ON THE INTERPRETATION OF *THE CIVIL SPHERE:* Understanding and Contention in Contemporary Social Science

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It is the blushing secret of our (social) science that responses to it are often not very scientific. We may employ the language of verification and falsification, but our arguments about truthfulness are often just that—arguments. We can confidently distinguish bad from good work, and mediocre from excellent, but it is more difficult to make confident claims about a work's truthfulness. Hidden just behind efforts at factual evaluation sit two responses that are, respectively, empirically more plausible and philosophically more honest. They are, first, "I don't understand what you are saying," and, second, "I disagree." This is a human science, not a natural one. It is inevitable and right that we often disagree with one another, and only human that we find it difficult to understand. The language of factuality masks these fundamentally interpretive claims. This is even more the case when the work in dispute is explicitly theoretical and evaluative.

More than two decades ago, I investigated the French reception of Durkheim's early and middle period writing, how the major 1890s works that came to stand at our disciplinary core—*Division of Labor in Society*, *Rules of Sociological Method*, and *Suicide*—had been interpreted by his contemporaries. I noted how Durkheim had protested that this work was "*malentendu*," a term usually translated as "misunderstood," that literally means "badly heard." I published the results of this investigation (Alexander 1986) in an essay subtitled, "On the Anxiety of Being Misunderstood."

To publish a big theoretical work, something ambitious and contentious that aims to be far reaching, is to experience the anxiety, not just of being wrong, but, even more acutely, of being misunderstood. We want to be heard rightly, as we think we are speaking and writing.

This is not an easy task. Any piece of writing, whether fictional or factual, is performative, a projection to an audience whom we largely do not know. We try to calibrate and control these projected meanings, not all of which are conscious, by targeting traditions that we can be confident are known (although they will hardly be known in exactly the same way), by citations to known literature, by academic and rhetorical conventions, by precision and clarity, and by factual reference. However, our audiences are far away, even if some of them occupy offices just across the way. In a complex world, there is always a large distance between theoretical projections and audiences. We are separated not only by temperament, but also by aesthetic and ideological sensibilities, by

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nationalities, by generations, and by unreflective presuppositions about the fundaments of action and order, and other variegated elements of social life.

These facts of intellectual performance affect the reactions even of the most interested, sophisticated, respectful, well-intentioned, and expert of audiences, all of which qualities certainly describe my interlocutors from the Midwest. I am most grateful to each of them for taking the time, first, to come to Chicago to deliver oral remarks at the 2007 Midwestern meetings and, later, to compose them for publication.[1] Some of the commentary reassures me that my readers and I are, indeed, on the same page, and many of the criticisms are well taken. With others I strongly disagree, despite the fact of being well understood. Other criticisms suggest, however, that *The Civil Sphere* has been badly heard, and give me the experience of being *malentendu*. In the remarks that follow, my goal is to create more transparency, with the hopes of making future theoretical debate about *The Civil Sphere* more clarifying and future empirical research more productive. Fundamental differences can be neither dissolved nor resolved. It is often the case that misunderstandings can be.

PROGRESS AND DISILLUSION: *THE CIVIL SPHERE* VERSUS THE CANON

Elizabeth Clemens has noted that the classics of our discipline are organized around themes of progress, whether through competition, differentiation, or revolution, or, I might add, evolution. It is for this reason, she explains, that sociological thinkers were shocked by the 20th century, or should have been. What transpired was not in the sociological deck of cards: left and right wing totalitarianisms, genocides, wars, and continuing domination, exploitation, hidden repression, and misrecognition of every kind. Clemens points out that these depressing events had "remarkably little" impact on the sociological canon. As our big, classical works are rooted in a progressive narrative, our sociological understanding of this disastrous century has been strangely foreshortened. Despite the emergence of critical literatures on race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, our canonical works have remained relatively unchanged.

Clemens also observes that while normative theories outside disciplinary social science have been more responsive to these 20th-century shocks, they have done so primarily by extending the more economistic and instrumental elements of canonical frames. Despite their dramatic prescience, such figures as Polanyi, Arendt, and Fanon, for "all their differences . . . advanced an analysis in which capitalism led to imperialism which led—along paths overseas and in Europe—to the cultural degradation and dehumanization of other humans." Even those who have managed to theorize the dark side, in other words, have been tied to old-fashioned paradigms, and to modernity's canonical dialectic of historical transformation. The result is that no matter how horrific, the shocks of modernity have been conceptualized as aberrational, as grievous malfeasance in this or that historical phase or subsystem. Through socialism, democratic revolution, or postcoloniality, the good society well and truly will prevail. I would only caution that for the more Nietzschian manifestation of this dark side theorizing—Foucault, Said, and

critical postmodernism—the tragedy of post-traditional society may be irredeemable, and the good society might never come.

As Robert Antonio explains in his opening pages, *The Civil Sphere* is an attempt to get beyond these limitations of the classical and modern canon, to transcend the progressive narrative without descending into pessimism and despair. I am committed to the idea of progress ideologically, but in reality it happens less frequently than the cheerleaders for modernity would have us believe, cheers that have only sometimes succeeded in drowning out the cries of those who have suffered modernity's progress (cf., Aron 1969). In *The Civil Sphere*, I cross Durkheim with Marx, and Weber with Parsons and Foucault, by developing a theory of social solidarity and its emancipatory possibilities, on the one hand, and a theory of debilitating and contradicting social restrictions, on the other. Once this model has been laid out, it should no longer be surprising that historical efforts to institutionalize a democratic civil sphere have also legitimated racism and slavery, class exploitation, religious hatred, repression, sexism, homophobia, and national chauvinism. It is the point of *The Civil Sphere* to explain how the dark and the light of democratic societies are fused at the hip, and why we are still engaged in the surgical exercise to separate them today. At a later point in his critical remarks, Antonio suggests that *The Civil Sphere* betrays "effusive optimism" about realizing civil ideals. This hardly seems the case. Aldon Morris is equally mistaken when he avers that *The Civil Sphere* posits a "pristine civil sphere" impugned by dark and evil "exogenous" forces that somehow remain outside it. This reading, too, belies the basic theoretical architecture of my book.

At the core of *The Civil Sphere* is the idea that modern, seemingly democratic societies are filled with barbaric contradictions, and that the latter become lodged inside the sphere of solidarity itself. For the sake of analytic clarity, we may posit that anticivil forces come from, or represent, the discourses, organizations, and goods produced by *non*civil spheres: markets, states, parties, churches and sects, families and patriarchies, and groupings formed by ethnic, racial, and regional ties. However, as I stress throughout *The Civil Sphere*, this division between civil and uncivil spheres is analytic, not empirical and concrete. At the heart of *The Civil Sphere* sits the critical eighth chapter: "Contradictions: Uncivilizing Pressures and Civil Repair." Its point is to explain how anticivil qualities—of space, time, and function—actually become lodged within the sphere of social solidarity itself, making at least a partial mockery of its emancipatory claims.

This compressed analysis weaves into a synthetic new model the empirical discussions from earlier chapters about civil society's dark side—the repressive and anticivil aspects of public opinion, fictional and factual media, civil associations, electoral systems, party conflicts, and law. In the chapters of *The Civil Sphere* that follow this Archimedean point, this new theoretical model—of what might be called (anti)civil intersectionality—is elaborated and extended in more empirical ways. Each of the three major case studies of the book, which extend over seven later chapters, begins by explaining how dominating forms of race, gender, and religion moved from markets, families, and churches into the heart of America's civil sphere life. In so doing, they became "destructive intrusions" that distorted civil ideals, providing institutional and cultural support for repression and exclusion.

THE PROBLEM OF THE CODES: ARE THEY FREE FLOATING; WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

Although resistance to cultural analysis has, in recent years, markedly receded, sociologists often seem to have an almost disciplinary problem with the idea that social life can sustain even *relatively* autonomous symbolic codes. In studying the economic world, it is perfectly all right to say that such things as markets or capitalism exist as structures in their own right, that their rules can be exposed, their patterns explained. The same can be said for organizations, for families, even for religion, as Weberians would be the first to claim. However, there is decided reluctance to allow culture to itself be seen in a structural way. It must be something constantly in flux, reflecting the freedom and subjectivity that mark the distinctiveness of humankind. It must be rooted in an ever-evolving existential search for meaning. It must grow out of the pragmatics of problem solving and boundary making, the situated exigencies of speech, the need for reciprocity, for taking the role of the other.

To assert that cultures do possess structures, these critics argue, is to commit, at once, a multitude of antisociological sins. Antonio accuses me of philosophical historicism, deductivism, speculation, and Hegelianism. Clemens asks, "Is it necessarily the case that societies are organized around this categorical structure?" The lengthy footnotes that create a midrash for *The Civil Sphere* condense two decades of my justifications for the relative autonomy of culture. In this midrash, I cite philosophical, linguistic, cognitive, anthropological, sociological, and historical arguments for a neostructuralism that is neither speculative nor idealist (most recently, see Alexander 2005a). Properly situated inside of a broader theory of cultural pragmatics, the idea of meaning-structures is as justified as it is necessary for any thoroughgoing effort at explaining the cultural dimension of social things.

While deeply rooted in institutional exigencies, and directed toward real pragmatic problems of the most grave and also the most banal kind, a binary discourse does indeed inform and organize the patterned conflicts and understandings of civil spheres. The content of this symbolic language is rich and complex but at bottom rather simple, its binaries repeated endlessly wherever the aspirations and realities of civil society come into play. This symbolic content is actually *there—out there* in the real world; I have not derived it from philosophical speculation or logical necessity. The aspiration for a community of self-regulating and independent individuals, on the one hand, and the fearful need to keep irrational, dependent, and despotic forces at bay, on the other, are thoroughly reflected in the detailed arguments of Western intellectuals from Socrates and Aristotle, to Machiavelli, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls. Strikingly, the same detailed series of binaries permeates and structures the messiness of everyday life. It informs the nuts and bolts of public squabbles, scandals, corruptions, outrages over harassment and exploitation, fights over racism and the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policies of the present day. It fills the pages of tabloids and broadsheets, the screens of television, the virtual spheres of digital life.[2]

Evoking what Marxist polemics once called "theoreticism," Antonio accuses me of offering mere "*assertions* that the codes are research based" (italics added). The funny

thing is that the codes do, in fact, derive from empirical investigations, which I clearly note but do not elaborate in my book. In 1979, I spent five days at the Vanderbilt Television Archives in Nashville, Tennessee. Sitting in front of a videocassette player, I watched two years of CBS Watergate coverage compressed into many hours of tape. When I first sat down, I expected to find the crisis being interpreted according to an overarching value contrast of universalism and particularism, the former corresponding to liberal–critical politics and the latter to conservative and traditional ones. Parsons and Lipset had introduced this functionalist understanding of culture into political sociology by reconstructing Weber, but the contrast had informed philosophical argument about moral judgment from antiquity. As I watched and listened, however, what jumped out at me was something quite different and much more interesting. What I heard and saw was something like a code, detailed yet at the same time generic, composed of layered sets of symmetrically equivalent binaries such as truth/lies, rational/irrational, open/secretive. In both its positive and negative references, these binaries seemed to be accepted by both sides in the polarized political conflict, as well as by the representatives of institutional elites, whether religious, economic, or journalistic. The code was never thematized as such. It was presented as descriptive, not proscriptive; as denotive, not connotative; as natural, not performative.

I knew I had "discovered" something significant here, something that related to the complex ambiguities of Enlightenment commitments to rationality and truth, but I was not quite sure what. Only later, in the early 1980s, when I began systematically reading in structuralism and poststructuralism, did I come to understand the binaries as a relational system of meanings, a language in the semiotic sense.[3] The idea that they were a historically specific manifestation of a much more general "discourse of civil society" only occurred to me several years later still. Reading Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, I realized that the self-judging moralism and wild paranoia that Bailyn traced in the founding fathers' writings, and connected to the "Commonwealth Ideology" that inspired the English Revolution during the century before, were the same positive and negative elements of the binary language that I had found, two centuries later, inside the Watergate crisis. After this experience of empirical convergence, many other empirical and theoretical literatures—about civility and barbarism, citizenship and exclusion, the democratic modernity and its primitive other—began to fall into place.

I do not elaborate this process of discovery in the footnotes of *The Civil Sphere*—Antonio seems to think that I should have—but I do refer to the series of empirically oriented doctoral dissertations that flowed from it, writings that concerned, at least in some part, the relation between binary discourses and civil society struggles in China, Hong Kong, Spain, France, Italy, Britain, and South Africa. I also reference the now widely known historical investigation that Philip Smith and I had conducted into 200 years of American political crises, which demonstrated, sometimes in mind-numbing detail, the repetition of similar themes in relation to economic, military, institutional, and legal claims.[4] Elsewhere in *The Civil Sphere*, I find elements from the discourse of civil society inside the French revolution and its aftermath, ancient Greek struggles around

democracy, and, of course, I find them to be deeply implicated in the historical struggles over race, antisemitism, patriarchy, and multiculturalism that occupy me throughout the second half of the book. To ask, as Antonio does, for the precise historical origins of this symbolic structure seems to me both off and beside the point. The hundreds of pages of empirical discussion and primary source quotation in *The Civil Sphere* demonstrate that the discourse has been richly instantiated in centuries of civil life,[5] and the scores of footnoted citations show that what has been documented in the main text is not confined to the cases discussed there.[6]

THE PROBLEM OF RECOGNITION: DO THE DOMINANT GROUPS IN A CIVIL SPHERE HAVE HUMANITY?

Just as they have often found it hard to credit the relative autonomy of culture, critically inclined sociologists have been drawn to a conflict theory perspective on social problems, viewing more culturally oriented approaches as somehow giving succor to the enemy. Such (mis)understandings are much less common now than they were in to the post-1960s polemics against which I directed my early work (e.g., Alexander 1982, 1987). Yet, a deep unease with what are allegedly the normative and political consequences of cultural understanding remains at the core of the criticism offered by Morris, and it, in some part, inspires Clemens' and Antonio's objections as well.

As the discourse of civil society splits, it delegitimates opponents. Its binary structure seems to tell us, in other words, that our opponents do not have any morals or ethics themselves. It is difficult for even professional sociologists to escape from this rhetorical structure in their theorizing and research. Actors, groups, and institutions who are bad from a moral perspective—economic or political elites with vast resources of money and power, or status groups that sustain social discrimination—are portrayed as selfish, deceitful, and instrumental. It stands to reason that against such shallow and demonic creatures, brute power is the only answer, and that moral integrity and agency must be limited to the dominated, not the dominant side. The oppressed need to fight fire with fire; they cannot reason or feel sympathy with the dominant, any more than the latter could ever identify with them. Conflict theory reigns supreme.

I do not agree with this deracinating logic. From *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* onwards, I have argued that any purely instrumental understanding of stratification and struggle fails to do justice to social conflict in most of its chronic forms. What I have argued in *The Civil Sphere* is that, throughout the stratification system, there is a paradoxical adherence to the civil code. The elites who hold power, and the masses of men and women who are members of the core group, try to purify their potentially polluted status, to civilize it, often sincerely believing that those who do not receive benefits do not deserve them (Alexander 2007).[7] To the degree that there is a relatively independent civil sphere, then, conflicts over stratification are also conflicts over interpretations.

This intertwinement of both ends of the stratification system with the discourse of civil society seems often to have troubled sociologists of inequality and social change. The idea that there is not only domination and liberation but also mutual recognition

and misrecognition does not seem quite right. Clemens suggests, for example, that such an understanding "stands in profound tension with the place of the agency of the oppressed at the heart of social movement analysis." Women should be liberated by women, blacks by blacks, workers by workers, and so on.

Now, I do agree that the heroic narratives that enlarge us while dehumanizing the other often trigger successful social movements, and a good deal of Part III of *The Civil Sphere* explains why. I do not agree, however, that such rhetorical denunciation should also stand at the heart of empirical social science.[8] Clemens is right that *The Civil Sphere* is informed by the idea that dominant and not only dominated groups possess the "moral capacity for recognition." This notion does not, however, advance a philosophical anthropology, but is more historical and delimited in its claim.[9] It holds good only if the dominant have submitted themselves, or present themselves as having submitted themselves, to the rigors and contradictions of civil society. While Clemens does acknowledge that "empirically, it may be correct that inclusion of the previously excluded turns on recognition by the dominant," she warns that "this conclusion should not be foreordained by the assumptions." However, certainly, my theoretical model of the self-corruption of civil society, and my lengthy empirical analyses of how putatively democratic civil societies have sustained centuries of racial, sexual, and religious domination, suggest nothing of the preordained.

Civil repair is not preordained but contingent. What triggers movements for repair is complicated. It is not the unfolding of some absolute spirit but often, as Chad Goldberg rightly remarks in his analysis of *The Civil Sphere*, a relatively contingent assortment of preparatory, down and dirty "material" things. For American and French women, their unexpected and wrenching participation in democratic revolutions gave birth to powerful, if fledgling, demands for gender equality and women's participation. For African Americans, there was the rural to urban migration, the participation in factory labor, the mass mobilization in World War II and, later, growing university education. For Jews, there was the American "discovery" of its wartime enemy's responsibility for genocide and the manner in which this new and unexpected historical context legitimated postwar "anti-antisemitism."

These mundane triggers have been the subject of institutional understandings that relate social movements to resource allocation. While necessary, however, such resources are only the beginning; they form a platform upon which organizations of the oppressed create active projections of moral capacity that build their own movements and establish potential connections of sympathy and understanding to those on the outside. Public inflictions of pain on members of subordinated groups—events that can come to be perceived as traumatic—are sometimes critical in widening solidary understanding. However, these painful occurrences must be actively constructed as civil traumas—they are not civilly traumatic as such. This applies as much to slavery as to the Holocaust, and to the encounters of Birmingham and Selma as well. Whether onlookers from the outside can empathize with the trauma of those inside is by no means a given. Moreover, contrary to what Clemens suggests, the widening of the circle of the "we" that is documented in *The Civil Sphere*—the process of solidary extension at the heart of civil repair—does not wait

upon the occurrence and construction of traumatic events. It proceeds along many pathways, via aesthetic and rhetorical constructions, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Frederick Douglas' speeches, and the *Cosby Show*; via slowly gathering heroic narratives about the triumphs of the downtrodden and virtuous, as illustrated by the quietly gathering force of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which first established the dignity of black movement and the sacralization of Dr. Martin Luther King; and by media stories, legal decisions, face-to-face interactions, and organizational building of all different kinds.[10]

In thinking about the processes that stimulate civil repair, it is important to distinguish symbolic recognition from factual knowledge. Describing *The Civil Sphere*'s approach to social change, Clemens speaks about being "faced with *evidence* of the dehumanizing, anticivil consequences of exclusion" and of being "confronted with the violence of suppression" (italics added); and Morris writes about media coverage "exposing southern racism" to northern whites, of advanced technologies being "able to convey the undemocratic treatment of blacks to millions with speed and clarity." *The Civil Sphere* eschews this kind of rational and scientific approach to recognition. It is a matter of understanding, not information, of fitting some part of foreground to some piece of background. Actors do not receive information as such, bites of reality whose moral meaning is subject only to being obscured or suppressed. The language of the civil sphere is always there, in the background, triggering typification and fueling invention and critique. However, which parts of this symbolic background are brought into play, the positive or negative side of the binaries? Moreover, which of the many elements of the speech and action of a protest will be picked out and "described"? It is control over this interpretive process, not only power in the instrumental sense, that social movements seek.

THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY: DOES *THE CIVIL SPHERE* GIVE CREDIT TO DOMINATED GROUPS?

This discussion allows us to consider the complaint that *The Civil Sphere* fails to accord agency to the dominated. Clemens avers this to be a major problem, but she largely defers to Morris' making of the case. Morris is adamant on this point. He claims that *The Civil Sphere* "places the primary agency of change in the hands of the White" and that it denies the black movement's ability to "produce the direct power to make changes in the racial order." Again, Morris seems uneasy about my emphasis on mutual recognition, with my contention that civil repair demands, not just conquest and surrender, but shifts in mutual understanding that allow the oppressed to be seen in more humane ways. Morris insists that white elite concern with victory in the Cold War compelled them to initiate changes in civil rights. By definition, it seems, elites are instrumental and immoral; if they do the moral thing, it could only have been to expand their imperial power on the international scene.[11]

My argument about agency and social movements in *The Civil Sphere* is clear and straightforward. According to my performative perspective, subordinated groups can effect change by creating social movements that initiate dramaturgical, symbolically

laden actions. These performances are projected both to audiences who are outside the movement but share its subordinate position, and also, and perhaps more importantly, to outside audiences who do not share its structural position at all. Dominant elites and core group masses are on the *receiving* end of these performances; the agents initiating them represent the subordinate groups themselves. In the first of my four chapters on the black movement for civil rights, I document the formation, under extraordinarily difficult conditions of racial domination, of a vigorous and largely self-sustaining black civil society. In several sections in the chapters devoted to the Jewish question, I trace the shifting self-understandings of Jewish artists, activists, journalists, and intellectuals as they sought to reshape the increasingly restrictive dilemmas of civil assimilation. Chad Goldberg, not Aldon Morris, gets it right when he notes that, in *The Civil Sphere*, the "effective opposition . . . of blacks is dependent on the formation of a black civil society" and its ability to mobilize "ideological and material resources." So does Robert Antonio, when he remarks that, in *The Civil Sphere*, the extended case studies of women, African Americans, and Jews "illustrate how democratic carrier strata, operating, at opportune moments, with the right ensembles of idioms, media strategies, and political practices can prevail in 'discursive struggles,' animate civil solidarity, and institute 'civil repair.' "

Throughout my discussion of the civil rights movement, I present it as directed by prescient, culturally strategic black leaders, and fueled by the courage and patience of black masses. Drawing on the valuable research of Morris himself, on recent historiography, and on the conceptual breakthroughs of the literary scholar Houston Baker and his colleagues (Black Public Sphere Collective 1995) and the sociologist Ron Jacobs (2000), I show how the movement's leaders and followers drew upon the resources of this black counter-public, whose capacities—cultural, institutional, and interactional—had been centuries in development.[12] I stress that, in some important part, the organizing energy and symbolic projections of the movement and its leaders were not only stimulated by, but directed back to, the black civil community itself. I also insist, however, that they were directed to the outside world, to the mostly white audiences composing the Northern civil sphere.

The Civil Sphere rests upon the claim that to the degree that there is democracy, to that degree there is a community that partially empowers people of all different resources and stripes. As the civil sphere is about solidarity, it should not be surprising that efforts to extend solidarity depend, in part, on understanding excluded actors in new ways. This is not only a normative claim, and it is not only an interpretative reading of ideological discourse. It is also a statement about institutions and the allocations of material rewards and sanctions. Part II of *The Civil Sphere* is devoted to these institutional domains, to the "communicative" institutions of public opinion polling, fictional and factual media, and associations, and to the "regulatory" institutions of elections, legal systems, and office. I examine their professional ethics, organizational forms, sanction and reward structures, operating procedures, and outputs. Every social happening that becomes an event in the civil sphere is put through this organizational grid of civil reward and punishment. This does not mean it will be deemed civil, much less that it is civil in fact. No outcome is guaranteed, and true justice can never be fully achieved in this world.

What passing through this organizational grid does mean is that the members of civil society—and this membership includes masses as well as elites—will compare nonconforming conflict groups with positive and negative constructions of civil motives, relations, and institutions, and that, after being so judged, these challengers will be pulled further into the embraces and rewards of the civil sphere or pushed further away. I deeply disagree with Morris' claim that "power" in the instrumental sense is the issue that defines the struggles for justice in which social movements engage. Insofar as there is a civil sphere, individuals and movements do not, typically, advance their cause by engaging in, or threatening, force and domination. In the long run, exercises in "the power of the masses" can succeed only insofar as that power is deemed, in some part and by some influential social groups, to be civil and, thus, to represent the common good. To the degree they are constructed as anticivil, these demands for power will be denied; if their threat to civility is judged to be extreme, these movements and their leaders will be repressed. The southern American states had an actual policy of Apartheid, but the United States, considered as a whole, was not South Africa. In the latter national context, the organization of guerilla violence and insurrectionary activities eventually proved necessary, and eventually productive. In the United States, they were neither. In the 1960s, large-scale black rioting soon created a rising white backlash, a conservative movement that intensified when confronted by the violently anticivil dramaturgy of Black Power. "Liberal" became the L word, to the radical left as well as to the right, and an increasingly polarized American civil society made political accessions at the national level impossible.[13]

All this is strongly to contest Aldon Morris's proposal that massive disruption, the undermining of empirical stability, is the key to social movement success. Disruption needs to be staged, framed, and interpreted. That is why the media certainly did not, as Morris suggests, ignore the civil rights movement's nonviolence. The civil or uncivil character of black protest was central to whether disturbances would be reported as legitimate and deserving of support, or anticivil and deserving of repression. Claiming to see behind the black movement's professions of nonviolence into its anticivil heart, southern media constructed the protests as worthy of repression, and applauded local governments when they unleashed antiblack coercion and violence. Southern whites did not accede to demands for black civil rights for the reason that the sit-ins threatened the profits of Woolworths and other racist white businesses or because the protests in Birmingham and Selma threatened the class position of local white elites. In fact, Southern whites rarely did accede. It was the common citizens and elites of the Northern civil sphere that eventually forced the dismantlement of Jim Crow, and they did so because they identified with the humanity of the Black southern movement rather than with its white oppressors. As northern knowledge about the movement was indirect, mediated by reports of newspapers, radio, and TV, the evaluative leanings of northern news media were central to this outcome. In contrast with its southern counterpart, the leading northern media was sympathetic to demands for expanding civil solidarity, and they performed their communicative role in a more professional manner, giving more play to independent norms of universalism and less to the

particularistic primordialities of race. Whether the journalists who carried out these institutional mandates were of northern or southern origin, black or white, or Jewish or Christian was beside the point. It was the independence of their institution's civil power that allowed them to succeed.[14]

THE PROBLEM OF MATERIALITY: WHAT ROLE DOES CIVIL RECOGNITION PLAY IN STRUGGLES FOR ECONOMIC EQUALITY?

These considerations lead directly to the question of whether my emphasis on civil recognition comes at the expense of considering the material elements of inequality, of social class, and the organizational and coercive machinery involved in actually redistributing economic power. According to Aldon Morris, *The Civil Sphere* asserts that symbolic soft power has triumphed over material hard power, and he objects. Contending that civil sphere institutions such as media and law "have their feet planted solidly in instrumental power," Morris claims that property ownership and profit alone dictate political success. For his part, Robert Antonio asserts that "the very extensive role of corporate interests and other organized forces in mass politics makes claims about [the] independent operation of civil ideals seem whimsical," and he accuses *The Civil Sphere* of postmodern subjectivism, of placing demands for recognition over the needs for redistribution, and of dismissing "critics of economic inequality."

The Civil Sphere does not, however, claim that symbolic understandings have trumped material concerns, and I affirm, rather than deny, that the institutions of the civil sphere, as those of other domains, are deeply self-interested and often profit seeking. What I do emphasize is that the civil sphere, both through its particular structures of symbolic discourse and through the distinctive qualities of its institutions, promotes solidarity in a manner that can, in principle and sometimes in practice, sharply curtail and control the hierarchies and instrumentalities of "material" life, and those generated by the spheres of religion, politics, race, ethnicity, sex, and gender as well. Far from dismissing the problem of inequality, in *The Civil Sphere* the tension between stratification and solidarity is placed at the core of social theory and social life.

What I dispute are not the facts of economic inequality but the theorists of it, those thinkers, from Marx to Mills, who have portrayed the civil ideals and institutions of democratic societies simply as fraudulent, who cannnot conceptualize the "capitalist" phase of modernity as sustaining counteracting powers of any institutional or ideal kind. It is because there are such counteracting powers—and most significantly among them a partially independent civil sphere—that ideals about liberty and equality are far from being simply whimsical. Rather than being neglected or dismissed, what *The Civil Sphere* argues is that the class struggle needs to be reconceived; I suggest, contrary to traditionally materialist understandings, that the struggle of working people was not substantially different from the other, more recent struggles that are the foci of my book. The labor movement involved demands for, and stimulated sharp resistance to, ever fuller incorporation into the discourses, institutions, and interactions of civil society. Chad

Goldberg is certainly right to suggest that "Alexander's model of the interchanges between the civil and noncivil spheres can also be seen as a reconstruction of T. H. Marshall's social–democratic ideas," indeed, that it "appears to build upon, extend, and generalize Marshall's conception of the relationship between citizenship and the capitalist market economy." Goldberg quotes from *The Civil Sphere*: "To maintain democracy and to achieve justice, it is often necessary for the civil to 'invade' noncivil spheres, to demand certain kinds of reforms, and to monitor them through regulation in turn."

Social democracy and racial incorporation both depend on the long march through the institutions. This march is organized, if not managed in its details, by the regulatory institutions of civil life. In the decades after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, there unfolded what many have called the "Second Reconstruction," the federal government's massive intrusion into the southern states, an institutional process that gradually dismantled the structures of legally enforced racial domination. This transformation was—it is far from complete, either in the South or in the North—neither symbolic nor wistful. It was long and painful, and very much the real thing. However, this "materiality" of state-mandated institutional reconstruction also depends, and depended upon, the earlier, and continuing, mobilization of new structures of feeling, which sustained more expansive forms of solidarity and widening social esteem.

In each of these regards, in both its cultural power and its materiality, this massive racial intervention in late 20th-century America very much resembled what Goldberg describes as "the civil incorporation of the working class in the 19th and 20th centuries." For neither the labor movement, nor the black-led movement for civil rights, was this "a matter of recognizing cultural differences," for this multicultural idea was not yet there for the taking. It was, however, very much a matter of making cross-class and cross-racial identifications. It was only because of decades, indeed centuries of struggle for civil recognition that regulative institutions eventually were engaged to compel some modicum of economic redistribution and, more broadly, the material repair of exploitative class relations, which meant, in Goldberg's words, "regulating working conditions and labor markets, curtailing arbitrary economic authority and corporate power, promoting full employment, and redistributing wealth 'according to solidary criteria.' " Antonio follows Nancy Fraser in arguing that material demands for redistribution have historically been separated from—must theoretically be considered apart from—cultural demands for recognition. "Her views," he argues, "must be heeded," but I think they should not be. As I have just suggested above, the labor movement's demands were not "material" in Fraser's sense. They, too, involved demands for recognition in terms of the civil codes of democratic society. Neither were the demands of blacks, Jews, and women only "cultural." They sought moral recognition, not only for itself, but to gain entrance into regulative institutions and power inside the state. As I explain in *The Civil Sphere*, it is precisely the entwinement of communication and regulation, of symbolic demands for civil recognition with legal compulsion and state intervention, that makes civil repair all that it can be. It is more than a song and a promise; the power of an outraged and indignant democratic state is an awesome thing to see.

ON THE HUBRIS OF DRAWING LINES: CAN CIVIL INCORPORATION GO TOO FAR?

Throughout the history of modern Turkey, there has been a strong feeling among the secular elites that those committed to public manifestations of Islamic faith are not fully trustworthy, that their motives and relations threaten the institutions of civil society. In recent years, as Turkey's Islamic regions have become modernized, this discussion has intensified, particularly after the Islamic-inspired Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, and Turkey's application to the EU gained steam. Yet, while more strident, and more institutionally significant, the lines of this freighted cultural debate have scarcely changed. Turkish communicative institutions circulate rhetorical accusations about secular selfishness and elitism, on the one side, and about Islamic barbarism and irrationality, on the other. Turkey's regulative institutions also are deeply divided themselves. Earlier this year, when the AKP nominated a party member, Turkey's popular Foreign Minister, to the presidency, the nation's Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. The AKP then called a new election and its victory increased its regulative power, significantly increasing the number of representatives it will send into the corridors of state power.

In the wake of this voting, some leaders of the secular elite, now firmly an electoral minority, questioned the election's legitimacy by polluting the AKP's civil standing. Alluding to what he claimed was widespread dissatisfaction with the Islamicist government's economic policies, the deputy chairman of the Republican People's Party suggested that "there must be something beyond reason that makes these people vote for AKP despite their disappointments," and he concluded that the "AKP has been trading on religion and manipulating people's sentiments."[15] The phrase "beyond reason" points to motives and "manipulating" to relations; each is a basic element in building the anticivil discourse that constructs others as being incapable of participating in the institutions of a democratic society.

Rather than engaging in tit-for-tat, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is also party leader of the AKP, called on voters who had supported the AKP to resist applying anticivil binaries to the secular side. He told them they should behave in a solidary manner with those who had opposed them. "Our joy should never be the sorrow of those who do not think like us," he warned in his victory speech, cautioning "beware that your happiness . . . does not overshadow the happiness of others." Addressing secular voters, Erdogan publicly underlined their rationality and independence, telling them "we respect your choices," and affirming "I also understand the message you sent in ballot boxes." These different choices, the Prime Minister asserted, should be seen, not as pointing to polarizing difference, but to a new multicultural mode of integration, one in which religious difference would affirm civil, not primordial solidarity: "We consider your different choices as the richness of your democratic life." To be sure, some of the Prime Minister's secular listeners were not reassured. A young businesswoman, remarking upon public images of political leaders' wives in headscarfs, insisted that such differences were fundamental, that looking religious could not

complement civil solidarity: "I don't believe the look of the Turkish government reflects the look of a democracy." Other secular voters, however, disagreed. Explaining that "for me, we have to be democratic," a young textile worker asserted "I don't care what his wife wears."

These discussions in Turkish society, which are echoed in the contentious European debate about Turkey's possible entry into the EU, illustrate issues that are fundamental to *The Civil Sphere*. Solidarity is vital for sustaining democratic societies. Feeling trust for distant others whom one will never know and with whom one might fundamentally disagree depends on how one views their motives and capacity for social relations. Finally, how one constructs these civil capacities is open to debate. It is difficult to be objective about whether this belief or that behavior indicates the capability for civil participation, or not.

These recent Turkish discussions are reassuring. They suggest that instantiating civil society is a common endeavor, one not limited to a certain civilization, region, or religious belief. However, such familiar discussions in an unfamiliar part of the world might also give us pause. In discussing *The Civil Sphere*'s model of incorporation, Chad Goldberg warns that multicultural enthusiasms must not obscure the fact that some cultural commitments and social practices are, indeed, beyond the pale of democratic life, and that they must be treated as such. "Out-groups," he writes, with radically Islamicist ones clearly in mind, "may engage in anticivil practices that make incorporation more difficult." In principle, I entirely agree. The willingness to resort to terror, for example, strikes at the core of the civil society project, as does—to our 21st-century sensibilities—the subordination of women and demeaning, often violent rhetoric against infidels of other faiths. The challenge, however, is to condemn such antidemocratic rhetorics and practices without broadening our polluting claims, without converting civil evaluation into primordial aggression. What we need to keep in mind, it seems to me, is that, in the history of civil societies, there has been little agreement, and nothing at all objective, about what is actually civil and what is not, about the substantive character of civil qualities. We need the imagination to understand how peoples launched into different historical trajectories might articulate democratic codes and erect civil institutions that draw the lines differently than we ourselves do today. We should not shrink from expressing our own strong convictions about where these lines must be drawn, but we should be careful to avoid what might be called the "spirit of pollution," a spirit that essentializes difference and converts moral conviction into self-righteousness. These are cautions with which, I am certain, not only Chad Goldberg but my other interlocutors would agree.

In *The Civil Sphere*, I attempt to lay out the sociological conditions, not only for democratic government, but for what John Dewey called a mode of living, a democratic life. I am not surprised that this effort has sparked conflict and disagreement. When there is a vigorous civil sphere, the plurality of lifeworlds can publicly surface, its themes becoming topics of political, intellectual, and cultural debate. In this contentious atmosphere, it is likely that the parties will feel misunderstood. Feeling that one is badly heard can spark further misunderstandings, which trigger further ripostes in turn. The danger

is that, as feelings heat up, ideas can become less clear. The line between understanding and agreement is difficult to draw. In a civil intellectual community, it is only the former that we have a right to expect. To make that more likely has been the aim of this reply.

NOTES

[1] Author-Meets-Critics sessions were also organized in spring 2007, at the Southern, Pacific, and Eastern Meetings; at the ASA's New York meetings in August; and in September at the Glasgow meetings of the European Sociological Association. A response to some of these other critics will appear in the fall issue of *Perspectives*, the newsletter of the ASA theory section, and another response, to an essay review by Bryan Turner, will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Citizenship Studies*.

[2] "Much of contemporary political science," Elizabeth Clemens relates, "has refuted just this framing, arguing that political actors can be understood as consistently rational, but honest, cooperative and trustworthy only when it advances their self-interest," and she concludes by complaining (or exclaiming—it is hard to tell whether she is being ironic or not), "yet Alexander rejects this standard assumption of political theory." It seems to me, however, that rat choice in political science, or sociology for that matter, validates rather than falsifies the theory of civil binaries that I have proposed. In fact, not only does rat choice confirm the distinctively binary nature of lay and philosophical thinking about democracy and politics, but it quite neatly fits into one of its sides. A theoretical version of what I call the tradition of Thracymachus it offers the kind of narrow instrumental approach to rationality that Socrates attacked in Plato's dialogues—concerned with means, not ends; aggressive, not cooperative; manipulative, not straightforward; and without consideration for the values of others, unless such concern is to serve our side.

[3] Two articles I published on the Watergate crisis (Alexander 1984, 1988) straddle the pre- and post-semiotic divide. The first was organized around the universalism/particularism contrast, while the second proposes the idea of more complex sets of binaries, although not yet the idea of the discourse of civil society. The notion of cultural discourse as a relational language built on self-generating antonyms bears a family resemblance, not only to the late Durkheim and semiotics, but also to Foucault's post-structural understanding. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault maintained that the Victorian discourse of repression was paradoxically implied by the anti-Victorian discourse of sexual liberation, such that the latter was not, in fact, "repression free." My sense that the discourse of civil society is similarly divided, that it similarly interpolates each side with the other, led me to adapt Foucault's notions of a simultaneously repressive and "liberating" discourse from the sexual to the political scene. All of this is recounted in *The Civil Sphere* and elsewhere in the publications that are cited there. My point is that the discourse of civil emancipation also speaks the language of exclusion, often doing so with the heartfelt intention of protecting democracy from its enemies and even, sometimes, from itself. It can hardly be the case, then, that I conceptualize the codes of civil society, pace Antonio, as fostering "uncontested integration." This is Habermas' discourse ethics, not mine.

[4] I also noted Baiocchi's (2006) research on the emergence of the discourse of civil society in Brazil's transition from authoritarianism and Heins' (2006) on how the civil binaries have distorted some recent European intellectual discourse about America. For a historical investigation of the codes as structuring class conflicts in late 18th-century London, see Davis (2007).

[5]At one point, Antonio implies that, while the quotations reproduced in *The Civil Sphere* do suggest binarism, they do not display the actual language terms that I attribute to the discourse of civil society. If this were so, it would certainly be a telling critique. I believe, to the contrary, that each quotation contains one or more of the civil binaries that compose the broader culture structure. This, at least, was my selection criterion for including a quotation. I briefly considered italicizing the actual items of the civil language inside each quoted text, but I decided this would be unnecessarily didactic and disruptive.

[6]As evidence for his assertion that "the connection between Alexander and Parsons is transparent," Antonio suggests that my "strong claims" about the civil codes actually "stand in for Parsons' evolutionary" theory. My discussion in the text above explains why this is not true. From the time when I first conceptualized these binaries as coded languages, I saw them as standing in marked tension, if not, in fact, as refuting, Parsons' cultural theory; when I conceptualized the irredeemable contradictions of the civil sphere, I understood myself to be falsifying the evolutionary optimism of modernization theory in general and Parsons' social and historical work in particular. My strong sense that Parsons had papered over the contradictory tensions between the subsystems (for him, AGIL), and overemphasized their complementary, was already very much part of *Theoretical Logic*, informing most of the second half of the fourth volume of that book (Alexander 1983). As I developed my civil sphere theory, I devoted a large chunk of the concluding chapter of *Neofunctionalism and After* (Alexander 1997) to a critique of Parsons' understanding of "societal community." More recently, in a more polemical essay (Alexander 2005b), I demonstrate how Parsons' commitment to evolution allowed him not to face the dark sides of modernity, but to pretend, instead, that contemporary American society either had already, or was about to, fulfill itself in an ideal way.

[7]In his powerful and disturbing book, James B. McKee (1993) has shown how just such a delegitimating binary distorted the history of American sociological studies of race, typically reducing African Americans to creatures without the capacity to participate in modern society in order to explain, if not to justify, centuries of white rule. In an article building upon McKee, Morris (2007:529) describes these "prescientific assumptions" in binary terms and attributes to them great symbolic power: "They led White sociologists to formulate two contrasting sociological populations: Whites were civilized, endowed with agency, and superior; blacks were subhuman, bereft of agency, and inferior."

[8]Indeed, my point in stressing the centrality of mutual recognition and misrecognition is not only empirical but moral. Only by insisting on widespread human capacity can we avoid the simplifying dichotomies upon which civil restrictions rest. If we fight a revolution that dichotomizes humane friend and inhumane foe, how will we create a human and inclusive society afterward? Who will educate the educators, as Marx once asked? The 20th century is strewn with the rotting carcasses of would-be liberators—revolutions built upon dichotomizing rhetorics that have refused to recognize the humanity of fellow human beings.

[9]It is just such a philosophical anthropology of recognition that Hegel laid out in *Phenomenology of Mind* and that, via Hegel, informs such contemporary philosophers as Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. For a critique, see Alexander and Lara (1996).

[10]The transformation of the form of women's organizations from "womanly" clubs to more impersonal business models, which Clemens documents in her book, *The People's Lobby* (Clemens 1997:184–234), illustrates how one of these nontraumatic pathways of change facilitated the civil incorporation of women. While emphasizing organizational repertoires rather than cultural structures, Clemens implicitly evokes a performative understanding, writing that

"by adopting techniques not traditionally associated with feminine activity, women sought *to present* themselves as legitimate political actors" (p. 207, italics added), and noting how, in the newly adopted organizational forms, "cash served both as a symbol of citizenship and as a medium of centralization" (p. 213). In her critical comment, Clemens acknowledges that in "cultivating greater communicative capacities and political development," even the more conservative first-wave feminists "deployed multiple substantive identities [that] can be arrayed as a series of overlain binaries in order to suggest a powerful, structuring, underlying code." I agree with Clemens that the continuing evocation of civil binaries neither reinforced purely traditional inequalities of gender nor introduced postgender criteria for evaluating women as citizens—which is precisely why, throughout my historical reconstruction of the shifting relation of gender and civil sphere, I employ the concept of "compromise formation."

[11]At various points in *The Civil Sphere*, I directly challenge Morris's (1984) account in theoretical and empirical terms, for example, footnote 33, pp. 637–41, where I also contest other instrumentalist explanations, including the emphasis on the Cold War and claims that white accessions at Birmingham and elsewhere were responses simply to local white businessmen's fears over profit loss (see below).

[12]In *Sociology and the Race Problem*, McKee argues that the racist distortion of black capacities (see note 7, above) explains why, before the 1960s, white American sociologists either dismissed the possibility for reform or adopted a paternalistic, white man's burden position. "A people so culturally inferior," McKee explains, "would lack the capability to advance their own interests by rational action." As blacks were "viewed as lacking a trained and experienced leadership, as still ignorant and mostly uneducated," they were portrayed "as incapable of participating in the political process." In other words, the failure to recognize black agency "was a logical extension of this image of the American black" (McKee 1993:8). Only with the antiracist reconstruction of the white political imagination, which was both cause and effect of the civil rights movement, could this serious misunderstanding begin to change, and white American sociology commence to give the power and the resources of the black civil sphere their due. In the final pages of *The Civil Sphere*'s analysis of the civil rights movement, I speculate that the significance of black agency in the contemporary project of civil repair has, perhaps, still not been fully appreciated: "Despite the periodic calls for regulatory intervention made by liberal intellectuals and policy elites, the conditions that sustain the racial underclass will not be repaired until a new social movement can arise. Only a powerful and affecting social movement could mobilize the increasingly fragmented black community. Only skillful movement intellectuals could translate the particular experiences and conditions of the racial underclass into compelling codes and narratives that can gain psychological identification from the civil sphere outside. Social scientists and critics speak about repairing this new racial divide primarily in organizational terms, calling for massive state intervention and economic restructuring. However, such new forms of regulation depend on the creation of new forms of civil power" (*The Civil Sphere*, p. 390).

[13]That, nonetheless, throughout much of the decades-long backlash period, civil repair of racial (and gender and sexual) inequality actually gained momentum demonstrates the manner in which regulative institutions of civil society respond to communicative restructurings of social solidarity, and not simply to the strategic maneuverings of election fights. This momentum did not, however, ameliorate the problem of the racial underclass.

[14]It is, in fact, the central importance of these northern media, not the fact that some of their best reporters were of southern origins, that is the central point of Roberts and Klibanoff's *The Race Beat*. This position actually provides the dramatic conclusion of their book, where they draw

from their interviews with John Lewis, the Congressman and former movement activist: "When he looks back on how he survived and how the movement kept going, he thinks about how hard the segregationists worked to keep the prying eyes of the press away. He can recall the security he felt when reporters—'sympathetic referees,' he calls them—were watching and the fear he felt when they weren't. . . . When he saw white thugs in Montgomery smash cameras, beat reporters, and rip up notebooks, he understand that there was an extraordinary power of communications operating parallel to, and intertwined with, the movement. It was, he felt, an allied force[:] 'There was a sense of righteous indignation on the part of the American people because of the message that the media was able to translate and send around the country and around the world' " (Roberts and Klibanoff 2006:407). Lewis is speaking here, of course, only about northern media. Roberts and Klibanoff document how southern media, with a few notable exceptions, "threw their whole editorial weight" behind the backlash that developed against the black movement in the South (p. 74).

[15]All following quotations from Tavernise (2007).

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