they have a built-in criterion for adjudicating which claims should be heard first. Last, but not least, civil discourse is not alone in its claim to the solidarity of members. From leftist internationalism to Western civilization, from human rights cosmopolitanism to environmentalism, the field of abstract solidarities is rather crowded. It is consequently rather important to explore the relations between civil solidarity and other forms of universalistic, abstract, political solidarities. How much and how often can political and civil membership be thought of as synonymous? The answer to these questions is far from straightforward.

Let us start with the CST foundational text, *The Civil Sphere* (hereafter TCS). For analytical convenience, it is useful to start with the negative. Alexander sharply contrasts civil membership with both cosmopolitan solidarities and public membership in a state. He has no patience for a cosmopolitan vision of the civil sphere as a utopian ideal or promise of the future, or even a yardstick for external critique. Alexander stresses several times that no civil sphere can be, by his definition, unlimited or fully inclusive. On the contrary, Alexander's civil sphere is always bounded geographically and socially. It is not an abstract space; it refers constantly to an essentialized territory, a homeland structured as a meaningful center, irradiating promises of salvation. He also clarifies repeatedly that actual civil spheres are always symbolically closed: beyond their boundaries, and often even within them, there are always other groups and other political entities lurking in the shadows. Without exclusion, without the negative polarities of the codes, the meaning of inclusion would also disappear.[8] *The Civil Sphere* does not see civil solidarity in cosmopolitan terms, and human rights cannot serve as sufficient grounds for membership. Paraphrasing Durkheim, even a society of cosmopolitan saints would need to have its polluted outsiders.

Alexander also refuses to identify the boundaries of the civil sphere with the boundaries of the state, even in its democratic or social-democratic varieties. *The Civil Sphere* does not support the secular progressive state so often

8 For an attempt to weaken substantially the necessity of such an exclusionary dimension of the civil sphere, see Voyer (2024).

idolized by the European left.[9] Instead, TCS analyzes the state in an old-fashioned, liberal way, as an extremely efficient coercion machine, a looming danger that must be carefully constrained and continuously controlled if the loss of liberty and autonomy are to be avoided.[10]

In fact, throughout TCS, the civil sphere is nearly always presented as somewhat co-extensive with the nation. Alexander writes, occasionally, that the civil solidarity he is discussing could be, in principle, also local, regional, or international (Alexander 2006:43). In the conclusions of the book, moreover, in one single page Alexander concedes quite a lot to the liberal globalism that has marked the period in which TCS was written. He stresses how his theory has been developed without reference to scale, and that it is possible to imagine and organize civil society beyond the territory of the nation-state. He even dares to write that a "globalized civil sphere may be the only way to proceed. Without a global range, the promises even of civil society in its national form may die" (Alexander 2006: 552).

Noble as this statement may be, it is doubtful it can be consistent with the overall structure of the book. In fact, throughout TCS, the civil sphere is nearly always presented as somewhat co-extensive with the nation. As he admits, his empirical studies concern only movements inside nation-states or regions (Alexander 2006:552). Of his cases, only the analysis of Jewish inclusion spans Europe and the US, although the latter becomes exclusive in the end. In the rest of the book, Alexander treats civil solidarity and national solidarity (at least in its "civic" variant) interchangeably. Nor should it be forgotten that the emphasis on the civil sphere as providing the force behind the state's regulative institutions – constitutions, legal systems, office, party, voting – imply a tight coupling of civil and national boundaries. The world Alexander discusses is a world of nation-states, to which some legacies of previous imperial formations are to be added.[11] He tends to distinguish himself from nationalist scholars because he defines the civil sphere in terms not only of national, but also of democratic membership (Alexander 2006:612). Still, democratic membership – symbolized by the voting roll – is legitimized by membership in the

9 The study of the Nordic European civil sphere has contributed to re-opening a debate on the emancipatory potentialities of states. See Alexander, Lund, and Voyer (2019).

10 This characterization is particularly evident in the way in which Alexander has reacted to the critique of his work by Bryan Turner (2008). While Turner insists that a liberal state, guaranteeing and supporting the existence of a public sphere, is necessary for a lively and independent civil arena, Alexander (2008) repeatedly stresses that a vision of the state as the enforcer of justice is inadequate for both analytical and empirical reasons. His civil sphere is an independent dimension, that in the best of circumstances may, through the influence of its communicative and regulative institutions, control the state, rather than being controlled by it.

11 Perhaps surprisingly, in a 793-page book published in 2006, the European Union, with its multi-layered membership and future-oriented mission, is not mentioned once. And it is a pity, as the extreme difficulties of the European project in fostering a sense of collective membership among the citizens of the member states could be a strategic research material in this regard.

politically-constituted nation. Technically speaking, liberal-democratic polities are just a subset, not an alternative, to nation-states.

The tight, but always implicit, coupling of the civil sphere and the nation has remained a dominant premise of the subsequent CST literature. It is pervasive, for example, in the innovative volumes on Latin America and East Asia that – also owing to the strong emphasis on democratic dynamics – have explored nearly exclusively processes of civil repair concerning second-class citizens in already established polities (Alexander and Tognato 2018, Alexander, Palmer et al. 2019).[12] In the CST literature, when there is a focus on the challenges to the established boundaries of the civil sphere, they are always *internal,* sub-national challenges. This is the case of the important analysis of secessionist claims ("what *you* claim is a civil sphere is *actually* an imperial space"), of regionalism and of first nations (Alexander, Stack et al. 2019, Alexander and Horgan 2025).[13]

In other words, there is little evidence that membership in the civil sphere – at least in the current societal configuration – can be independent of national belonging. The codes of the civil sphere may (and are) applied also externally: events in other parts of the world – the Vietnam War, the Russian aggression toward Ukraine or the Middle East tragedies being only the latest examples – may trigger heated debates and robust polarization also in countries very far from the epicenter. As we have seen previously, the same codes can, and are, applied to include or (more often) tarnish prospective migrants and newcomers (Jaworsky 2021). Codes may also be used, with varying degrees of success, to support processes of boundary expansions or boundary blurring: the European Union, battered as it currently is, has consistently employed civil codes and imaginaries to boost a feeling of post-national belonging among the citizens. International, transnational, and global civil discourses are always refracted and activated in, and through, national civil spheres.

Civil spheres, as quasi-nations, are not intrinsically open to newcomers. On the contrary, they may be quite suspicious of the civil qualifications of outsiders. What makes the civil inclusion of migrants possible (although not

12 For an exception, see Tognato and Jaworsky (2020). Migration is also more present in the volumes dedicated to Nordic Europe and Canada, always within specific national cadres (Alexander, Lund et al. 2019, Alexander and Horgan 2025). In many ways, the current CST literature could be criticized for its methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). Ricarda Hammer has also criticized CST for failing to acknowledge how the constitution of the civil spheres is irremediably intertwined with colonization (Hammer 2020). We plan to discuss both these critiques in a future paper.

13 An exception is the work of Andrea Voyer and Anna Lund, who have developed a version of CST much more focused on a careful analysis of social interaction (Alexander, Lund et al. 2019, Voyer 2024). It is an approach that could, in principle, cross-cut national affiliations. They analyze interactions shaped by public cultural institutions involving actors whose status is defined nationally as legitimate. Hizky Shoham has developed an interactional approach to civil sphere analysis, which focuses explicitly on the bottom-up development of the connection between civil and national solidarity with limited state involvement (Shoham 2017, Shoham 2021).

certain) is consequently not a special "quality" of civil rules. What makes the civil sphere important in this regard is the (historically varying) mix of national membership (based on a difference between insiders and outsiders) and liberal-democratic imagination, based on openness. Analytically, the two elements are basically independent: the world is full of undemocratic nations, while liberalism has always been thought of as (theoretically) universal. Historically, however, the unlikely combination of these two elements has generated a specific normative model, that has shown (until now) a certain robustness even if constantly exposed to severe strains (Alexander, Kivisto et al. 2020). This "civil" model accepts – with some hypocrisy – migration as a possible avenue leading toward various degrees of membership, although it places the duty to prove one's civil qualifications on the shoulder of the prospective new member. It is a model clearly open to abuse. It further helps to orient the codification of migrants toward the negative polarities. Nevertheless, without considering this constitutive tension, it would be difficult to understand why in the (somewhat) liberal-democratic states, it is possible to practice the legal inclusion of culturally-distant migrants. This, of course, is something that authoritarian states – such as those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (a major immigration destination) – have no qualms about, being incapable of (or unwilling to) even consider conceiving migrants as anything close to ingroups.

Making explicit and systematic the connection between civil and national memberships is particularly useful for developing a satisfactory CST theory of migrant incorporation. It allows for a fruitful dialogue with the large body of studies on the national incorporation of immigrants, focused on migration as the crossing of a bundle of multilayered – and often overlapping – symbolic boundaries. At the same time, it grounds the study of civil incorporation in a more definitive geopolitical framework.

Migration, Citizenship, and the Civil Sphere

Reading the CST literature, most migration scholars would be surprised by the lack of citizenship as a political institution linked to and informed by the civil sphere, given how seemingly obviously it is connected to migration. Social theorists may be equally surprised, as the omission of citizenship runs against a long line of sociological reasoning: from T.H. Marshall (1964) to Talcott Parsons (1965), citizenship has been considered the building block of civil solidarity in modern society (Kivisto 2004, Sciortino 2010). In broader political theory, citizenship has been usually seen not only as a mark of membership and a guarantee of rights (and duties) but also as *the* communitarian element that provides, treating diverse individuals as equal, the foundation for claims to inclusion and justice.

Scholars of migration have always been interested in citizenship, both as the institution regulating global socio-economic stratification (see Part 1), and as a necessary passage in the inclusion process (Kivisto and Faist 2009). In particular since many liberal-democratic states have introduced measures

guaranteeing rights to long-term residents (thus creating the so-called *denizens*), understanding why some immigrants decide to "naturalize," that is, take citizenship of the host country, has become more important (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017, Joppke 2019). How different countries regulate the acquisition of citizenship has been linked to different visions of national membership, with important consequences for the inclusion of outsiders (Brubaker 1992). Some scholars have also focused on the consequences of immigration for the very same institution of citizenship. Christian Joppke, particularly, has argued that immigration causes a progressive "lightening" of citizenship. Accommodating migrants, among other trends, implies a weakening of citizenship's subjective meaning, its growing dissociation from nationhood, and a growing instrumental attitude to it (Joppke 2021). In a different vein, post-colonial critiques have seen in citizenship acquisition a decoy functional to the reproduction of the hypocritical "political demography" of liberal democracy (Favell 2022). In summary, citizenship remains quite a lively concept.

In TCS, by contrast, Alexander substantially ignores citizenship, considering it a merely legal, state-accorded status, which plays a marginal role in the overall incorporation process. He seems to perceive citizenship only as a formal, objective, legal status, denoting only the relationship between individuals and the state. His citizenship is Christian Joppke's vision of the future already accomplished. For Joppke, to grant theoretical attention to citizenship risks obscuring the much more important role played by shifting "internal" cultural perceptions (Joppke, 2021). The deeply analyzed cases of civil repair discussed in TCS, such as national minorities and first nations peoples (Alexander and Horgan 2025) as well as caste (Alexander and Waghmore 2025), have something in common: they all involve citizens or members of recognized national minorities.[14] While their claims concerning the implications of their membership trigger heated conflict, membership as such was not, as a rule, disputed. In the case of "aliens," even if long-term migrants, is precisely their presence to be a matter of contention.

Alexander's stance is that incorporation processes are primarily structured by collectively shared cultural meanings and emotions (the existential conflict over the symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them"), while changes in legal and political definitions seem to merely follow from such conflicts (Lund and Voyer 2020). His position, however, is not only analytical but also political: the possibilities of justice and recognition, in his view, should not be entrusted to citizenship. He sees citizenship as an institution that, allowing only

14 Although there are a few pages dedicated to acknowledging the importance of immigration in the composition of national populations, the issue receives only moderate attention in the text (Alexander 2006: 409ss). Besides mentioning that a more flexible civil sphere may find fewer difficulties in accommodating migrants than "rigid 'state' societies" (Alexander 2006: 414), Alexander does not explore how the codes of the civil sphere contribute to defining the meaning of the admission of new immigrants. Throughout the book, Alexander is mostly interested in what happens once the actors invoking civil repair have been long-term residents.

membership in a state, may be established independently by democratic rules or respect for individual rights (Alexander 2008).

Alexander has some good arrows for arming his bow. Citizenship, as a legal institution, is indeed available even in the most totalitarian states. It may be acquired but also lost. Rohingyas in Myanmar and hundreds of thousands of Muslims in India know this fact all too well.[15] Most immigrants acquire citizenship for instrumental, rather than sentimental, reasons evaluating it coldly in terms of benefits and costs (Harpaz and Mateos 2019). A growing number of states allow for multiple citizenships, severing the strict identification of nationhood and citizenship, not to mention "golden passports" for plutocrats (Surak 2023). Being a citizen of one country, moreover, does not necessarily entitle one to civil recognition, as many rituals, symbols, and icons associated with civil membership are historically defined by the dominant group. Neither does it shield migrants from frequent ethnoracial Othering. Even considering all these elements, however, there is room to argue that Alexander's view of citizenship is unduly restrictive.

First, membership in any given state is the very basis of the immigrant condition. Second, the acquisition of long-term residence status and/or citizenship is inextricably intertwined not only with important legal protections but also with a thicker symbolic legitimation of one's social presence. Few things like citizenship acquisition make it difficult to deny an actor's legitimacy in participating, although often in a marginal or stigmatized role, in the national community. Citizenship is also the fundamental legal protection against the ultimate form of exclusion: physical removal. Third, it is important to consider that the universalizing promise of civil repair that is so central to the cases analyzed in TCS would not extend to the "alien" who could not even claim to be a second-class citizen. Consequently, acquiring citizenship makes participation in civil life possible to a degree not allowed by any other legal status. Last but not least, the modern history of citizenship documents its rich cultural dimension. As the looming controversy over birthright citizenship in the United States will soon show, it is never only about the law. Conflicts over citizenship are the most meaning-loaded controversies in liberal democracies, the ones in which the codes of civil society are explicitly used. Civil sphere theory should thus incorporate a more explicit (and thicker) understanding of national membership, able to pay the citizenship status its dues as (currently) the main conduit – legally and symbolically – of the idea of civil membership.

Migration as Boundary Crossing

In the previous section, we argued in favor of a vision that sees existing civil spheres more explicitly and tightly coupled with national membership. We also claimed that at least for (comparatively-speaking) democratic states, the

15 For India, see https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/indias-national-register-citizens-threatens-mass-statelessness.

institution of state citizenship should be considered one of the main conduits for civil membership. Our plea for the importance of the political dimension in the analysis of the civil sphere should not, however, be taken as an attempt to define inclusion in mere legal-political terms. While we criticized CST for neglecting the importance of legal statuses, they are a necessary, if insufficient, pre-conditions for inclusion in the civil sphere.

Residence permits and citizenship are far from being the only factors shaping migration trajectories. Migrants interact with many other categorical systems that frame individuals (and networks, and groups), organize and limit their everyday lives, and reify the distinctions between insiders and outsiders. Many of these boundary processes are not codified in legal terms, and some of them operate largely informally, if not subconsciously. What they all have in common is that they all deal with, and in turn reproduce, migrants' membership ambiguity, their being "matter out of place."

Migration research has documented how the perceived quality of belonging, and its related boundary work, has consequences for the willingness to engage in interpersonal contact (Manevska, Achterberg et al. 2018), attitudes towards immigrants (Bail 2008), and even the willingness to help (Jaworsky, Rétiová et al. 2022). The perceived quality of belonging, however, does not depend only on the features – real or imagined – of the migrants. It is also, and perhaps mostly, contingent upon the ways boundaries are drawn (nearly always deploying the codes of the civil sphere). Migration means experiencing boundaries, but not all boundaries divide the world in the same way; not all boundaries draw upon the same symbols and narratives.

Unfortunately, migration scholars have traditionally paid little attention to the cultural dimension of migration and incorporation (Levitt 2005). The cultural dimension of social boundaries has been consequently little explored. Many migration scholars had judged social and symbolic boundaries too "soft" to be studied systematically, in comparison at least with more well-known issues of socio-economic and political incorporation. When dealing with issues of cultural difference, the field of migration studies is still largely split between those who see cultural differences as mere decoys for power inequalities and those willing to take at face value the description of reality endorsed by the involved actors, particularly when they are the migrants themselves (Sciortino 2012). Even if an increased cultural sensibility may be detected, it is still largely employed to "uncover" hidden forms of prejudice and xenophobia. Therefore, most sociological work on the cultural dimension of international migration is still caught up in a debunking mode. The attention to the contingency of difference-based discourses does not generate a fascination with their meaning structures or an interest in explaining the specific semantic structures that sustain (and constrain) their classificatory power and their capacity to persuade. It is here that CST can provide a distinctive contribution to migration studies. Relying on its cultural sociological approach, CST may help to question the

dominant instrumentalist vision of boundary-making, opening the relationship between social and cultural boundaries in a less reductionist direction.[16]

The dominant tradition for boundary research in sociology defines it as an instrumental, strategic activity. Boundary-making – both symbolic and social – is equated with a strategy of social closure, targeted to hoard resources, thus producing inequality (Tilly 2004, Tilly 2005). This strategic emphasis explains why the symbolic, discursive structure of boundary-making is often ignored, even when its importance is duly recognized (Wimmer 2008). The instrumental understanding of boundary-making practice is moreover associated, particularly in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, with a reductionist vision of the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries.[17] In Bourdieu's work, there is a fundamental homology between social and symbolic boundaries. They are not only highly interrelated, following the same logic of instrumental conflict: the creation of symbolic boundaries is a performative action that, using the language of revelation and construction, produces what it claims to have found in reality (Bourdieu 1991). The conflict about the legitimate ways of dividing the social world is the same thing as the conflict over the distribution of social power. From his perspective, the significant symbolic boundaries are the ones that overlap with specific social configurations and are functional to their reproduction. Unsurprisingly, categorical change is always functional to reproduction; transformation is always exogenous.[18]

From a CST point of view, this combination of instrumental boundary-making and weak autonomy of the symbolic dimension imposes unnecessary analytical limits to social research (Sciortino 2012). Granting (analytic) autonomy to symbolic boundaries, far from being a postmodern bonfire of the vanities, finally makes it visible how, in complex societies, collective representations are hardly ever homologous with social structures. A major implication is that boundary-making processes are contingent upon a creative interpretation of the cultural codes, classification, and narratives that constitute a major resource for their creation and maintenance. "Foreignness" can be seen as one form of belonging to a rich family of semantic constructions dealing with social

16 For a critical review of the field from the point of view of cultural sociology, see Sciortino (2012). The work carried out by the group of cultural sociologists at the Masaryk University in Brno is a rich example of the potentialities of a non-reductionist understanding of the interaction of cultural and social boundaries. See Jaworsky, Klvanova et al. (2023), Jaworsky, Rétiová et al. (2022), Rétiová, Rapoš Božič et al. (2021) and Božič, Klvaňová et al. (2023).

17 Bourdieu has been involved only marginally in migration research, but he has been an inspiration for scholars dealing with mobility and migration, including Abdelmalek Sayad (2004). See also Erel (2010) and Kim (2018).

18 The same applies to many researchers employing conceptual frameworks inspired by Bourdieu, with some important exceptions. Todd (2005) offers an interesting attempt to revise Bourdieu's framework making it able to account for the autonomy of the categorical order in social transformation and not only reproduction. Bail (2008), in his analysis of symbolic boundaries against immigrants in Europe, argues that the materials employed to trace such boundaries have consequences on the integration processes.

membership and the qualities necessary to claim and embody it. They are forms that can be combined in different ways, sometimes matching the boundaries of actual social networks, many other times resulting in broader configuration.

It should also be remembered that actual national boundaries are crisscrossed by other forms of transnational (as well as local or regional) solidary discourses that overlap – if only partially – with the codes of the civil sphere. Various discourses, from the cosmopolitan appeal to human rights to shared religious traditions, from the leftist appeals to worker solidarity to former colonial shared pasts, can be used in isolation or in (more or less) plausible combinations, as a rudimentary solidary discourse justifying one's presence and residence and, if not membership, at least the future possibility of it. A similar argument can be made for more exclusionary actions: they too can rely on a motley set of transnational discourses that, without challenging completely the membership of settled migrants and ethnic minorities, may seed uncertainty, weakening the bona fide nature of such membership.

The theoretical choice of giving analytical autonomy to symbolic boundaries makes it possible to explore new possibilities for understanding immigrant incorporation (Kivisto 2012). In fact, many of the most interesting phenomena in migration research take place precisely when symbolic categories and social clusters do *not* coincide. It is one example out of many, precisely the mismatch of social and symbolic boundaries that energizes the processes of civil repair as well as the tensions over inclusion or exclusion (Alexander 2016, Sciortino 2021).

In short, exclusion and inclusion are determined by structural *and* cultural forces, network positions *and* meaningful coding, political coalitions *and* crosscutting understandings of the moral order (Alexander 1990, Alexander 2006). If processes of boundary-making may be so dynamic, it is precisely because actors may develop claims to social inclusion (or exclusion) grounded on their previous membership in larger symbolic communities, as well as try to disqualify members of existing social networks owing to their polluting location in the symbolic order (Becker 2021). Rather than reflecting *sic et simpliciter* the balance of powers among members of various categories, the dynamism of boundary-making is oriented to, and acting upon, the gaps and discrepancies between social and symbolic orders. Granting analytical autonomy to symbolic boundaries does not mean denying that boundary-making is a process in which uneven and motley networks and asymmetric power relations play a great role. It acknowledges, however, that it is *also* a cultural activity linked to a vision of the world, triggered and regulated by overarching semiotic structures that classify events and possibilities in structured patterns of codes and narratives.

Stressing the importance of symbolic boundaries, and their analytical autonomy, does not imply going back to a vision of boundaries as reflexes of actual differences in specific cultural contents. Nor is it a return to the vision of boundaries only as a matter of subjective attribution. To claim that symbolic boundary-making is rooted in deeper cultural structures strengthens the view

that social categories, social groups, identities, and subcultures do not exist in isolation. Their actual meaning is always given by their position in the structural and symbolic orders that regulate social life. Such categories are a consequence of the specific form of the social and moral order in its historical developments, not its elementary, pre-existing constituents.

Conclusion

Civil sphere theory offers a promising, yet incomplete, framework for analyzing the complexities of universalistic solidarities in modern society. In this paper, we have explored the possibility of using CST to better account for international migration processes. By exploring migration as a process of boundary-crossing, we have situated it at the confluence of national membership, citizenship, and civil inclusion. This nexus provides the opportunity to highlight an undertheorized aspect: what are the membership boundaries of the civil sphere, and how are they related to national belonging?

The inherent tension between liberal-democratic ideals and the bounded nature of nation states creates fertile ground for both inclusionary and exclusionary practices. Migrants, as "matter out of place" often illuminate the fragility of civil solidarities while simultaneously offering opportunities for their redefinition. CST's nuanced understanding of cultural codes and symbolic boundaries positions it as a critical tool for unpacking these dynamics.

However, we wish to underscore the current limitations of CST, particularly its underdeveloped engagement with citizenship. As we have argued, citizenship is not merely a legal status but a pivotal conduit for both symbolic and social inclusion. Its omission risks underestimating the structural forces that shape migrants' experiences and the pathways toward their incorporation. We claim that by integrating a richer understanding of citizenship, CST can more effectively address the processes by which migrants negotiate their place within civil spheres.

In advancing this dialogue between CST and migration studies, we invite scholars to reconsider the role of symbolic codes in shaping inclusion and exclusion. This reorientation not only enriches CST but also provides migration scholars with a more robust framework for analyzing the cultural dimensions of boundary-making. In doing so, it calls for a deeper engagement with the symbolic imaginaries that sustain – and often disrupt – the processes of civil incorporation.

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Peter Kivisto i Đuzepe Šćortino

Pripadnost, migracija i uključenost u građansku sferu

Apstrakt

U ovom članku istražujemo odnos između migracije, pripadnosti i uključenosti kroz prizmu teorije građanske sfere, trenutno najsnažnijeg teorijskog okvira za razumevanje društvene solidarnosti u savremenim, diferenciranim društvima. Iako se teorija građanske sfere pokazala značajnom za produbljivanje razumevanja društvene solidarnosti i građanske obnove unutar ustanovljenih političkih sistema, ona je nedovoljno razmatrala granice koje određuju procese uključivanja i isključivanja u kontekstu migracija. Članak započinjemo rekonceptualizacijom imigracije kao procesa prelaska geografskih, političkih i simboličkih granica. Ovakav pristup pomera fokus sa linearnog shvatanja inkluzije na dinamičan međuodnos između nacionalne pripadnosti, državljanstva i građanske sfere. Oslanjajući se na sofisticiran pristup društvenim i kulturnim granicama razvijen u okviru teorije građanske sfere, tvrdimo da su u savremenom svetu nacionalna i građanska pripadnost duboko povezane. U kontekstu migracija, građanska sfera, dakle, mora posredovati između formalne inkluzivnosti liberalno-demokratskih ideala i ograničavajućeg karaktera nacionalne pripadnosti. Nakon toga razvijamo kritiku teorije građanske sfere zbog njenog nedovoljnog fokusa na državljanstvo, naglašavajući da državljanstvo dalje ostaje ključni kanal za univerzalizaciju nacionalne pripadnosti. Na kraju, identifikujemo glavni pokretač promena u konceptu članstva – tenziju između društvenih i simboličkih granica unutar diferenciranih društava. Ovaj pristup spaja studije migracija i kulturnu sociologiju, pružajući preliminarne uvide u mehanizme građanske integracije.

Ključne reči: Građanska sfera, demokratija, inkluzija, članstvo, migracija, nacija-država, solidarnost