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CIVIL SOCIETY IV: DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY AND THE NON-CIVIL SCAFFOLDING OF THE CIVIL SPHERE¹

ABSTRACT

A defining feature of what Alexander calls Civil Society (CS) III is its separation—analytic and empirical—from the putatively non-civil spheres of the family, schools, and associational forms which lack public communicative intent and comprise CS I. While critical to the progress of CST as a research program, with this separation and delimited conception, civil sphere theorists may miss a key insight of CS I regarding the *mutual interdependence* of spheres. Although civil codes, institutions, and interactional practices may have their "natural" home in the civil sphere, their emotional and normative force, and their survival over time, depend upon their ancillary institutionalization in non-civil spheres. Families are key to *democratic socialization*. Schools cultivate *democratic dispositions* through citizen-formation, inducting students into their nation's democratic traditions. And through *civic action* and *civic interaction orders* prejudices are challenged, and citizens become open to new forms of incorporation. Using the case of contemporary American democratic culture, we survey scholarship on political polarization and social capital's decline in the US, and argue that the discord characteristic of contemporary America's civil sphere arises, in part, from these non-civil spheres. That is, the erosion of democratic solidarity and basic norms of civility originate in democratic deficits in those non-civil spheres that scaffold the civil sphere.

KEYWORDS

Civil sphere theory,
civil society,
democratic solidarity,
cultural sociology, civic
action

Introduction

Imagine, if you will, a society where the civil sphere's communicative and regulative institutions are expansive and robust, where the discourse of civil society and the democratic ideals it encodes are regularly invoked by journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens, and where levels of political incorporation, legal

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protection, and cultural recognition for once marginalized and polluted groups and persons is historically high. Imagine also that *every* other (non)civil sphere in society save the market is weak, debilitated, or polarized—where the economy is invidiously winner-take-all, where middle- and lower-class families are resultantly stretched thin and bare, where schools are reduced to class-sorting mechanisms in a meritocratic rat-race, where partisan interests and hostilities organize religious life, where politics infuses art and athletics, where public space and services are eroded by privatization, where algorithms incentivizing outrage and umbrage dictate media and news consumption, where critical reflection and democratic deliberation have become luxury goods, where cross-cutting social ties and face-to-face sociability have become scarce. Now ask: is this putatively democratic society a healthy one? We suspect the answer is apparent: no, it is not. In fact, we suspect many will have trouble even imagining such a society; could a civil sphere be said to be “expansive and robust” under such conditions? Perhaps, but surely it cannot endure.

Implicit in this hypothetical lies our thesis: that the civil sphere’s life and health is intimately intertwined with the life and health of noncivil spheres. Or put another way: that democratic culture in general and democratic solidarity specifically, relies upon noncivil scaffolding (Talisie 2019). Civil sphere theory (CST) is not inattentive to this fact: Alexander acknowledges that, although the civil sphere is culturally and institutionally autonomous from “noncivil” spheres such as the state, economy, religion, family, and community, “these spheres are fundamental to the quality of life and to the vitality of a plural order, and their independence must be nurtured and protected” (2006: 7). Moreover, later he notes that, while noncivil spheres are regularly responsible for anti-civil intrusions, they equally provide important “facilitating inputs” that strengthen the civil sphere: “The goods and social forms produced by other spheres can be conceived as promoting a more ample civil life” (2006). Yet, despite these admissions, relatively little attention has been paid by Alexander, or CST scholars more generally, to noncivil spheres’ civil contributions. Instead, CST scholars tend to treat noncivil spheres as either intrusions into, or as under the sway of the civil sphere.

This should perhaps not surprise us, as this oversight follows logically from CST’s normative and empirical prioritization of the civil sphere—what Alexander (2006) calls CS III. To be sure, the analytic differentiation of “civil” institutions, associations, and discourse has arguably been CST’s most important intellectual contribution, marking a clear advance over the classic formulations of Ferguson, Smith, Hegel, and Tocqueville (CS I) as well as the later neo-Marxist revision (CS II). However, by focusing narrowly upon the civil sphere proper—understandable in the theory’s first iterations—CST scholarship can give the impression, wittingly or not, that democratic life relies exclusively on the expansiveness and robustness of the civil sphere. Worse, CST scholars may inadvertently end up disregarding some of the most important insights of these earlier accounts—be they, about the role of noncivil spheres in reproducing what Tocqueville (1998) termed the “habits of the heart” that

sustain democratic life, or the Marxist concern that the market tends to corrode everything, including civil solidarity. In turn, we believe CST scholars must expand our analytic purview to include the “civilizing” inputs (Alexander 2015: 174) of noncivil spheres and, similarly, the various ways that noncivil spheres provide “attenuating” inputs that temper or reduce the force of the civil sphere, and “impeding” inputs that outright obstruct civil sphere goals. This requires, we (provocatively) contend, a move from CS III to CS IV—an account of the civil sphere analytically includes both the *civil* dimensions of noncivil spheres—that is, the various ways these noncivil domains (re)produce and sustain civil dispositions, actions, interactional practices, and relations—as well as the *noncivil* features of these spheres which contribute to maintaining a healthy democracy.²

In this article, we present the initial outlines of this more expansive account of civil society by considering the civil contributions offered by three noncivil spheres: families, public schools, and voluntary associations/public life. CST is grounded in a framework of societal differentiation, conceiving of modern societies as characterized by institutional and moral pluralism (Durkheim 1984; Walzer 1983; Alexander and Colomy 1990). In contrast to modernization theory, however, CST rejects the view that differentiation entails institutional complementarity and cohesiveness; instead, it stresses the “fundamental incompatibility” of spheres (Alexander 2019: 7). In our view, the reality is best conceived as lying somewhere in-between neat complementarity and pure incommensurability. As Walzer (1984) puts it, “What goes on in one institutional setting influences all the others; the same people, after all, inhabit the different settings, and they share a history and a culture...” (327). While appreciating that noncivil logics, discourses, relations, and practices structure noncivil spheres, we believe that CST insufficiently stresses the *interdependence* of social spheres. In healthy democracies, noncivil spheres contribute fundamentally to civil life, socializing citizens to internalize the sacred codes of civil society, develop democratic attitudes, habits, and skills, cultivate and sustain civil relations, engage in everyday practices of civility, and expand the boundaries of democratic solidarity. Moreover, they also provide noncivil goods contributing to the vibrancy, cohesiveness, and richness of social life (Rosenblum 1998; Talisse 2019; Rosa 2024). Alexander (2006) contends that CST strives to theorize “democracy as a way of life” (4), yet, as Walzer reminds us, modern lives are scattered across far more spheres than the civil. If democracy is indeed a way of life, then it makes little sense to think it stops at the boundaries of the civil sphere. We do not stop being democrats when we go home and spend time with families and friends, when we attend school, or when we socialize in public. And if we do, maybe we were never really democrats to begin with.

2 In a penetrating response to this paper, Alexander forcefully challenged our contention that what is required is a new conception of civil society (i.e., CS IV). While we respectfully disagree, we do so undogmatically; we consider this an attempt to begin, rather than end, a much-needed conversation.

Thus, a more thorough sociological accounting of democratic life cannot limit itself to the communicative and regulative institutions of the civil sphere. To be sure, these institutions may be the heart of civil society, but a heart cannot live long unless its sister organs vigorously pump blood to it. Noncivil spheres are those organs, and their democratic roles, though perhaps civically subordinate, are no less vital for being so.

Our concern, then, is less the genesis of the civil sphere *per se* than how non- or extra-civil spheres provide scaffolding for the civil sphere, to the extent that without it the civil sphere would be much impoverished. Where CST scholarship has considered such spheres, they are generally treated as providing facilitating inputs or as spheres that encounter crises and are often transformed when pierced by civil sphere values (Alexander 2019). Where such an argument begins from a position inside the civil sphere, tracking its independent force over non- and extra-civil spheres, our argument takes an alternative tack—by starting *outside* the civil sphere. Rather than examining how the civil sphere infuses other spheres, we look at how those other spheres infuse the civil sphere. While our argument does not call into question the *analytic* autonomy of the civil sphere, we drive analysis in what we believe are novel and fertile ways by closely attending to the civil sphere's concrete entanglements with other spheres.

To set the scene, we begin with a review of the development of CST, focusing on the omissions and errors Alexander sought to address in earlier accounts of civil society. Next, building on the key insights of CS I, CS II, and CS III, we synthesize classical work on civil society, contemporary democratic theory, and recent cultural sociological scholarship on civic action and civic interaction orders, sketching the outlines of a more analytically expansive account of civil society (CS IV).³ The next section considers the “civilizing” inputs of three noncivil spheres—families, public schools, and voluntary associations/public life—highlighting both their “civil” and “noncivil” contributions to democratic society. Then, in the final section, we demonstrate our account's value by using it to shed light on the ailing health of American democracy (Ziblatt and Levitsky 2018). Although our opening imaginative hypothetical was not meant as a description of contemporary American democratic life, we cannot deny its similitudes. Thus, we contend an important source of the democratic degeneration characteristic of the American civil sphere lies in the state of its noncivil spheres. Put succinctly: a combination of extreme inequality, political polarization, and flailing public institutions has profoundly undermined both the civil dimensions of these noncivil spheres, and the noncivil goods they contribute to democratic social life. We conclude with brief reflections on the implications of our account for CST scholarship.

3 In this endeavour we are inspired by Xu (2022).

Civil Society I, II, & III - A Review

In *The Civil Sphere* Alexander makes clear that he devised CS III in response to the problems that plagued prior accounts of civil society. The original account, CS I, which he traces back to the Scottish moralists (Ferguson and Smith), Rousseau, Hegel, and Tocqueville, conceives of civil society as comprising basically all non-state institutions (the family, the market, voluntary associations, etc.) that involve social cooperation. The central problem with this account, argues Alexander, is its diffuseness; although highly suggestive, talk of “civil society” on this account simply includes far too much, and so fails to empirically and normatively differentiate a whole panoply of discourses, relations, and institutions. It is useful to place Alexander’s critique of CS I in context. During the years he was writing *The Civil Sphere*, neo-Tocquevillian accounts of civil society were experiencing a veritable revival (Bellah et al. 1985; Etzioni 1996; Putnam 2000; Paxton 2002).⁴ Thus, Alexander’s critique of CS I took shape in an intellectual context where social scientists were increasingly of the view that the lifeblood of democracy—what neo-Tocquevillians thought of as the seedbed of civic virtue—was “civil society,” vaguely conceived as including any and all voluntary associations, be they babysitting co-ops, knitting clubs, or bowling leagues.

At the same time, CS III was also devised with a second account in mind—an account that Alexander sensed had become increasingly taken-for-granted in sociology. What Alexander calls CS II follows Gramsci in conceiving of “civil society” as a sort of superstructure of capitalist societies. On this view, not only is civil society not democratic, but it is “inherently capitalist” (Alexander 2006: 29)—the ideological terrain upon which ruling class domination is meted out: the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas. Although CS II is ostensibly Marxist in its theoretical debts, Alexander traces its intellectual origins back to Thrasymachus, for whom might makes right, and talk of “justice” is said to be a smokescreen for naked self-interest. For Alexander, then, while the problem with CS I was its diffuseness, the problem with CS II was its reductionism. Like “weak” programs in the sociology of culture (Alexander and Smith 2001), Alexander maintained, CS II mistakenly denied the autonomy of (democratic) ideals and culture.

Considering this context, it should be evident why Alexander insisted on the analytic autonomy and empirical priority of the civil sphere. In response to scholars advocating CS I, Alexander stressed the fact of institutional differentiation, and the complex societal dynamics it produces. Subsuming all non-state institutions under a single conceptual umbrella ignores the incredible cultural and institutional diversity contained therein. Bowling leagues and BLM chapters might both be non-state voluntary associations, but this does not make them equally “civil.” Thus, a central aim of CS III was to isolate the

4 Following Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) we use the term “neo-Tocquevillian” because many scholars saw themselves as inspired by Tocqueville’s thought. We therefore sidestep the question of whether or not such scholars interpreted Tocqueville correctly.

codes, discourses, and institutions that comprise the civil sphere so that scholars might distinguish “civil” associations from “noncivil” ones. What makes a BLM chapter “civil” in a way that bowling leagues are not, Alexander contends, is that the former publicly invokes the discourse of civil society for the purposes of broadening democratic solidarity.

In formulating CS III, Alexander was sensitive to the arguments about “bad civil society” (Chambers and Kopstein 2001), which charged neo-Tocquevillians with overlooking the fact that many non-state voluntary associations either fail to contribute to civic life or directly threaten it (see also Foley and Edwards 1999). Is it actually the case that bowling leagues make a difference for civic life? Or might we be searching for the “civic” in all the wrong places (Schudson 2006)? Additionally, neo-Nazi social clubs may provide great bonding social capital for aspiring Nazis, but is this really something democrats should celebrate? Faced with an account of civil society so nebulous that it struggled to distinguish the civil impacts of condominium boards from those of social movements, it is not difficult to understand why Alexander (2006) insisted on “a much more precise and delimited understanding of the term” (31).

Equally, CS III was devised to counter the cynicism and reductionism of CS II. By insisting on the fact of differentiation, Alexander sought to correct the Marxist tendency to reduce everything to capitalism: “The civil sphere and the market must be conceptualized in fundamentally different terms. We are no more a capitalist society than we are a bureaucratic, secular, rational one, or indeed a civil one” (33). In separating analytically, the “civil sphere” from the “economic sphere,” Alexander was able to demonstrate the autonomy of liberal democracy—to show empirically that far from being a mere handmaiden to capital, democracy enshrines its own institutions, relations, and codes, which have played a key role in constraining not only the predations of the capitalist market, but also the anti-civil effects of patriarchal families, racial hierarchies, and religious intolerance. What is more, by insisting upon the institutional and cultural autonomy of the civil sphere, Alexander was able to bring to light the centrality of shared feelings, sacred values, and social performance in democratic life, that is, democracy’s reliance upon narrative, imagination, rhetoric, and charisma. This offered a useful corrective not only to the reductionism of CS II, but also the overly rationalized accounts of democratic life associated with Rawls and Habermas, centered on formal procedure for achieving justice. Thus, here too it is easy to see the basis for Alexander’s insistence on defining civil society in the circumscribed form characteristic of CS III.

And yet, this insistence has not been without drawbacks, the most important of which is that CST scholars have arguably underrated, or at least overlooked, the civil contributions of noncivil spheres. In a response to his critics Alexander (2015) writes:

Challenging the claim of critical theory that complex organizational systems colonize and destroy democratic lifeworlds, CST points to such ‘civilizing’ inputs as formally free market relations and contract law, bureaucratic rationality,

science, and this-worldly ascetic religion. Yet, if such inputs can be critical to the creation of a civil sphere, they are not the same as the product they help to build—civil discourse and institutions.... Neither the morale nor the institutions of the civil sphere can be reduced to the social and cultural inputs that contribute to their construction. (175)

This statement, we think, is representative of CS III, in that it simultaneously acknowledges the “civilizing” inputs of noncivil spheres, while insisting upon the civil sphere’s analytic and empirical priority. Now, as we have explained, given the academic context from which civil sphere theory emerged, this insistence makes perfect sense.

But it is not clear to us that this insistence helps, rather than hinders advances in CST scholarship today. Few deny the analytic autonomy of the civil sphere. This battle has been won. The question, then, is whether ignoring or downplaying the “social and cultural inputs that contribute” to the civil sphere’s construction, maintenance, and expansion is theoretically appropriate. We think not. As CST matures and is brought in ever newer directions and applied to novel cases, it is a good time to revisit some of its core assumptions. We contend that while CS III is undoubtedly an improvement upon CS I and CS II, it nevertheless overlooks some of the most important insights contained in those earlier accounts. Accordingly, perhaps we need a more expansive account of civil society that systematically theorizes these “civilizing” inputs. In the following section, we offer the initial outlines of such an account.

Civil Society IV – An Initial Sketch

By bringing to light the institutions, associations, and discourses that centrally animate and structure the civil sphere, Alexander has done scholars of democracy an immense service. Without question, CS III markedly improves our empirical and normative understanding of democratic life. Yet, for all that it offers, it nevertheless leaves unaddressed or undertheorized a number of significant issues and questions.

The first of these is the question of *democratic socialization*. To be sure, Alexander (2015) acknowledges that “[c]ommitment to democratic values is a matter of socialization to established culture” (Alexander 2015: 175). Yet, there is little in CST that explores this process.⁵ In fact, one can get the impression from much CST scholarship that democratic citizens—and democratic solidarity, with them—simply come into the world prefab. The truth, of course, is that no one is born a democrat; they must be made. And the making of democratic solidarity does not magically appear when citizen’s reach voting age, but rather is contingent on socialization into civil sphere values, and so begins long before a person officially “enters” the civil sphere. This becomes apparent when we ask how civil values become sacred for individuals. The civil values

⁵ Of course, the tendency to ignore socialization is not unique to CST (see Guhin et al 2021).

of autonomy, agency, rationality, self-control, and sanity are made meaningful early in life, through local traditions, folk tales of civil heroism, and face-to-face interactions (Fine and Hallett 2014; Fine 2019). Similarly, individuals learn the meaning of civil relations—those that are open, trusting, and truthful—in various noncivil spheres long before they partake in the civil sphere proper (Xu 2022). Accordingly, CST scholars must improve our understanding of the process of democratic socialization—that is, how democrats are made (and continuously remade).

The second of these is the importance of what we call *democratic dispositions*. While CS I may suffer from diffuseness, what it arguably gets right is emphasizing the importance of democratic attitudes, sensibilities, and skills—what Tocqueville (1998) felicitously called “habits of the heart.” Now, it is true that neo-Tocquevillians have tended to be too sanguine about the capacity of any and all voluntary associations to foster these, while also failing to identify precisely how such dispositions take shape. However, failing to identify the social origins of democratic dispositions does not change the fact that the cultivation of such dispositions is essential to a flourishing democracy (Maletz 2005). Indeed, summing up the consensus among democratic theorists, Kymlicka and Norman (2000) write,

the health and stability of a modern democracy depends, not only on the justice of its institutions, but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens: e.g. their sense of identity, and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic, or religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; their desire to participate in the political process in order to promote the public good and hold political authorities accountable; their willingness to show self-restraint and exercise personal responsibility in their economic demands, and in personal choices that affect their health and the environment; and their sense of justice and commitment to a fair distribution of resources. (6)

Political theorists tend to discuss these civic virtues as if they can be abstracted from the meaningful lifeworlds of individual citizens. A cultural sociological approach says otherwise (Xu 2022; Morgan 2024). Thus, when we speak of *democratic dispositions*, we consider the declarative and nondeclarative cultural habits that animate democratic life in specific places and times (Lizardo 2017). To be sure, the discourse of civil society and the sacred codes it enshrines are an essential resource in civic life, but such codes do not merely live at the symbolic or discursive level. They are equally embodied and enlivened, materialized in practical and social competencies, in split-second intuitions and instincts, and in routine practices (Giddens 1984). It is in this multidimensional way—entailing both discursive and practical consciousness—that we think “civility” as a cultural ideal must be conceived. For Shils (1991) “civility” is “a mode of political action which postulates that antagonists are also members of the same society” (13-14). In a similar vein, Boyd (2006) sees civility as “a moral disposition that derives from the postulate of moral equality” (866). For

these theorists, to be committed to civil values is not merely to invoke specific discourses, nor to be primed to respond to civic performances, but also to comport oneself in distinctly “civil” ways, and to exercise certain “civil” habits of mind (e.g., Gutmann 1987; Macedo 1990; Galston 1991; Rosenblum 1998).

One of these is “the disposition, and the developed capacity, to engage in public discourse” (Galston 1991: 227). And tied to this is “the willingness to listen seriously to a range of views” (Kymlicka and Norman 2000, 11). Gutmann (1987) summarizes these as “the skills and virtues of deliberation” (xiii). CST scholars have tended to be suspicious of philosophers’ emphasis upon public reasonableness and rational deliberation. For Alexander (2015), theorizing “democracy after the cultural turn” requires, if not outright rejecting, at least attenuating the “abstract and ratiocinative understanding of modernity” implicit in classic accounts of deliberative democracy (182). To be sure, CST has compellingly shown how democratic life rests upon symbolic and performative foundations, which Habermasian accounts of the public sphere miss. Yet, there is no reason, in principle, that CST and deliberative democracy cannot be reconciled. Advancing precisely this kind of reconciliation Sass and Dryzek (2024) argue that “democratization entails the co-evolution of culture and reason (and institutions),” such that it is a mistake to sharply contrast social performance and rational deliberation.⁶ Thus, Sass and Dryzek contend that a healthy civil sphere in fact *presupposes* certain democratic dispositions, including a willingness and capacity to deliberate. Of course, there are others. Rosenblum (1998) highlights the disposition to treat people with easy spontaneity and without reference to rank, law-abidingness, and refraining from inflicting cruelty, humiliation and violence. Callan (1997) stresses a psychological resistance to tribalism, and a striving for impartiality. And Lefebvre (2023) pinpoints a visceral revulsion to slurs and other forms of explicit discrimination. No doubt there are others, and of course these dispositions and virtues will manifest in distinct ways across democratic societies and cultures. But the point stands: the “culture of democracy” (Xu 2022) cannot do without democratic dispositions.

The third underexplored area in CST is the nature and diversity of *civic action* and *civic interaction orders*. Like CST, civic action theory was devised in response to the neo-Tocquevillian account of civil society, which naively presumed that all voluntary associations equally contribute to civic life (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). However, in contrast to CST, which foregrounds the communicative intent of “civil” groups, civic action theory instead centers how discourse, codes, narratives, and symbols are mobilized *in action*. On this account, action is “civic” insofar as it involves individuals cooperating for the purposes of improving society, however they imagine it (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014, 809). This framework importantly differs not only from CST,

6 It is worth noting that Alexander made this very same argument prior to his more sustained engagement with performance theory, albeit in the context of discussing the aspirations of social science (see Alexander 1995).

but also deliberative democracy, which foregrounds democratic dispositions and capacities, as the focus is on *scene styles*—that is, the favoured modes of interaction that shape how groups “act” civically. With this concept, Lichterman and Eliasoph help us to see that some groups with “civic” communicative intentions and aims can coordinate their actions in profoundly uncivil ways, while other groups that lack any explicit “civic” intent or purpose may nevertheless accomplish profoundly “civic” goals. Crucial for us is the fact that “civic action” is not restricted to the civil sphere but rather takes place across a wide variety of institutional domains—both “civil” and “noncivil.”

We use the term *civic interaction order* in order to highlight the meso-level groups where civic life becomes socially meaningful. As Fine and Hallett (2014) explain, citizens come to understand and experience the “civil” primarily through local communities and groups—be they families, classrooms, or volunteer groups. In other words, it is through the social relations, emotional linkages, shared memories and prospective futures formed and nurtured in groups that citizens make sense of, and experience, the discourse of civil society. Further, it is in these that we learn to perform and enact our “civil selves” (Fine 2019: 21). So, while the civil sphere may be institutionalized at the macro-level, it relies profoundly upon the “tiny publics” that make up meso-level interaction orders. Summing things up, Fine (2019) writes, “Affiliations among persons create affiliation with society. Allegiance is constituted in the local worlds in which citizens participate, and it then extends to allegiance to a world that is more expansive, but perceived as similar in kind. A commitment to local action becomes a commitment to an extended world” (22; see also, Kaplan 2018).

A focus on civic action and civic interaction orders forces us to expand our analytic purview and seek out wherever and whenever “civil” life is being done (Horgan 2019; 2025). Such focus challenges the view, implicit in CS III, that institutional spheres monistically enshrine a single discursive and moral logic, as opposed to being the site of multiple, overlapping and hybridized orders of worth (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006).⁷ Reflecting on the merits of CS I, Rosenblum (1998) remarks upon the “hybrid character of associations” (6) in a liberal democracy, that is, the way a single institution or group may serve multiple social and moral purposes, some “civil” and others not. The insight here is significant, and can be traced back to Tocqueville: if a society is truly democratic, then nearly all institutional spheres will contain some “civil” dimensions and aspects, as they will reflect the “passion for equality” characteristic of democratic peoples (Tocqueville 1998: 204). So, while we agree with Alexander that the *raison d’être* of the family, the public school, and voluntary associations are not to shore up the civil sphere, it is nevertheless the case that each of these noncivil spheres plays a vital role in doing so.

The fourth and final issue revolves around the *noncivil* goods upon which a robust civil sphere depends. In contrast to totalitarian societies, liberal

⁷ For contrasts between CST and Boltanski’s approach to public culture, see Eulriet (2014).

democracies protect the right to privacy, and with this, the pursuit of apolitical engagements—from love and friendship, to art and academic excellence, to scientific exploration and humanistic fantasy (Watts 2022).⁸ In this way, it is implicit in theories of liberal democracy, including CST, that a healthy democratic society requires robust noncivil spheres which provide citizens with plural social goods to value and pursue (Walzer 1983; Watts 2024). According to Talisse (2019), an underappreciated consequence of this is that it is *good for democracy* when individuals engage in activities and pursuits that are “non-political.” Talisse’s argument is that healthy democracies require citizens who are engaged and invested in noncivil spheres—where they have strong familial and friendship ties, where they are gainfully employed, and where they have hobbies and communal responsibilities that root them in networks of support and esteem. Likewise, Rosenblum (1998) stresses the necessity of “the experience of pluralism” (17); in her view, it is best for democracy if democratic citizens are involved in myriad social spheres, which force them to interact with those who differ from them along axes of race, gender, sexuality, class, talent, ideology, and partisan affiliation. It is the experience of pluralism that serves to foster the cross-cutting ties essential to democratic stability (Calhoun et al 2022: 237).

It is the noncivil spheres in modern society that provide such inputs, while enabling such cross-cutting interactions and ties. Consequently, if those “greedy institutions” demanding “fervent and total commitment” (Coser 1974: 4) are permitted to flourish, civic life will suffer. If citizens lack health (and health-care), they will not be able to meaningfully participate in civic life (Schudson 2006). If citizens lack social integration, they will be more susceptible to demagogues (Gidron and Hall 2020). Likewise, if they are withheld recognition or esteem (Honneth 2014; Lamont 2019). And, of course, few barriers to democratic participation are as profound as poverty. These examples recall an insight contained in CS II—what we would formulate as a concern about the *domination* of one sphere by another (Walzer 1983). Although Alexander was right that the civil sphere is analytically independent of the market, it is nevertheless the case that the economic sphere can dominate, and thereby distort, other social spheres. And to the extent that these spheres provide essential inputs into the civil sphere, their incapacity may indirectly undermine democratic life.

In sum, we contend that, for all its virtues, CS III fails to adequately theorize and account for (1) the process of *democratic socialization*, (2) the nature and importance of *democratic dispositions*, (3) the diverse sites and character of *civic action* and *civic interaction orders*, and (4) the essential role of *noncivil goods (and spheres)* in maintaining the civil sphere. In the following we begin addressing these issues, by considering them as they relate to each of the following three noncivil spheres—the family, public schools, and voluntary associations/public life.

8 This is not to say that these engagements are apolitical, but rather that they can be pursued without reference to politics.

A CST Analysis of the Family, Public Schools, and Voluntary Associations/Public Life

The Family

Parsons (1955) writes, “the *human* personality is not ‘born’ but must be ‘made’”, and that it is families which serve as the “factories” that produce them (16). So, if something like a “democratic personality” (Greenstein 1965) exists, then these will be pre-eminently formed in democratic families. In saying this, we are not reducing the family to its role in reproducing democratic life. As Erikson (1964) reminds us, the role of the family is much broader than this; it serves to imbue children with all the necessary means—psychological, emotional, and social—to cope with, and navigate, the adult world. Thus, we agree that childhood socialization involves much more than teaching children to speak in the language of civil society (Alexander 2015 175), yet, clearly, in democratic societies, families play an inordinate role in *democratic socialization* (Davies 1965).

While it was certainly the case that the family functioned in aristocratic societies as an anti-civil force, legitimating patriarchal relations and sexist attitudes, processes of modernization and democratization have fundamentally changed this (Giddens 1991; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Indeed, it is perfectly coherent to speak today of the “democratic family,” the “democratic marriage,” and “democratic parenting” (Sait 1940; Beasley 1953). To be sure, these institutional changes have been the result of processes of societalization (Alexander 2019)—of the civil sphere intruding into the family and restructuring it in line with democratic norms and ideals. But the result has been a genuine cultural-structural change, such that the family in democratic societies now plays a critical role in sustaining the civil order.

Consider, first, when and how children are introduced to the discourse of liberty, which sacralizes the ideals of self-control, rationality, autonomy, and sanity, while polluting their opposites. We would argue that these values become “real” for the child first and foremost through their embodiment by their parents and caregivers (Easton and Hess 1962). Thus, just as Mead (1934) theorized that children develop a self through role-taking, we can say that the child first develops her “civic self” by taking on the perspective and roles of her parental authorities. In this way, the child’s first “civil heroes” will likely be the significant others in her life—be they her parents, her teacher, or a local authority figure (Fine 2019). Furthermore, it is also within the family where children first learn the meaning of “civil” relationships; open, trusting, and truthful relations will be those modeled by their guardians and upheld (or not) by adult authorities. As, too, will civil interaction norms. Civil inclusion at the macro-level is complemented by inclusion at the interactional level, what Colomy and Brown term “interactional citizenship ... a set of vague and diffuse but vitally felt expectations and obligations that pertain to interactional displays of respect, regard and dignity for the person” (Colomy and Brown 1996: 376; cf. Brownlee 2020). We would argue that it is within the family that children

first become acquainted with such democratic norms of interaction. These are more than simply interactional norms, they provide entrance into broader codes and rituals of democratic engagement (Cahill 1987). By observing parents and caregivers interacting with strangers, children learn that civility demands “equal, open, tolerant, nonviolent, and inclusive manners of communication and styles of self-governing” (Xu 2022, 10) and are thus initiated into the civil interaction order. Finally, it is in the family where democratic dispositions and competencies are first cultivated (if not fully realized). Children develop the habit of deliberating publicly and learn the “art of listening” (Xu 2022) at the dinner table, they may be taught by their democrat parents to speak up and advocate for their interests, and they learn to cooperate with siblings and playmates. In countless moments over the course of childhood, children develop the attitudes, skills, and character that enable them, when older, to participate in the civil sphere (Gutman 1987: 50).

Democracy presupposes an obedience to law coupled with a critical stance toward authority, and a valuing of independence and rational deliberation (Alexander 2006). These are core features of democratic socialization, and they contrast markedly with the socialization patterns typical of authoritarian societies. Elucidating the latter, Greenstein (1965) lists the following: rigid discipline, conditional affection dependent upon approved behavior, strict parental authority, deference toward superiors, domination of subordinates, the prizing of strength and the punishing of weakness. Of course, CST would stress that the codes of civil society can be attached to any number of behaviors (e.g., many contemporary authoritarians traffic in the language of democracy (Mounk 2018)). While true, the democratic family strives to embody the “best” in democratic society—i.e., honesty, openness, trusting, cooperation, participation, independence, and equality. Similarly, we can contrast the democratic marriage or partnership, premised upon the autonomy and equality of each partner, with that typical of authoritarian societies, where traditional gender hierarchies more forcefully structure relations and interactions (Sait 1940). And here again, empirical evidence suggests that genuine changes have taken place within the family in the wake of democratization (Giddens 1991).

All of this lends credence to Durkheim’s (2003) insight that the family is “the political society in miniature” (26). A democratic society, therefore, will not last long without democratic families. If parents do not socialize their children to sacralize civil motives, relations, and institutions, then civil performances have difficulty fusing. If children do not develop the democratic dispositions undergirding civil relations and interactions, then civic life will hollow-out. And if young people are not encouraged by their parents to reflect, deliberate, and show respect for those with whom they disagree, then the prospects of the civil sphere will be impoverished.

All of this said, Alexander is correct that the family is not chiefly, or even primarily, a “civil” institution. The first language of the domestic sphere is expressive, affective, intimate, and self-oriented (Watts 2022). The interactional practices and norms of family life generally serve to secure close bonds of

affection, loving relations, romantic ties, and self-realization. Parental authority can conflict with rational-legal authority. The partiality and expressive ethic inherent to family life can sit in tension with the impartiality and self-discipline demanded by the civil sphere. The private goods of family life are not those of public life. The family, then, is a *hybrid* institution (Rosenblum 1998). On one hand, it provides essential noncivil goods—from nurture and loving relations to emotional and material support. On the other, it plays critical “civil” functions, making the discourse of civil society meaningful and real, inculcating in citizens democratic dispositions, and acclimating them to democratic mores. In turn, we do not deny the tension that can, and does, characterize the boundaries separating the family from the civil sphere. However, we insist that both the noncivil and civil inputs the family provides are crucial to a robust and vibrant civil sphere, and so also to democratic life.

Public Schools

In a response to Honneth’s contention that CST errs in overlooking the civil functions of schools, Alexander (2015) remarks, “education is of the greatest importance to maintaining a democratic society, but education is not, in itself, a civil institution” (175). Technically speaking, we have no qualms with this statement; if we define “civil” as Alexander does, it is plainly true. But it is worth asking: if education really is “of the greatest importance to maintaining a democratic society” then should we really exclude it from a sociological account of democratic life?

Public education, like the family, is a hybrid institution, oriented to multiple, and indeed, competing social goods. This is made clear in Parsons’s (1964) analysis of the school class, which he describes as “an agency of socialization and allocation” (129). For Parsons, an important function of the schooling system is to prepare children and adolescents for their future roles in the modern economy, by socializing them into the value patterns of society, providing them intellectual and vocational training, and then channeling them into the occupational structure (130). In this way, education serves the economic sphere by providing it with human capital in the form of able workers and employers. Incidentally, in this capacity the school also functions as a system of stratification, thereby producing and reproducing various forms of inequality (Bourdieu 1984).

However, at the same time as the education system functions as a “sorting machine” (Domina et al. 2017), it also functions, Parsons (1964) contends, as a source of socialization into “responsible citizenship.” That is, it’s in the school class where young people hone the democratic dispositions they first learned in their families, while also broadening their scope: “Such things as respect for the teacher, consideration and co-cooperativeness in relation to fellow-pupils, and good ‘work-habits’ are the fundamentals, leading on to capacity for ‘leadership’ and ‘initiative’ (Parsons 1964: 137). Core to social reproduction, education, then, has both economic and civic functions. As Smelser (1985) writes,

“education as a process can never be a purely cognitive process, but it also inevitably involves the exposure to cultural values, ideals, heroes, and villains, as well as normative expectations relating to matters such as personal ambition, attitudes and behavior toward authorities, cooperative behavior, and so on” (116). It’s worth noting that the view that the education system plays a vital role in democratic socialization is far from novel. For instance, one finds it championed by both Dewey and Durkheim (see Dill 2007). For the former, a critical aim of public education is to prepare young people for public life, by habituating them to cooperating, deliberating, and critical thought. For the latter, education is a profoundly moral task, oriented to socializing children into the civic traditions of the nation, fostering the emotional bases of democratic solidarity, and inculcating within students a universalist moral orientation (Cladis 2005). Nor have these ideas been exclusive to intellectuals. As Kymlicka (2001) reminds us, “the need to create a knowledgeable and responsible citizenry was one of the major reasons for establishing a public school system, and for making education mandatory” (293). So, while it might be the case that the primary function of public schools is not “civil,” it is nevertheless the case that “a basic task of schooling is to prepare each new generation for their responsibilities as citizens” (293).

It might be argued that the school cannot, and ought not, be expected to accomplish “civil” ends, or that “civic education” is, at most, a minor component of the educational process. Yet, as Macedo (2004) insightfully retorts:

Civic education is inseparable from education: no teacher could run a classroom, no principal could run a school, without taking a stand on a wide range of civic values and moral and political virtues. How could you conduct a classroom without taking a stand on gender equality? Are you going to treat boys and girls the same or not? Are you going to treat all religions in a tolerant manner? Do you care equally about the education of rich kids and poor kids? It would be nothing short of bizarre for schools to confine themselves to promoting only ‘academic’ or ‘intellectual’ virtues while leaving aside democratic virtues such as basic equality of concern and respect for all people. Important moral and political values constrain and shape the way we conceive of and advance the intellectual enterprise. (14)

Macedo reminds us that, just as democracy has reshaped the family, so, too, has it reshaped the education system. And just as the democratic family facilitates democratic life, so, too, does democratic education (Gutmann 1987). For instance, by inculcating in students democratic dispositions, democratic education functions to expand the partial loyalties and primordial ties fostered in the family (Parsons 1955: 122). By enforcing and rewarding civility, tolerance, and mutual respect in interactions, schools habituate students to civic interaction orders. Democratic schools implicitly and explicitly sacralize the civil values of autonomy, independence, and rationality while polluting their opposites (Kymlicka 2001, 309). Classrooms provide opportunities to practice and hone the skills and habits of deliberation (Callan 1997). Students are

taught the histories of local and global “civil heroes” and “anticivil villains,” developing admiration for the former and antipathy for the latter (Hess and Easton 1962; Watts 2025). Students internalize the “institutional habitus” of their school culture, coming to feel and enact specific modes of incorporation (Tajic and Lund 2022; Lund 2015). And in the process, they gradually develop a “common civic identity” (Macedo 2000: 231), which serves as the emotional and symbolic basis for civil solidarity.

Of course, all of this will take place in a particular cultural context, shaped by national, regional, and local traditions, and thus will take different forms across time and space. Moreover, just as CST offers an ideal-typical account of the democratic functions of the regulative and communicative institutions of the civil sphere, so, too, are we providing an ideal-typical account of the “civil” contributions of education. Furthermore, none of what we have said changes the fact that schools can, and do, function simultaneously as sources of human capital, as sorting machines, as incubators of academic excellence, and as generators of civic virtue. As we have argued, education is a hybrid institution, a site of diverse values and ends. Within any given school one is as likely to find the narrow pursuit of economic self-interest or the disinterested quest for truth, as the universalist ambition for civil solidarity. To this extent, it is true that schools are not “civil” institutions. Yet, it remains the case that in a healthy democracy, schools will serve “as mediators of civil sphere values” (Tajic and Lund 2022), thereby shoring up the civil sphere.

Associational Life

Alexander’s critique of the imprecision and diffuseness of CS I remains invaluable. CST and civic action theorists have made evident the deficiencies in an account of civil society that treats all voluntary associations as equally “civil.” Nevertheless, there are insights contained in CS I that ought not be neglected. We can think of these as twofold: first, CS I was justifiably concerned not merely about the *quality* of civic discourse, action, sociability, and public life, but also their *quantity*. Second, CS I rightly underscored the noncivil goods, fostered neither by the family nor state institutions, that contributed to a robust democratic culture. Let us take these in turn.

CST and civic action theorists are chiefly interested in probing the *quality* of “civil” discourse and performance and “civic” action (Alexander 2006; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). By contrast, in *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) was mostly concerned with tracking the *quantitative* decline in social capital and civic engagement. When understood in this way, not only does it seem possible to reconcile these programs, but it becomes desirable to. The reason is that it seems to us important (leaving aside the methodological challenges it poses) to ask whether “civil” associations, as conceived by CST, or “civic action” as conceived by civic action theorists, are more or less common than they once were, and to then investigate what the sources of these quantitative changes might be. Or, framed differently: it may be that civic associational life

is high in quality, but if it is minimal in quantity, restricted to a tiny number of citizens, we may need to worry.

So, while communitarian and civic republican concerns about the corrosive effects of individualism on civic and public life may be overstated, they cannot be dismissed out of hand (Durkheim 2003; Calhoun et al 2022). Tocqueville (1998) was surely right that individualism can undermine democratic life, insofar as it leads citizens to turn inward, and disregard their civic responsibilities. Still, whether “civic life” has precipitously declined or not remains an open question, the answer to which will depend on how one defines “civic.” Moreover, it remains the case that scholars such as Putnam ignored the rich varieties of civic action (Schudson 2006). In turn, a revised account of civil society must be much more sensitive to the diversity of both civic life and civic space.

One emerging line of inquiry follows Goffman (1963) in conceiving of public space and interactions between strangers as entailing profoundly civil dimensions (Horgan et al. 2020; Horgan 2020). As we noted above, civil inclusion at the macro-level has been complemented by inclusion at the interactional level (Colomy and Brown 1996)—a fact that becomes apparent when civil interactions break down. Indeed, “[i]t is the absence of democracy in everyday life that makes daily interactions unbearable” (Rosenblum 1998, 351). Democratic citizens expect to be treated with equal dignity in public space, such that a violation of the sacred norm of civility stirs up immense emotional distress and anger (Horgan 2020; 2025). Similarly, civil sociability among strangers may also provide for a diffuse sense of belonging (Horgan et al 2020; Liinamaa et al 2021). There is an important sense, then, in which face-to-face interactions with strangers can serve to fortify the civil bond or tragically weaken it. A key problem with CS I, then, was that in conflating civil society with voluntary associations, many civil dimensions of public life were overlooked.

The most important feature of CS I, however, was its appreciation for the noncivil goods that noncivil spheres such as the family, hobby groups, sports clubs, social networks, artistic communities, religious organizations, charities, professional societies, and associational life in general contribute to democracy. For instance, while Putnam’s (2000) famous distinction between “bonding” and “bridging” social capitals has been criticized on the grounds that neither type has been proven to *directly* contribute to civic life, and both have been found in some cases to threaten civility (Chambers and Kopstein 2001), it is nevertheless the case that both types of social capital can, and often do, contribute *indirectly* to democratic social life.

First, associations that generate *bonding* social capital provide citizens with a host of noncivil goods, including camaraderie, community, responsibilities, purpose, social support, and emotional connection (Kaplan 2018). In this way, we could say that a core function of noncivil spheres is to stave off anomie (Durkheim 2002). A society where many suffer from social isolation or lack close friendships and social ties is not a healthy democracy. Citizens in this condition are more likely to lose faith in democratic institutions, and thus become more open to authoritarian appeals (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Gidron and Hall

2017). Accordingly, although they may not be expressly “civil,” noncivil associations that generate bonding social capital can be said to function as “generative institutions” (Watts 2022) which provide democratic citizens with the resources—psychological, social, and emotional—to productively participate in the civil sphere. Rosenblum (1998) observes, “One experience of associational life can offset others. Associations can compensate for deficits and deprivations suffered outside. When they are not indirect schools of virtue, they may provide a sort of reparation” (350). Of course, it is true that not all voluntary associations of this kind will contribute to the culture of democracy (and some may threaten it), but Putnam and other neo-Tocquevillians’ are right that a society wholly lacking in bonding social capital, where citizens lack close ties to others, is unlikely to foster a healthy democratic culture (Hall and Lamont 2013).

Second, Putnam’s notion of *bridging* social capital spoke to the importance of broad social networks that facilitate interaction, cooperation, and communication between citizens. Here, too, the problem is that bridging social capital is not in itself “civil.” Yet a crucial insight nevertheless remains—that is, the existence of social networks that cut across axes of difference is tremendously important for stabilizing the civil sphere (Talisso 2019; Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022). As Alexander (2021) notes, the civil sphere relies upon the maintenance of “a vital center” that ensures that opposing civil groups remain committed to the basic rules and institutions of democratic life. One of the ways that this vital center is secured is through the existence of those cross-cutting allegiances and overlapping concerns across various noncivil spheres that enable “enemies” to become “frenemies” (Alexander 2013: 2). It is through sharing nonpolitical activities, identities, and investments that adversaries in the civil sphere become willing to accept the legitimacy of the democratic process (Xu 2022: 104). Furthermore, although true that the size and complexity of modern society ensures that core-groups may “rarely encounter out-groups directly” (Alexander 2006: 421), supposing that the few interactions citizens have with those different from them are inconsequential is a mistake. On the contrary, we contend contact between diverse citizens plays a crucial role in expanding or contracting civil solidarity (Allport 1954). These ties need not be sustained or thickened over time, merely sharing space in conflict-free ways is a good in itself (Anderson 2011). When core-group members have positive and civil interactions with members of out-groups, this can significantly reshape their civic imaginaries (Mounk 2022). Indeed, it is for this reason that the concept of bridging social capital is useful, as it points to the necessity of social ties that “bridge” individuals and groups with different identities and commitments (Rosenblum 1998).

Ultimately, what our expansive account of civil society strives to foreground are the myriad noncivil goods that sustain democratic social life (Talisso 2019). As our opening thought experiment implied, a society where none but the civil sphere is thriving is, paradoxically, not a healthy democracy. For a strong democratic society is one where families, schools, associational life are providing the “civil” and “noncivil” inputs that, in subtle yet essential ways, undergird civil solidarity.

American Democracy: A Case Study in Democratic Degeneration

We have argued that CS III needs updating, more specifically, that it must be expanded to include the civil and noncivil inputs upon which the civil sphere relies (what we call CS IV). Thus far we have made our case in analytic terms; in our view, democracy is at its best when its noncivil spheres like the family, the education system, and associational life are doing their civil and noncivil jobs, as it were. In this final section we strengthen our case by examining the empirical state of these spheres in contemporary America. We argue that an important source of the democratic degeneration taking place in America is the result of the domination and corrosion of these noncivil spheres. That is, American democracy is suffering because these noncivil spheres have been unable to do their jobs. This is not the place to offer a comprehensive account of the ills of American democracy, of course. So, we merely focus on what we take to be two key pathologies, which have had sizeable effects on American social and civic life—economic inequality and political polarization.

A large body of empirical evidence makes clear that over the last few decades inequality has risen dramatically, especially in the US (Piketty 2014). While growing inequality has multiple causes, analysts agree that a central source was an ideological-cum-policy embrace of neoliberalism, beginning with the election of Reagan (Harvey 2005; Savage 2021). From a cultural sociological perspective, neoliberalism can be understood as the view that the cultural and moral logic of the market should govern all other spheres (Lerch et al. 2021); it entails domination by the economic sphere (Watts 2024). Decades of neoliberal reforms have not only fuelled a massive gap separating the rich and poor, but also wage stagnation and increased economic precarity for the middle classes, a hollowing out of social services, including public education and infrastructure, a decrease in social mobility, steep declines in union membership, and the de-skilling of both blue- and white-collar jobs (Lind 2020; Leonhardt 2023). In these ways and more (and just as advocates of CS II would predict), the tyranny of the market has had profound effects on other social spheres, destabilizing and weakening personal, social, political, and even economic life for all but the wealthy.

In parallel with the mounting economic inequality wrought by neoliberalism, America has witnessed a remarkable surge in political polarization over the last half-century or so (Klein 2020). Not only do Democrats and Republicans tend to hold radically opposing ideological positions on most social issues (Abramovitz 2022), but they hold increasingly hostile views of each other (Abramovitz and Webster 2018). Summarizing the literature on affective polarization, Iyengar et al. (2019) write, “Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party’s members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines, or even to partner with opponents in a variety of other activities” (130). Political polarization has increased in most developed democracies, but America’s levels of negative partisanship remain exceptional (Garzia et al. 2023: 3). One of the reasons for this,

Baldassari and Gelman (2008) explain, is because of an upsurge in partisan alignment. Not long ago, average Democrats and Republicans shared much in common, both ideologically and demographically. Today, partisans are divided not only by ideology, but also geography, race, education, religious affiliation, news consumption, workplace, cultural taste, and marital habits (Abramovitz and McCoy 2019; Iyengar et al. 2019). In other words, Democrats and Republicans have increasingly self-sorted, such that they inhabit discrete partisan lifeworlds. What is more, empirical studies suggest that one's political identity commonly dictates one's activities and investments across nearly all social spheres (Finkel et al. 2020; Lee and Bearman 2020; Revers forthcoming).

How have economic inequality and political polarization affected the non-civil spheres of the family, the school, and associational life? As Americans have grown more economically unequal, they have led much more economically segregated lives (Owens 2016). Indeed, income inequality is an important cause of the urban and rural divide (Florida 2018; Luca et al. 2023), as well as rising neighborhood segregation on the basis of class. Mijs and Roe (2021) observe, "As income inequality in the United States increased by 15% over the 1970–2010 period, inequalities among neighborhoods in these cities grew by about 40%" (6). One of the consequences of neighbourhood segregation has been a decline in cross-class interactions and ties; rich Americans rarely have sustained encounters or relations with those who belong to a different social class. A tragic irony of this fact is that the wealthy tend to "underestimate the extent of inequality in their society and overstate its meritocratic nature" (Mijs and Roe 2021: 11). And we would add that economic segregation drastically diminishes opportunities for the rich and poor to forge civil ties. It is also the case that the declining economic fortunes of the white working-classes have played more than a small part in fuelling the sense of grievance and resentment that has been essential to the electoral success of Donald Trump (Hochschild 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Meanwhile, partisan sorting has accompanied economic sorting; not only are neighborhoods more economically homogeneous, but they are also more politically homogeneous (Bishop 2008). As a result, families now exist in disparate partisan bubbles—with "red" parents socializing their children amongst like-minded others, and "blue" parents doing the same (Elder and Greene 2016). Finkel et al. (2020) contend that levels of polarization have normalized what they call "political sectarianism," which entails a tendency to view partisan rivals as essentially alien to oneself, a dislike and distrust of opposing partisans, and the propensity to view partisan rivals as immoral or evil (533). It seems reasonable to suggest that, if political sectarianism is increasingly the norm, then children are likely to be socialized to share the extreme negative partisanship of their parents. So, while young Americans are still socialized to view the values of civil society as sacred, they are simultaneously taught to restrict civil solidarity to partisan allies.

Just as the family has been profoundly reshaped by inequality and polarization, so, too, has the education system. Because the US public school system

is funded by local property taxes, economic and residential segregation fuels educational segregation (Mijis and Rose 2021: 8). Thus, not only do children of the wealthy receive more educational resources, but educational segregation makes it so that they will be less likely to form friendships or social ties with those of a lower-class background. What is more, with the decline of civic education (Mirel 2002), and the growing emphasis on meritocratic measures of success (Lamont 2019), many schools have abnegated their civil functions in favour of their latent function as sorting machines and engines of inequality. Summarizing these trends, Mijis and Roe (2021) write, “Increasing educational homophily in modern America is driving a wedge between the educated and the uneducated, with similar implications for income and wealth, which are closely correlated to educational attainment” (4). This is not to deny that public schools continue to provide vital “civil” inputs, rather it is to stress that the highly stratified character of the American education system is an important source of the civil degeneration that has taken place in recent years (Markovits 2019; Brooks 2024).

Finally, it should come as no surprise that associational life has been restructured along partisan lines. Political sectarianism has meant that fewer Americans engage in leisure, hobbies, work, worship, or volunteer alongside either those of a different income bracket or partisan affiliation (Campbell et al 2018; Lee and Bearman 2020). Talisse (2019) describes this as the “political saturation of social space” (4)—i.e., a state where partisan interests and investments colour one’s activities in all social spheres. As a result, citizens have few if any cross-cutting ties or positive exposure to partisan rivals. The primary salve against the death spiral of affective polarization is to have a wide range of everyday interactions, not just with intimates and colleagues, but also with those with whom we may share little else (Törnberg 2022). And because perceptions of partisan rivals are increasingly filtered through news and social media, the consumption of which is guided by partisanship, many Americans inhabit “polarizing echo chambers” (Finkel et al. 2020: 534), thus becoming more entrenched in their partisan beliefs (Sunstein 2002). What this means is that, far from inculcating within citizens a broad commitment to civil values, solidarity, and the maintenance of a vital center, the segregated character of associational life now works to hinder cross-class ties while emboldening partisan hostility (Talisse 2019; Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022).

It might be objected that the civil sphere has always been, and will always be, a site of immense contestation, agonism, and even polarization. This is of course true. As Alexander (2015) reminds us, because the discourse of civil society is binary—where a range of distinctions (open/secretive, trusting/suspicious, altruistic/greedy, etc) tethered to an overarching binary of sacred and profane shape democratic discourse (Alexander 2006: 53-67; Alexander and Smith 2001)—it is perfectly normal for partisan rivals to paint one another in anti-civil terms. Indeed, this is par for the course in democratic life (Alexander 2006: 129). Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that the current levels of inequality and polarization make today’s situation unique—or better

yet, much more akin to the sorry state of American democracy that existed in the lead up to the Civil War. As Alexander notes, the difficulty that America faced in this period was that the north and south inhabited largely distinct civil spheres. What is more, they “came to see each other as irredeemably anti-civil, as enemies who must be physically destroyed if the northern and southern civil spheres were to be preserved” (Alexander 2019: 23). Indeed, America in this period was so divided that there existed next to nil civil solidarity across the north and south. Although perhaps not quite as extreme, American democracy today holds perilous resembles. Abramovitz (2022) remarks,

a growing share of Americans have come to see politics as a form of warfare, with elections viewed as contests between the forces of good and evil. Partisans increasingly view supporters of the opposing party not as opponents but as enemies: bad actors who want to inflict harm on the nation and who will stop at nothing to achieve their goals. (646)

The extreme levels of inequality and polarization in contemporary America are grave threats to the civil sphere because they create conditions where partisans become willing to subvert democratic norms and institutions to prevent their rivals from gaining power. It is significant that in recent years democracies have experienced backsliding, not through military coups, but instead through the ballot box (Gandhi 2018). What this suggests is that, in highly unequal and polarized societies, where economic resentment and negative partisanship are immense, citizens become increasingly willing to support politicians who disregard or even violate democratic norms and institutions, provided they share their partisan identity (Finkel et al. 2020). In such conditions the vital center cannot hold, as defeating one’s anti-civil enemies is perceived as a matter of life and death, and thus far more important than respecting the democratic rules of the game (Graham and Svobik 2020). As Svobik (2019) summarizes, “Polarization ... presents aspiring authoritarians with a structural opportunity: They can undermine democracy and get away with it” (Svobik 2019: 24).

Conclusion

When Alexander devised CS III, it made sense to prioritize the analytic and empirical autonomy of the civil sphere, at the expense of the noncivil spheres which merely provide facilitating inputs. However, it is time for CST scholars to expand our analytic purview to include the noncivil components of democratic social life. Those noncivil spheres that provide facilitating inputs also provide *attenuating inputs* and *impeding inputs* that may modify the civil sphere, perhaps even weakening possibilities for its expansion. As the case of American democracy makes clear, without the vital civil *and* noncivil contributions of families, public schools, and associational life, democracy can neither thrive nor survive. What happens in these noncivil spheres profoundly shapes possibilities for enhancing the civil sphere. Extreme inequality and polarization have corroded and corrupted these noncivil spheres in ways that

have undermined their capacity to provide the goods which scaffold the civil sphere. CST scholars must revise our conception of civil society so as to provide a more thorough account and properly theorize these processes.

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Galen Vats i Mervyn Horgan

Građansko društvo IV: Demokratska solidarnost i ne-građanska potpora građanskoj sferi

Apstrakt

Jedna od ključnih karakteristika onoga što Aleksander naziva Građanskim društvom III je njegova analitička i empirijska odvojenost od navodno ne-građanskih sfera, kao što su porodica, škola i udruženja koja nemaju javnu komunikativnu nameru, a koja čine GD I. Iako je ovo bilo ključno za razvoj teorije građanske sfere kao istraživačkog programa, sa odvajanjem i razgraničavanjem građanske sfere, teoretičari građanske sfere mogu propustiti ključne uvide koje je donelo Građansko društvo I u pogledu uzajamne međuzavisnosti različitih sfera. Iako građanski kodovi, institucije i interakcijske prakse možda imaju svoje „prirodno“ mesto u građanskoj sferi, njihova emocionalna i normativna snaga, kao i njihov opstanak tokom vremena,

zavise od njihove pomoćne institucionalizacije u ne-civilnim sferama. Porodice su ključne za *demokratsku socijalizaciju*. Škole neguju *demokratske dispozicije* kroz formiranje građana, uvođeći učenike u demokratske tradicije svoje nacije. I kroz *građanske akcije* i *građanske interakcijske poretke* dovode se u pitanje predrasude i građani postaju otvoreni za nove oblike uključivanja. Koristeći slučaj savremene američke demokratske kulture, analiziramo radove o političkoj polarizaciji i opadanju socijalnog kapitala u SAD-u, i tvrdimo da rastuće neslaganje karakteristično za građansku sferu savremene Amerike delimično proizilazi iz ne-civilnih sfera. To znači da erozija demokratske solidarnosti i osnovnih normi uljudnosti potiče iz demokratskih deficita u tim ne-civilnim sferama koje treba da podržavaju građansku sferu.

Ključne reči: teorija građanske sfere, građansko društvo, demokratska solidarnost, kulturna sociologija, građansko delanje

