



Civil Sphere Theory Working Group

Meeting 2025

October 22-24, 2025

University of Vienna



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Institut für Soziologie



CiDAPE

Program overview

OCT 22

OCT23

OCT24

9:00

Panel 3A

Aula

Panel 3B

Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)

Panel 7A

Aula

Panel 7B

Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)

9:30

10:00

10:30

Coffee *Aula*

11:00

Panel 4A

Aula

Panel 4B

Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)

Coffee *Aula*

11:30

12:00

12:30

Lunch

13:00

Registration *Aula*

Gangl Bierheuriger (Campus, courtyard 1)

13:30

Welcome *Aula*

Lunch

14:00

Panel 1

Aula

Panel 5A

Aula

Panel 5B

Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)

Gangl Bierheuriger (Campus, courtyard 1)

14:30

15:00

15:30

Coffee *Aula*

Coffee *Aula*

16:00

Panel 2

Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)

Panel 6A

Aula

Panel 6B

Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)

16:30

17:00

17:30

Coffee *Aula*

18:00

Roundtable

18:30

Aula

19:00

Reception

19:30

Heuriger

20:00

Reception

Aula

10er Marie, Ottakringer Str. 222

Detailed Program

Wednesday, October 22 – Non-parallel Sessions

Time	Program	Presenters	Location
13:00-13:30	Registration		<i>Aula (entrance area)</i>
13:30-14:00	Welcome and Opening Remarks		<i>Aula</i>
14:00-15:30	Panel 1: Frontlash, Backlash, and the Civil Repair <i>Chair: Runya Qiaoan</i>	● Jeffrey C. Alexander ● Nelson Arteaga Botello ● Anna Durnová	<i>Aula</i>
15:30-16:00	COFFEE BREAK		<i>Aula</i>
16:00-17:30	Panel 2: Revisiting the Civil Sphere: Concepts and Critiques <i>Chair: Till Hilmar</i>	● Giuseppe Sciortino ● Galen Watts & Mervyn Horgan ● Marcus Morgan	<i>Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)</i>
17:30-18:00	COFFEE BREAK		<i>Aula</i>
18:00-19:30	Roundtable: Civil Sphere Under Siege: CEE Strikes Back <i>Chair: Anna Durnova</i>	● Dominik Zelinsky ● Csaba Szaló ● Adriana Zaharijević ● Katharina Renner	<i>Aula</i>
20:00-22:00	WELCOME RECEPTION		<i>Aula</i>

Thursday, October 23 – Parallel Sessions

Time	Program	Presenter	Location
09:00-10:30	Panel 3A: Civil Polarizations and Social Divides <i>Chair: Elisabeth Becker-Topkara</i>	• Caroline Russell & Celso M. Villegas • Håkon Larsen • Marian Pradella	<i>Aula</i>
	Panel 3B: Theory and Methodology in Civil Sphere Research <i>Chair: Jan Váňa</i>	• Andrea M. Maccarini • Csaba Szaló • Andrea Voyer	<i>Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)</i>
10:30-11:00	COFFEE BREAK		<i>Aula</i>
11:00-12:30	Panel 4A: Boundary Issues: Civil vs. Non-Civil Spheres <i>Chair: Anna Lund</i>	• Werner Binder • Ines Ribas Ferreira Dias • Christopher Thorpe	<i>Aula</i>
	Panel 4B: Urban Civil Spheres and Micro-spaces of Interaction <i>Chair: Sarah Schäfer</i>	• Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky • Mervyn Horgan & Saara Liinamaa • Danny Kaplan	<i>Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)</i>
12:30-14:00	LUNCH		<i>Gangl Bierheuriger (Campus, courtyard 1)</i>
14:00-15:30	Panel 5A: Resistance in Authoritarian Contexts <i>Chair: Celso M. Villegas</i>	• Runya Qiaoan • Milica Resanović & Ivana Spasić	<i>Aula</i>
	Panel 5B: Journalism, News, and the Public Sphere <i>Chair: Matthias Revers</i>	• Jackie Harrison • Nikolaus Poechhacker • Thomas Olesen	<i>Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)</i>
15:30-16:00	COFFEE BREAK		<i>Aula</i>
16:00-18:00	Panel 6A: Uncivil Repair: Breakdown and Contestation <i>Chair: Marcus Morgan</i>	• Dominik Zelinsky • Polina Zavershinskaia & Francesco Spera • Federico Quadrelli	<i>Aula</i>

	Panel 6B: Political, Communicative, and Literary Experiences <i>Chair: Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky</i>	● Horng-luen Wang ● Steve Koh ● María Luengo Cruz & Matthias Revers ● Jan Vána	<i>Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)</i>
19:00	EVENING RECEPTION		Heuriger <i>10er Marie, Ottakringer Str. 222</i>

Friday, October 24 – Parallel Sessions

Time	Program	Presenter	Location
09:00-11:00	Panel 7A: Multiculturalism, Incorporation, and Civil Solidarity <i>Chair: Werner Binder</i>	● Elisabeth Becker-Topkara ● Hizky Shoham ● Jakob Egholm Feldt ● Stefan Lund, Anna Lund, Ali Osman	<i>Aula</i>
	Panel 7B: Civil Sphere and the Environment: Climate Change and Public Responsibility <i>Chair: Dominik Zelinsky</i>	● Liv Egholm ● Till Hilmar ● Sarah Schäfer	<i>Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)</i>
11:00-11:30	COFFEE BREAK		<i>Aula</i>
11:30-13:30	Panel 8A: Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory <i>Chair: Christopher Thorpe</i>	● Hee-Jeong Lee ● Gabriela Muggenburg y Rodriguez Vigil ● Matthew Coetzee ● Carina Carlhed Ydhag	<i>Aula</i>
	Panel 8B: Spaces of Care: Childhood and Beyond <i>Chair: Liv Egholm</i>	● Trygve B. Broch ● Rebecca Brinch, Ylva Lorentzon, Anna Lund ● Julia Schmid ● Marianna Melenteva	<i>Alte Kapelle (Old Chapel)</i>
13:30-14:30	LUNCH		<i>Bierheuriger Gangl (Campus, courtyard 1)</i>
14:30-15:30	Closing Remarks and CST's Pathways Forward		<i>Aula</i>

Abstracts

14:00 -- 15:30 Panel 1: Frontlash, Backlash, and the Civil Repair

Frontlash/Backlash: The Doing and Undoing of Civil Repair

Jeffrey C. Alexander (Yale University)

Early in the evening of July 2, 1964, in an atmosphere of equal part solemnity and jubilation, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the most important civil repair of racial injustice in a century of American history. Later that evening, Johnson's mood faded into melancholy, and he confided to an aide, "I think we've just delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come." LBJ had wedged open the civil sphere of the United States in a singular manner, formalizing a vast movement for racial incorporation that had begun decades earlier and would continue right up until the present day. This utopian movement was filled with hope and looked to the future with great expectations. Yet it also created ashes in its wake.

Civil repair is a fire that burns down repressive social structures and eviscerates narrow social beliefs. It is civil correction but also civil interruption, not just forward-looking but *frontlash*. In a pluralistic society that allows free association, great reforms create great reactions. The more powerful the frontlash, the more powerful and dangerous the backlash. The mid-sixties victories of civil rights and the powerful movements that came after them offered African-Americans, women, and other excluded minorities unprecedented rights and extraordinary opportunities for incorporation. At the same time, however, they fueled racist and misogynist movements that brought rightwing conservatives to power, from Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump.

While the dialectic of frontlash/backlash is widely experienced, it has rarely been theorized. I begin the task of doing so in this paper. I advance the seemingly paradoxical proposition that the greatest dangers to democratic life emerge, not from structures of domination and exploitation, but rather from the success of efforts to ameliorate them. To the degree that emancipation is successful, reactions are triggered that can undermine it. Social theory must conceptualize the dialectic of reform and reaction, and relate these dynamics to the challenge of maintaining civil solidarity, the overarching commitments to one another – no matter what our heartfelt partisan commitments – that make civil cooperation possible.

When the populist leader leaves: The civil sphere faces the radicalization of the heirs of the populist project

Nelson Arteaga Botello (FLACSO-México)

The Civil Sphere Theory (CST) has examined how populism can erode the communicative and regulatory institutions of the civil sphere (Alexander, Kivisto & Sciortino, 2021). How, through their rhetoric, charismatic leaders promise to expand the democratic game, thus paradoxically disqualifying and dismantling existing democratic rules and institutions (Kivisto & Sciortino, 2018). The CST allows us to appreciate that the real danger of left and right-wing populism lies in how fast and how far they are willing to take their reforms of civil redress in the name of the people (Alexander, 2021).

When the leader can no longer remain in power, the heirs to their cause can commit to finishing the job faster and with greater depth of scope. The group in power increases discipline and cohesion within itself through an enthusiastic devotion to the common cause once advanced by its leader (Alexander, 2013). Thus, the apparently progressive reforms of democracy acquire an impersonal meaning and translate into strategies that seek to systematically attack the civil sphere's regulatory and communicative institutions. While the former may end up seriously fractured, the latter may succeed in maintaining their capacity to denounce and, in some cases, reverse populist threats to democratic life.

This paper analyzes how, at the end of 2024, Mexico experienced a radicalization of democracy by the heirs of the left-wing populist government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024). It shows how, by managing to take control of the legislative power –based on a biased reading of the law– they carried out profound constitutional reforms in two months: they dismantled the Supreme Court of Justice, the judiciary as a whole, the regulatory body of elections, as well as the autonomous bodies of State regulation and control. Claudia Sheinbaum, López Obrador's

successor, endorsed the reforms, pointing out that they were necessary to materialize the common cause promoted by the leader. Thus, the new elites that present themselves as the incarnation of the people are defining new boundaries of civil inclusion and exclusion in an accelerated and profound manner.

It also analyzes how liberal and conservative media, civil associations, some social networks, academic groups, and universities have become communicative forces that have warned about the setbacks to democracy that the constitutional reforms contain. They called for the defense of the Supreme Court of Justice, the judiciary, and the institutions that organize and regulate the exercise of the vote; they also demanded that the opposition parties strengthen their capacity for political action and that public officials adhere to the duties and ethics of their office. The effort of the communicative institutions to defend or “restore” democracy sheds light on how they attempt to recompose the meaning of democracy within a regime that claims that the reforms it has promoted are expressions of the people’s will.

This paper extends the CST by analyzing, on the one hand, how the democratic erosion project—driven by a populist leader—can become even more radicalized when continued by his political heirs—to such an extent that it can severely damage the civil sphere’s regulatory institutions—. On the other hand, it allows us to understand the efforts by the communicative institutions to demonstrate the authoritarian character of democratic radicalization, using innovatively the civil codes and narratives that, paradoxically, are also shared by the new power elites but in a populist vein.

The Crisis of the "We": Rethinking Climate Emotions through Civil Sphere Theory

Anna Durnová(University of Vienna)-Presenter

Raili Marling (University of Tartu), Elif Sandal-Önal(Universität Bielefeld), Sarah Schäfer(University of Vienna), Susanna Soosaar (University of Tartu)

This paper examines the role of emotions in shaping collective identities (“we”) and how the structural dimension of emotions influences political discourse, particularly in the context of climate change. From the perspective of Civil Sphere Theory, we argue that the climate crisis is also a crisis of collective emotional identity, where neoliberal individualization and competitive imperial logics fragment the possibility of a shared response. The erosion of democratic emotions—such as trust, solidarity, and hope—compromises the potential for a civic horizon capable of mobilizing broad-based action.

Building on a dialog between civil sphere theory and affect theory and political psychology, we explore how emotions mediate between individuals and the collective, shaping perceptions of democracy, responsibility, and civic engagement. We introduce the concept of emotional code to analyze how emotions structure discourse, political behavior, and social belonging within the civil sphere. Climate change emerges as a site of emotional polarization, where cognitive and affective processes shape individual responses to environmental crises, and where political actors strategically mobilize emotions to reinforce divisions rather than expand solidarity.

By foregrounding the structural and symbolic dimensions of emotions, this paper contributes to understanding how civil repair might counteract affective fragmentation and how democratic renewal could be fostered through repoliticizing climate emotions. We propose methodological approaches for studying shared emotional codes and outline pathways to reconstruct a more inclusive and action-oriented “we.” Ultimately, this work seeks to illuminate how the civil sphere can mediate climate emotions in ways that sustain democratic cohesion and collective engagement in the face of global challenges.

16:00–17:30 Panel 2: Revisiting the Civil Sphere: Concepts and Critiques

Colonialism and Civil Codes: Exploring the Boundaries of the Civil Sphere

Giuseppe Sciortino (University of Trento)-Presenter

Peter Kivisto (Augustana College)

In the conclusion of *The Civil Sphere*, Alexander writes about the possibility of “the imagining and organizing of civil society to go beyond the territory of the nation-state.” This suggests its possibility at the inter-state level, as most consequentially seen in the European Union. It also calls for exploring the potential and limitations of conceptualizing a global civil sphere—an imagining akin perhaps to Kant’s dream of “perpetual peace.” This paper will focus instead on the relevance of the civil sphere for nineteenth and twentieth colonialism and its aftermath. As a springboard to the topic, we respond to Ricarda Hammer’s call for “decolonizing the civil sphere.” We will ask what she means by decolonizing in this context and critique how she reads CST, in particular her understanding of the “classificatory system” and modes of incorporation.

We will offer an alternative interpretation of how we might conceptualize the dialectic between metropole and periphery, both during and after colonialism. In doing so, we will also highlight civil society’s liberatory potential.

On the Non-Civil Foundations of Democratic Solidarity

Galen Watts (University of Waterloo) & Mervyn Horgan (University of Guelph)

One of the defining features 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 voluntary associations which lack public communicative intent and comprise CS I. Without doubt, this separation has been critical to the progress of CST as a research program. However, by insisting on such a delimited conception, civil sphere theorists have lost sight of a key insight contained in CSI—that 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, as well as their survival over time, depend crucially upon their ancillary institutionalization in non-civil spheres. In this paper, we sketch three ways this is so. First, families provide the affective bonds and sources of esteem that make possible the development of feelings of mutual respect characteristic of civil relations. Further, families are not just sites of (non-civil) filial love and care—they also have *civil* dimensions; for instance, children often learn how to perform civility by their parents and loved ones. Second, although the school is a site of narrow meritocratic striving, it is also a site of broad citizen-formation. Through processes of ritual initiation, students are inducted into the democratic traditions of their nation; consequently, civil and anticivil codes come to be symbolized by national deeds and figures, cultural narratives of civil heroism and trauma are absorbed, and the seeds of civil solidarity are planted. Lastly, it is through direct contact with diverse others, facilitated by noncivil voluntary associations (including religious communities), that our prejudices are challenged, and we become open to new forms of incorporation. Indeed, it is because our interpretation of civil discourse is significantly shaped by our face-to-face social interactions with persons who (unwittingly) serve for us as exemplars of specific groups (gendered, racialized, classed, etc.) that they are often critical for fostering civil repair. Surveying the scholarships on rising economic inequality and political polarization in the US, we argue that one explanation for the sclerosis and discord characteristic of the American civil sphere in the twenty-first century is the result of atrophy and/or breakdown in these respective non-civil spheres. That is, the erosion of democratic solidarity and basic norms of civility in America arguably have their origins in the democratic deficits suffered in the non-civil spheres upon which the civil sphere deeply depends.

Why the study of Contentious Performances needs Durkheim

Marcus Morgan (University of Bristol)

This paper evaluates Charles Tilly’s account of social performance as a means of ‘contentious politics’, focussing on his concept of ‘repertoires of contention’. It finds merit in Tilly’s meticulous historical reconstruction of the contextually limited repertoire of political performances, of how participants in popular contention improvise upon available scripts, and of how the outcome of prior contentious performances constrains the scope of subsequent ones. However, it argues that Tilly’s approach ultimately fails in realising the full promise of the performance metaphor by offering a de-culturalized account that treats contentious performances as either dependent effects of more profound changes in state-making and economic class relations, or else as a set of pragmatic tools that contending actors deploy in political contestation to meet their instrumental goals. Most importantly, Tilly’s model neglects how social performances make meaning through deploying shared symbolic structures that exert their own autonomous power over social action. The paper traces the source of Tilly’s limitations to his hasty dismissal of Durkheim as ‘useless’ on the topic of contention. To rectify the weaknesses in Tilly’s account, it therefore suggests returning to Durkheim’s emphasis on the significance of symbolic structure, developed more recently by civil sphere theory. Doing so reveals the influence of the internal architecture of shared ‘collective representations’, showing how these representations both enable and constrain social performance by structuring the form in which meaning can be communicated, limiting the manner in which events and issues can be understood, and shaping the normative commitments of actors.

Thursday, October 23 – Parallel Sessions

09:00–10:30 Panel 3A: Civil Polarizations and Social Divides

Codes, Narratives, and Dramatic Types: Debate Performance During a Time of Political Polarization

Caroline Russell and Celso M. Villegas (Kenyon College)

How do candidates' aesthetic performances matter in a time of political polarization? To answer this question we analyzed the televised debates between U.S. Senate candidates during the 2022 midterms in eleven states where the election was assumed to be competitive: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wisconsin. Using a qualitative analysis of the debates themselves (N=15) and a hand-coded sample of local newspaper articles about each debate (N=249), we applied theories and concepts from cultural sociology in order to better understand how people made sense of these performances. We found that candidates' performances exhibited similar cultural codes, narratives, and dramatic types: (1) a "politician" code that set political insiders versus outsiders, (2) varying use of storytelling versus listing partisan talking points, (3) performances of masculinity as performances of competency, and (4) for successful candidates, evidence of "anticharisma" (Wagner-Pacifi 2024) which emphasized responsibility to voters and to the obligations of office. This paper advances civil sphere theory by specifying the culture structures operating in lower-level races amidst national-level backlash.

Is Left Woke? Struggles to understand woke as a left movement

Håkon Larsen (Oslo Metropolitan University)

How to signify woke and anti-woke in national political debates have caused concern for left actors across Europe. Where the right seems confident promoting woke criticism, the left is struggling to understand how to relate to woke without benefitting the agenda of the right. In Norway, 2023 represented a peak in national debates on woke, as left actors contemplated at length in their daily newspaper how to continue left minority inclusive agendas without entering into a culture war granting the right the privilege of setting the agenda.

The analysis shows that critical actors on the left asks whether the previous successes of left movements might be undermined by new left movements, which seems focused on particularistic rather than universal agendas, and are less successful as civil translators. They further problematize how contemporary left movements are alienating large parts of the white working class, which in turn are fueling an anti-woke backlash movement. Simultaneously, many left actors argue that the left needs to relate to woke one way or another, as the right should not be able to pollute the left as woke, without the left talking back. The left is thus struggling to understand how best to make the contemporary woke movement into a powerful frontlash movement responding to the anti-woke backlash movement. At core, this debate is about civil sphere boundary relations, as the movements are seeking through narratives and performances to connect emotionally with audiences in struggles over solidarity and incorporation.

Beyond Shifting Goalposts? The Antagonistic Shadow in Civil Sphere Theory

Marian Pradella (University of Siegen)

While Civil Sphere Theory (CST) has been extensively examined across theoretical and empirical domains, this paper addresses a previously largely unaddressed dimension: the explicit adoption of agonistic principles through reference to Chantal Mouffe's work (Alexander 2006: 124, 2021: 2). This adoption, also evident in Alexander's characterization of democracy as struggle between "frenemies" (Alexander 2019: 6) introduces certain tensions into CST's conceptualization of civil sphere discourse. Specifically, Mouffe's understanding of agonistic democratic discourse as haunted by the ever-present possibility of antagonistic conflict (Mouffe 2013) raises questions about how CST's binary codes can maintain universal aspirations while incorporating agonistic elements that necessarily require constitutive antagonistic exclusions. The analysis demonstrates that this tension manifests empirically in how binary codes structure discourse within civil sphere while simultaneously establishing its outer boundaries – particularly visible in contemporary phenomena like populist movements challenging established democratic discourse parameters. While Alexander conceptualizes the binary code's operation through an agonistic lens, arguing that "There will always be

two goalposts, but we shift them, even in the middle of play” (Alexander 2006: 551), recognizing antagonism's persistent shadow suggests that civil sphere transformations may entail not merely shifting goalposts but fundamental alterations to the democratic game itself. While rejecting Mouffe's strictly anti-universalist “solution” (Michelsen 2022: 75) to the problem of antagonism, the analysis demonstrates how recognizing antagonism's constitutive role can further refine CST's theoretical framework.

09:00–10:30 Panel 3B: Theory and Methodology in Civil Sphere Research

Convergent theories of radicalism: A dialogue between Civil Sphere Theory and S.N. Eisenstadt's study of modern barbarism

Andrea M. Maccarini (University of Padova, Italy)

This paper aims to start up a dialogue between the approach to ‘radical’ actions, ideologies and collective identities developed within Civil Sphere Theory (CST) and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's theory of modern barbarism. The two conceptual frameworks, I suggest, share important features as well as they part company at some point, and in principle they could work in tandem to produce a deeper sociological understanding of various forms of radicalism in the present era.

The paper first illustrates the convergence between CST and Eisenstadt's theory. They both see radicalism not in substantive terms, but through an analysis of cultural codes. I also argue that this convergence has systematic reasons, to be found in the roots of Jeffrey Alexander's notion of civil society.

Then Eisenstadt's seminal reflections on barbarism and modernity are outlined, highlighting the added value they might represent to CST. The divergence lies in the way symbolic codes are conceived. While CST lays out a binary symbolic matrix in which civil vs. uncivil qualities are listed, Eisenstadt's analysis of the social construction of symbolic boundaries revolves around three major codes, identified as *primordiality*, *civility*, and *sacredness*. The absolutization of one code results in violence, social and political exclusion (uncivil), while the pluralistic, non-conflationary interweaving of the three symbolic principles results in ‘civil’ forms of social order. Thus, as CST maintains, radical actions and ideologies can certainly be regarded as uncivil and antidemocratic when they try to impinge on the autonomy of the communicative and regulative institutions of the civil sphere. But Eisenstadt's conceptual frame also reclaims the importance of cultural contents, emphasizing the civil value of pluralistic forms of collective identity building.

Finally, the paper provides some empirical illustrations to clarify the crucial points of the main argument, indicating that the conversation between the two approaches deserves further developments.

Symbolic Mediation and Political Autonomy: A Reinterpretation of Geertz's Concept of Expression

Csaba Szaló (Masaryk University)

Politics can maintain its autonomy despite economic and technological forces only if it acknowledges that rational action is influenced by cultural meanings deeply intertwined with the social life of specific historical communities. Clifford Geertz's work on ideology illuminated how symbolic systems mediate and integrate human actions in their public forms. This contribution aims to reinterpret Geertz's clarification of the concept of expression, showing how symbolic systems transform emotions into meanings and make them publicly accessible. Human actions, even in their elementary forms, are already mediated and articulated by symbolic systems. Therefore, Geertz develops an interpretive strategy to reveal the entanglement between the surface of social phenomena and the depth of symbolic systems. While symbolic anthropology emphasises the significance of rhetoric and figurative language, cultural pragmatics adds a power dynamic to this focus on structural codes. This sensitivity to the active strategic utilisation of meanings in specific situations can bring back a historical sense of collective agency into sociology. In this context, if social action is considered to be inherently symbolic and historical, the current sociological emphasis on the conflict between the reality of social life and its distorted representations cannot be justified without integrating this force of distortion into processes of symbolization and legitimization.

From Methodological Individualism to Civil Solidarity: The Normative Critique of the Cognitive Turn in Cultural Sociology

Andrea Voyer (Stockholm University)

This article critiques the methodological individualism of the cognitive turn in cultural sociology by integrating the framework of epistemic normativity with civil sphere theory. The cognitive turn, exemplified by dual-process frameworks (DPF), has advanced the study of personal culture through insights into declarative and non-declarative cognition. However, its focus on individual cognition often neglects the systemic, normative dimensions of public culture. By emphasizing the shared belief in meaning as the connective tissue of social life, epistemic normativity provides a bridge between individual cognitive processes and collective cultural systems.

Drawing on civil sphere theory, this article reframes public culture as a normative domain where moral codes and shared expectations shape solidarity and social boundaries. Civil sphere normativity underscores how collective meaning-beliefs sustain the moral aspirations of inclusion and equality while also producing the social distinctions and exclusions inherent to cultural life. This integration situates individual action within broader cultural and moral systems, countering reductionist tendencies in cognitive sociology. Through this lens, personal and public cultures are shown to be interdependent, with epistemic normativity mediating their relationship. The resulting synthesis demonstrates how solidaristic ideals and moral frameworks emerge from the interplay of individual and collective dimensions of culture. This approach not only critiques the limitations of methodological individualism but also advances a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural foundations of civil solidarity.

11:00–12:30 Panel 4A: Boundary Issues: Civil vs. Non-Civil Spheres

From the Civil Sphere to the Academic Sphere. Tentative Steps Towards a Cultural-Sociological Theory of Society

Werner Binder (Masaryk University)

Sociologists in the 20th century have often conceived modern society as a culturally and functionally differentiated whole consisting of various value spheres (Weber), subsystems (Parsons, Luhmann) or fields (Bourdieu). Alexander's *The Civil Sphere* (2006) originated in this tradition, but so far there has been little work on the other (non-civil) spheres of modern society. This talk explores the possibility of a cultural sociological theory of society inspired by civil sphere theory starting from the assumption that non-civil spheres can be modelled after the image of the civil sphere, with their own binary codes, discourses and institutions. In this talk, I want to debate the concept of the academic sphere in light of its similarities and differences with the civil sphere. While the civil sphere strives for justice, academia can be characterized by the pursuit of truth. The civil sphere produces social solidarity, academia instead scientific consensus. In both cases, inclusion and exclusion seem to be inextricably intertwined – without dissent, scientific consensus becomes trivial. Like the civil sphere, academia has its own set of communicative institutions such as scientific associations, academic journals and conferences. Furthermore, there are other institutions such as research institutes, universities and study programs, which are partly research-oriented, partly pedagogical. Last but not least, rivaling narratives about scientific progress (cumulative growth vs. paradigm change) may correspond with the debates on assimilation and multiculturalism discussed in *The Civil Sphere*.

Politics Actually: How Fiction and Fact Interact within the Civil Sphere

Ines Ribas Ferreira Dias (Masaryk University)

Politics are necessarily mediated. The media of mass communications are “one fundamentally significant articulation of the imagined and idealized civil domain” (Alexander, 2006, p. 75). Both fictional and factual forms of media participate in the creation of broad narratives and genres that frame our engagement with politics. These communicative institutions, both fictional and factual, aesthetically articulate the *structure of feelings* of civil society through a steady stream of representations. As such, they are an essential part of the civil sphere. The goal of this article is to further the understanding of their dynamics. How do fictional and factual media interact within the civil sphere? How does fiction inform political expectations?

To explore the boundaries between fact and fiction, I focus on the case study of the popular, and frequently revisited, 2003 movie *Love Actually*, and the enduring incorporation of its images into British news articles from the last 21

years. The interaction between these two sets of texts reveals the dialectical relationship between factual and fictional representations and how their dialogue can constitute the background within which citizens negotiate the expectations of the office of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

More so, *Love Actually* also allows me to consider the boundaries between the civil and non-civil spheres of social life. As the tropes of the romantic comedy genre and the archetype of the romantic lead blend with the archetype of political office, operating between the civil and non-civil, they exemplify the tension and permeability of said boundaries.

Making Love in the Italian Style: Theorizing British Italophilia with Civil Sphere Theory

Christopher Thorpe (University of Exeter)

This presentation identifies and reflects on CST's merits for 1) rendering visible and theorizing British Italophilia 2) highlighting its significance for rejuvenating the study of cultural representation, and, in light of this, 3) generating new insights into the politics of representation. It does this by posing the following question: What does it mean to say that Britain is a nation of Italophiles, and how can CST be used to theorize the sociological and social significance of such a condition? Focusing on three BBC television mini-series aired between 2023 and 2024, inspired by and organised around the British 'love of Italy and Italianness', I show how CST allows for the representational and performative significance of the series to be captured. In other words, rather than subjecting the series to a range of deconstructive operations and reductive forms of cultural studies and sociology of culture-type analyses, CST supplies the normative and conceptual frameworks with which to explicate the solidary, idealizing, and aspirational dimensions of the series, and their importance for the remaking of British Italophilia as culture structure.

Empirically, the research examines how the presenters' self-professed 'love of Italy' is represented and performed as a force for moral and social good, capable of bringing together and binding actors otherwise divided by structures of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. Concepts from CST and cultural pragmatics are also used to cast light on the role such series and the 'communicative actors' producing them, play in extending 'Italy' and 'Italianness' to include audience-public's historically marginalised from accessing them, precisely at a point in time when attempts to transform the symbolic meanings of Italy and Italianness by the Italian government are marginalizing (further) and excluding equivalent groups in Italy. The presentation concludes by reflecting on the potential limitations of CST, specifically the concepts of 'discourse of liberty' and 'civic competence', for theorizing British Italophilia, and how these might be overcome. for 1) rendering visible and theorizing British Italophilia 2) highlighting its significance for rejuvenating the study of cultural representation, and 3) generating new insights into the politics of representation.

11:00–12:30 Panel 4B: Urban Civil Spheres and Micro-spaces of Interaction

People Like Us? Walking with Migrants in the Urban Civil Sphere

Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky (Masaryk University)

People with a migratory background have long faced a difficult (even if unspoken) question: are you "people like us"? The "us" is taken-for-granted, understood through terms like "majority society," "mainstream society," and "host society." Even the study of migration has largely been a story that privileges the perspectives of the "us" in destination societies. Who exactly constitutes the group known as "us"? Questions of who belongs and who doesn't are worked out in the civil sphere of the destination society. Within the civil spheres of Western democracies, debates about who belongs as a "good citizen," and who should be excluded as an anticivil outsider, result in consequences for "migrants" and "locals" alike. Through a critical, cultural sociological study in which we develop a "reverse sociology of migration," we take a step toward privileging the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups and reversing the ethnographic gaze. In other words, we strive to situate the "mainstream" instead of the "migrants" at the margins. Our study takes place in the urban civil sphere of Brno – a secondary city in Czechia that has been recently experiencing growing ethnic and cultural diversification of its population as a result of migration. We walk with migrants and conduct "go-along interviews," in which we explore how they make meaning and interact with people and institutions in the city's urban space. We seek to understand how people with a migratory background perceive symbolic and social boundaries and how they actively and creatively engage with them. Used in this way, go-along interviews provide insights into how belonging is negotiated in the urban civil sphere. In particular, we look at the everyday politics of how people with a migratory background engage in boundary work in response to the anticivil processes of racialization and Othering, seeking to carve out spaces of belonging.

Urban Civil Sphere(s)

Mervyn Horgan and Saara Liinamaa (University of Guelph)

Initial iterations of civil sphere theory implicitly viewed the civil sphere's boundaries as coincident with national boundaries. More recent CST scholarship has begun to push these boundaries, both upward toward theorizing transnational and/or global civil spheres, and downward to examining sub-national, regional and local civil spheres. The interplay between spheres at different levels produces a range of new tensions and new analytic possibilities. Working with the downward movement, in this paper we posit the *urban civil sphere* as an analytically distinct domain of solidaristic social action.

A city is not simply a setting or container for the unfolding of national level dramas. Rather, the urban civil sphere is a distinct realm of collective mobilization and solidaristic social action, with intrinsic differences from the national or international level. Cities have their own communicative institutions (e.g. local newspapers and tv, community message boards) and regulative institutions (e.g. municipal governance, zoning, by-laws). The urban civil sphere provides interactional, discursive and symbolic resources that can act as ballast against punitive national level movements and policies. Homing in on select examples around municipal policy, migrant inclusion, and everyday urban interaction, we demonstrate how, because of cities' specific characteristics—including density, heterogeneity, mobility, public realm—the urban civil sphere's internal tensions and dynamics, while shaped by national-level civil spheres, retain both analytic and empirical autonomy from broader civil spheres.

The Structural Transformation of Gossip from Club Sociability to Bounded Civil Solidarity

Danny Kaplan (Bar Ilan University)

How have changes in the communication of gossip influenced the development of mass civil solidarity? Drawing on illustrative moments in the rise of society journals in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, this paper examines the cultural-historic shift from traditional interpersonal gossip toward mass-mediated gossip and its implications for bounded solidarity.

First, I examine how sociability in British civic and political clubs presents two forms of triadic interactions: interpersonal gossip and 'public intimacy.' In interpersonal gossip, two parties discuss a third party in their absence, whereas public intimacy involves interactions between two parties staged in the presence of a third or an audience.

Second, these seemingly opposing performative mechanisms converged with the rise of society journals, which functioned as a form of social performance where a celebrity's personal life became both a scandal shared among an audience and a spectacle performed for the audience. Mass-mediated gossip enabled a multitude of readers to share secrets about others while reaffirming common norms of sociability, transforming strangers into confidants and accomplices.

Despite the apparent contrast between codes of the civil sphere and the practice of gossip—transparency vs secrecy, trust vs mistrust, public debate versus interpersonal exchange, bridging over differences vs deepening divisions—I argue for a mutually reinforcing relationship between gossip and civil solidarity. Mass gossip intertwined the feelings of exclusivity, familiarity, and loyalty characteristic of club sociability with core elements of the civil sphere—moral judgment, active cooperation, and a sense of sacredness—thereby shaping civil solidarity as an act of complicity.

14:00–15:30 Panel 5A: Resistance in Authoritarian Contexts

Resilience and Resistance: The Emotional Landscape of Civil Sphere through Chinese Cultural Movements

Runya Qiaoan (University of Vienna & Palacky University)

In an era characterized by global democratic regression and the ascent of populist forces, comprehending the emotional underpinnings of civil resistance has emerged as a critical imperative for safeguarding democratic values. This research addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship by delving into the emotional landscape of civil resistance, with a particular focus on cultural movements within contemporary China. In recent years, China has exhibited a concerning totalitarian tendency characterized by declining civil society and the centralization of political power. Many assume that, given the current political landscape, the Chinese Communist Party would not tolerate any antagonist associations and social movements. However, as James Scott noticed, in the non-Western part of the world, resistance often takes a different form. In recent years, there have been a few waves of movements in China that do

not fit neatly in the traditional social movements studies but deserve close examination. The “lying- flat” (躺平) movement, a passive resistance counterculture rejecting the societal pressure of over-work and over-achieve is a good example. In this project, I will focus on the “lying- flat” movement in China through the lens of Civil Sphere Theory (CST) while elaborating it further through Interpretive Analysis of Emotions (IAE). While CST traditionally focuses on the cultural and symbolic parts of the social norm, I will examine how these norms are translated into emotions conveyed in the discourse surrounding these movements to ascertain the emerging meaning structures in the Chinese civil sphere.

“This Exam Can’t Be Retaken”: Visual Materials and Civil Repair in Serbia’s Student Protests

Milica Resanović & Ivana Spasić (University of Belgrade)

This study examines the visual expressions of student protests that erupted in Serbia in November 2024, leading to widespread faculty blockades across the country. The protests emerged after the collapse of a recently renovated concrete canopy at the Novi Sad train station, which killed 15 people. In response, students demanded accountability and the identification of those responsible. Rather than being portrayed as a localized tragedy, the student movement framed this incident as a symbol of systemic issues, especially government corruption, or, more broadly, as a problem that endangers society as a whole. Visual materials, foremost among them the red hands, which became an iconic representation of students’ demands, served as powerful tools for conveying messages and evoking emotions among citizens. Through the framework of civil sphere theory, this research investigates how visual materials, particularly protest banners and posters, were utilized by students and their supporters to present their demands in terms of civil qualities and to portray representatives of the ruling political elite and current political system as embodying anti-civil qualities. Particular focus is placed on whether, in an authoritarian society like Serbia, characterized by weak communication and deeply dysfunctional regulatory institutions, students are demanding the creation of new civil institutions or the reform of the existing ones, and how they are visually articulating these demands. Data will be collected from Protestography, a non-profit platform that gathers protest visuals across Serbia, with interpretation focusing on both visual and textual elements in selected banners and posters.

14:00–15:30 Panel 5B: Journalism, News, and the Public Sphere

News Journalism, State Power and the Civil Sphere

Jackie Harrison (University of Sheffield)

Civil sphere theory is quite clear on the relationship between the political sphere and the civil sphere. It is a relationship of persistent and consistent contestation. This is seen in particular in the relationship between state power and the communicative conditions it requires the institutions of the factual mass media conform to. This presentation analyses how the exercise of state led hostility toward news journalism seeks to bring about one of four types of political-communicative conditions under which news journalism is forced to operate in the civil sphere. These are 1) Agonistic pluralism where the state displays respectful institutional forbearance and an acceptance of news diversity and diffusion; 2) Antagonism where the state undertakes media capture and supports partisan news as advocacy and pre-critical opinion; 3) Repression where the state uses impunity and illiberal legal and economic measures creating the circumstances for self-censorship; and 4) Authoritarianism where the state operates under a warrant of absolute authority and seeks to bring about a ‘correct way’ for news journalism to operate. These four types enable us to address both a) the outcomes of the relationship between the political sphere and the civil sphere and the types of political-communicative conditions for news that we are required to live with and b) the extent to which the civil sphere retains its independence and integrity regarding the civil role of news journalism.

The culture of algorithmic news: News Recommender Systems in public broadcasting as negotiation sites for journalistic ethos in the civil sphere

Nikolaus Poehhacker (University of Graz)

Mass media is a vital element in (in)forming and constructing public opinion in democratic societies. By presenting facts about social, cultural, and political life, the news builds one of the foundations of public discourse. However, framing and selection of news is prone to interpretation of editors and journalists, which is balanced with an institutionalized journalistic ethos ensuring the objectivity of reporting (Alexander, 2008). Drawing on civil sphere theory and ethnographic observations at a German public broadcaster I discuss the tension between the democratic function of public broadcasting and the implicit normativity of algorithmic recommender systems. In Germany’s

public broadcasting system, similar to other European states, journalistic ethos is highly linked to the German constitution, which demands broadcasters to present a diverse set of information in their program. The ongoing digitalization of broadcasters, however, creates challenges in that regard as recommender systems are increasingly becoming part of the broadcasters' online presence. Recommender systems are cultural artifacts that carry the values of their production contexts. While the journalistic ethos follows the ideal of objectivity and informing public opinion, the algorithms in question were developed for recommendations on Netflix and social media sites to maximize user presence on digital platforms and revenue by advertising. This is achieved, amongst other techniques, by recommending emotionally engaging or similar information, rather than an objective selection based on journalistic significance - and thus are at odds with the values of the civil sphere.

Whistleblowing and negative expert knowledge

Thomas Olesen (Aarhus University)

The paper argues that the whistleblower is a distinct character in democracies. On the one hand, whistleblowers have important affinities with activists and journalists, with whom they share an ethos of disclosure, a vision that a healthy, vibrant democracy is built on the corrective power of 'societalization' (Alexander, 2018). On the other, whistleblowers are *sui generis* because they engage in disclosure from the inside. This means that they offer a different kind of truth-claim to public debates. I call this negative *expert* knowledge. The term 'expert' has two aspects. The first one points to the fact that whistleblowers have first-hand experience with the wrongdoing they disclose, either because they have observed it directly or experienced it themselves. In the second aspect, the whistleblower's observation of wrongdoing is tied to their professional competences. The whistleblower has professional skills that enable them to detect wrongdoing in ways that laypeople cannot, just as their professional competences give them privileged organizational access points from which to observe wrongdoing. By labelling the whistleblower as a 'character' and linking them with a certain type of truth-claim, I locate the whistleblower on a broader map of civil sphere actors. So far, CST analysis has paid most attention to activists and journalists (Alexander, 2006). I conclude the paper by arguing that the negative expert knowledge of whistleblowers is particularly important in a context where organization and technology become increasingly complex and opaque. This is perhaps most evident in the Big Tech sector, where production revolves around AI and algorithmic technologies.

16:00–18:00 Panel 6A: Uncivil Repair: Breakdown and Contestation

'Not Now': Slovak Illiberalism and the Theory of Uncivil Repair

Dominik Zelinsky (Institute for Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences)

This paper draws on Alexander's civil sphere theory, in particular the notion of civil repair, in which civil sphere identifies uncivil practices or traumas and seeks a correction that decreases unrest and public emotions, often by including previously excluded voices. The paper, however, develops a theory of the obverse process, which I term 'uncivil repair'. In contrast to civil repair, uncivil repair is an authoritative attempt to resolve civil sphere problems and pacify the situation by excluding selected voices from the public sphere and establish an – apparent – state of order at the expense of actual symbolic repair. As a result, the civil sphere seems to be mended, but the appearance is superficial. The result is, in fact, that the civil culture is jeopardized. The paper draws on recent events in Slovakia, following the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister Robert Fico in May 2024, in which the Slovak political elite rejected the possibility of a civil repair. Instead, guided by the heated emotion and high political polarization, they opted for the strategy of uncivil repair, blaming a variety of political and public actors for the assassination. This uncivil repair was unsuccessful within the bounds of a liberal democratic state. However, the choice of uncivil strategy over civil one resulted in a 'no repair' situation that engendered a culture of suspicion and conspiracy theorizing about Fico's assassination.

Uncivil Repair Through Violence: An Analysis of the Backlash Quasi-Solidarization and Recommendations for Civil Repair in Germany and Italy Amid the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Polina Zavershinskaia, and Francesco Spera (University of Salento)

The Civil Sphere Theory, which focuses on the concept of the civil sphere, provides a comprehensive understanding of civil society and its symbolic practices. It asserts that the civil sphere's core consists of the discursive structures of civil solidarity supported by civil institutions, all intended to promote inclusiveness and peaceful, nonviolent coexistence. Regrettably, the normative ideal of the civil sphere is not always reflected in actual societies. Jeffrey

Alexander argues that the civil sphere is not a panacea. In this study, we examine the quasi-solidarization practices of backlash actors who, by mimicking civil sphere discourses and institutions, seek to legitimize violent actions against the civil sphere's core in a way we term "uncivil repair." As social turmoil often creates favorable conditions for backlash actors to propose their "uncivil repair," we analyze the justification of violence by German and Italian backlash during the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. First, we investigate the discourses used against German and Italian civil centers and their institutions, specifically focusing on the backlash portrayal of violence as a legitimate and civil action. Second, we assess whether such discursive quasi-solidarization has increased violence within the German and Italian civil spheres. Ultimately, we provide recommendations on how the regulatory institutions of the German and Italian civil spheres (particularly the law) can counter the backlash's legitimization of violence and restrain their quasi-solidarization practices, proposing normative mechanisms for "civil repair."

Organized civil society between particularism and universalism: challenges and opportunities for the development of democracy

Federico Quadrelli (University of Kassel)

Social, cultural and economic transformations have a disruptive impact on the lives of people and nations. They can be very rapid changes due to technological innovations, or slow ones with regard to habits and practices of communities, in both cases these changes bring with them more or less radical, more or less aggressive backlash phenomena. This happens not only at the level of organized political parties, such as those of the identitarian, radical and populist right that have ruled or are ruling in several countries in Europe. But rather, also in civil society, which too often is not properly analyzed in its dark aspects. Civil society, as the American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has theorized (2006), is characterized by inclusion and exclusion. Within it, phenomena of emancipation and progress can be generated, but also the opposite, phenomena of intolerance and exclusion, when the interests and goals of social groups do not pursue the idea of universalistic solidarity, but rather particularistic and therefore exclusionary. Studies investigating the relationship between civil society organizations and the phenomenon of the radical and populist right, for example, and consequently the impact that can be generated on democracy, are few. Yet, as Schroeder et. All (2020, 2022) remind us, in the various subsystems of civil society (sports, labor unions, religion, and so on) there are increasing interventions of the radical and populist right, if not extreme right, which from within and from below, exert forms of interference and contamination of democracy, pushing for an ideological reformulation of the concept of community, nation, and solidarity marked by the idea of exclusivity, often on an ethnic, religious, and sexual basis. The principles of the open society on the basis of which modern Western democracies were formed are being challenged in favor of a narrative that increasingly pushes to put up walls and create separations between groups, according to a closed society logic. These drives run through society in its various subsystems, and reverberate in institutional political representation, with support for identity political parties and movements that then intervene in legislation to restrict the spaces of freedom that had previously been created. This paper offers an analysis of some specific case studies in Italy and Germany about civil society organizations working to promote an exclusionary vision and as a reaction to the social and cultural innovation processes of recent years. The focus will be on some organizations active in the religious, sports and trade union fields in Italy and Germany. The purpose is to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to the analysis of the dynamics in civil society in relation to the idea of democracy.

16:00–18:00 Panel 6B: Political, Communicative, and Literary Experiences

Making (Non)Sense of War: Binary Codes, National Identity and Solidarity in Contemporary Taiwan

Horng-luen Wang (Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica)

How does war unite or divide a society even before it begins? Conversely, how does civil society respond to looming war threats? This paper explores these questions through the case of Taiwan. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, global attention on Taiwan, labeled by *The Economist* as "the most dangerous place on earth," has grown, as many viewed Taiwan as a potential flashpoint for the next major warfare driven by China's ambitions for unification. Yet, domestic responses remained tepid until the 2024 Presidential Election, when issues of war and peace became central to political debate. The three major parties—the DPP, the KMT, and the TPP—framed Taiwan's war risks differently. While the DPP promoted military deterrence, the KMT and TPP warned that strengthening defense would provoke China and heighten war risks. These debates, in turn, intensified public awareness of national security.

Drawing on Jeffrey Alexander's Civil Sphere Theory, this paper analyzes how war-related issues interact with Taiwan's regulative institutions (voting, parties, and office) and communicative institutions (mass media, polls and civil associations). Data from newspapers, online platforms, and public opinion polls are used for analysis. It shows how binary codes, manipulated by different election camps in their political discourses, are weaved into distinct narrative genres that lead to contradictory strategies to cope with war. It also examines how different camps "make sense (or nonsense) of war" that may bear contradictory implications for the inclusion and exclusion of the nation. Through Taiwan's case, this paper intends to shed new light on the complex interplay between war, civil society, and national identity.

The U.S. Supreme Court and Civil Sphere Theory

Steve Koh (Boston University)

How does the U.S. Supreme Court establish legitimacy? Over the last two hundred years, the Court has interpreted the U.S. Constitution on watershed issues such as segregation, abortion, and marriage equality. And yet the Constitution is just 7,591 words. A puzzle thus emerges: how does the Court intelligibly interpret this short text for American society? This article develops a new theoretical and empirical account of such Supreme Court decisionmaking. It shows how the Court consistently and inevitably draws on the American cultural discourse of liberty, part of the broader American cultural discourse proposed in Jeffrey Alexander's civil sphere theory. When it does so, however, the Court may trigger a backlash: the countervailing discourse of repression. This article shows this through two case studies. First, it explores the cases guaranteeing and then overturning the right to abortion, from *Roe v. Wade* (1973) to *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022). Second, it reviews the cases guaranteeing the right to bear arms, beginning with *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008). The two sets of cases show that the discourse shares the same pattern: the Court's defenders hailed the decisions as a restoration of the Constitution or a guarantee of liberty, while opposing justices and commentators accused the Court of "creating a Constitutional right out of nowhere." Public newspaper editorials, legal commentators, and interviews with Supreme Court justices show other instances of this broader communicative discourse within the American civil sphere.

Hybrid Media and the Polarization of the Civil Sphere: Elite Polarization Beyond Political Institutions

María Luengo Cruz (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid) & Matthias Revers (Universit of Leeds; University of Hamburg)

Media institutions consolidate polarized meanings and emotions. In this paper, we aspire to extend the notion of elite polarization, applied primarily to political institutions, to explore how divided and divisive communicative institutions shape political polarization in the public sphere. Drawing on civil sphere theory (Alexander, 2006) and theories of field transformation (e.g. Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Eyal, 2013), we analyze hybrid media as key polarizing agents. Examples include partisan news apps such as MAGA 2024 and Proud Democrat, which became powerful political-media-economic entanglements during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign by blending news, entertainment and audience tracking. These hybrids inhabit a space between politics and the media, fragmenting audiences while fracturing media institutions from within. These overlapping lines render them increasingly ineffective in fulfilling their societal role: to establish factual interpretations of reality, including grievances that demand public accountability and injustices that incite broader social understanding.

Literary Agency in the Civil Sphere: The Dialectics of Civil Despair and Repair

Jan Váňa (Institute of Czech literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences)

I propose a dialogue between Civil Sphere Theory (CST) and my recent developments in the cultural sociology of literature. Following the Yale School of Cultural Sociology, I conceptualize literary works as analytically autonomous agents that actively shape their social surroundings. The autonomy is exercised through the *aesthetic experience of reading* where the text exerts agency by immersing readers in its aesthetic structure.

Building on Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling", later adopted in CST by Jeffrey Alexander, I argue that literary agency operates on two levels: (1) the intimate, subjective interaction between the text and the reader, and (2) its resonance with emergent, largely inarticulate collective patterns. I embrace the structures of feeling as the foundation of a new *model of literary communication in the civil sphere*.

To demonstrate this model, I analyze the reception of four dystopian novels: *Parable of the Sower* (Butler, 1993), *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood, 2003), *Never Let Me Go* (Ishiguro, 2005), and *The Road* (McCarthy, 2006). Examining

nonprofessional readers' reviews on GoodReads.com and Reddit, I trace how emotional engagement with these novels' aesthetic power intertwines with readers' reflections on contemporary civil issues such as environmental degradation, corporatocracy, and authoritarianism. Crucially, readers articulate a shift from *civil despair*—a sense of urgency over the erosion of civil values—to an impulse toward *civil repair*, actively engaging with these concerns to prevent such decline.

Friday, October 24 – Parallel Sessions

09:00–11:00 Panel 7A: Multiculturalism, Incorporation, and Civil Solidarity

Towards Multicultural Memory: Civil Sphere Struggles in Post-Civil War Spain

Elisabeth Becker-Topkara (Heidelberg University)

This paper traces struggles over a Muslim cemetery in post-Civil War Asturias, Spain, highlighting the centrality of multicultural memory in creating an inclusive contemporary society. Drawing on the theory of multiculturalism put forth in *The Civil Sphere*, I shed light on the bifurcating cultural narrative of the civil (victim) and uncivil (perpetrator) and its grasp on collective memory, complicating this still-dominant perspective through the ambivalent and unsettling role of the Moroccan Muslim soldier.

I argue that largely hidden Muslim cemeteries throughout contemporary Spain, such as our case study, built during the Spanish Civil War, serve as a starting point for thinking about enduring spatial and cultural exclusions in Spain's civil sphere: that is, those who are deemed civil or uncivil in both present and past, kept apart through their association with danger, threat, and deviance from Spanish values/norms. I further emphasize not only national but also regional social, cultural and political configurations that give shape to understandings of who belongs, both in life and after death. Drawing on interviews with local stakeholders in the cemetery as well as local and regional archives, I ultimately develop a theory of multicultural memory that brings into conversation the theory of multicultural memory put forth in *The Civil Sphere* with Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, emphasising the role of collective memory in shaping contemporary civil spheres. I define multicultural memory as *the overlap and interference of memories that help constitute the public sphere, specifically by expanding the range of imagined life experiences for the members of a society—thereby expanding the imagined community in the present through recognition of a shared history*.

Can “non-liberal” belonging tools expand? Arabs/Palestinians/Muslims in Israeli Civil Sphere

Hizky Shoham (Bar Ilan University)

To what extent and under what conditions can the civil sphere include non-core groups? This question is critical amid global clashes between inclusivist liberalism and exclusivist neo-nationalism. This normative paper examines CST as a political theory for navigating tensions between liberal justice and nationalist belonging, using contemporary Israel as a case study. Unlike naïve liberals such as Rawls and Habermas, CST argues that the civil sphere must foster both justice and universal solidarity. Expanding the civil sphere to include non-core groups thus requires more than access to material and political resources; it necessitates recoding “non-liberal” solidarity frameworks—such as language, the calendar, civil religion, and folklore—toward greater inclusivity. A non-naïve liberal approach would historicize and reassess these tools, shifting them from exclusive ties to the core group to belonging frameworks that foster universal solidarity.

Israel's ethnocratic civil sphere, shaped by a democratic framework but currently governed by an exclusivist (and often racist) administration, exemplifies both the possibilities and challenges of expanding the folkloric civil sphere. Bottom-up practices—such as folklore, the Hebrew language, and the Jewish calendar—contribute to solidarity within Jewish Israeli society while largely excluding Arab-Palestinian citizens. Can these frameworks be reimaged to foster civil solidarity across these divides?

By historicizing symbols, holidays, consumer practices, and invented traditions, I propose pathways for bridging Zionist, Jewish, and Israeli rituals with those of Arab, Palestinian, and Muslim communities. These efforts can cultivate a bottom-up, shared folkloric civil sphere—limited but expanding—holding the potential to transcend current exclusivist political climate.

Anti-antisemitism as ambiguous civil sphere vitality: Jewish safety and social solidarity

Jakob Egholm Feldt (Roskilde University)

In European societies, government-sponsored anti-antisemitism has become ambiguous. States such as Germany, the UK, and Denmark have strongly called upon a vigilant anti-antisemitic civil sphere vitality to combat value impurities in defense of a social “we”. Muslim minorities and “the Left” have been confronted with a binary question of allegiance to anti-antisemitic cultural codes. In this paper, I analyze the struggle over co-creating a sacred-primordial narrative about the inherent civil values of the Danish national collective; a struggle which links the present and the future to past traumatic as well as cathartic events in different ways. This co-creation within an assimilatory society with a homogenous self-image has re-exposed Jewish cultural otherness and highlighted Jewish vulnerability confronted with claims for civil recognition from other minorities. The Danish case connects to cross-European civil sphere struggles over which narratives and historical paths the solidary “we” is travelling along from past to future. From the perspective of this paper, the civil sphere struggles over (anti)-antisemitism represent an endangerment of a cultural structure which opens possibilities for both reconstruction and increased polarization. Within civil sphere theory, multiculturalism most often represents a more advanced state of inclusion than assimilation or hyphenated identities but over the past 30 years multiculturalism itself has been polluted by elite-critical civil sphere currents. Arguably, anti-antisemitism as civil sphere vitality and as critical social thought stands at a crossroads between domestication, polarization, and renewal.

Education and Civil Repair

Stefan Lund, Anna Lund, Ali Osman (Stockholm University)

Education acts as the glue of society. As early sociologist Émile Durkheim noted, schools reflect societal dynamics. If schools fail to foster solidarity, social cohesion is at risk. Thus, education creates a moral environment where individuals learn about collective life through experience—not just, as Durkheim taught us, in “minds and imaginations, but in reality.” This means that educational policy and everyday school experience extend beyond academic achievement and encompass the collective coexistence of society. This presentation will highlight how municipalities and schools in Sweden's marketized school-segregated landscape engage in various civil repair processes. Thus, we will provide analyses of beliefs and practices regarding local desegregation policies and their enactment of different modes of incorporation. Our data consists of three sub-studies highlighting various desegregation initiatives (school closing, school merging, and school opening). We interviewed local politicians, public officials, and school principals to understand why and how they initiated desegregation policies. Additionally, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with teachers. Our analysis of desegregation processes illuminates how modes of incorporation can range from non-incorporation and assimilation to hyphenation and multicultural incorporation. The study shows the policies and practices of desegregation and the existence of civil or non-civil actions that enable one form of incorporation to occur before the others.

09:00–11:00 Panel 7B: Civil Sphere and the Environment: Climate Change and Public Responsibility

Stabilizing Societalization: Futurizing as explanatory repertoires

Liv Egholm (Copenhagen Business School)

This paper investigates how specific causes become recognized as societal problems that require collective action and are upheld over time. Drawing upon Alexander's framework of Societalization (2019) and recent scholarship on imagined futures as vital catalysts for social action, this study investigates the role of future imaginations in framing past and contemporary occurrences as ruptures to the civil sphere. While the framework of societalization implicitly builds on the civil sphere's anticipation of desirable futures, there is a need for more nuanced and explicit theorizing to address the role of future imaginations in delineating and upholding a cause as a societal challenge. Through a comparative analysis of divergent organizational forms and strategies employed by the English branch of Extinction Rebellion and the Danish KR Foundation, the study illustrates that the different imaginations of the future inherent in existing civil codes and “genres of scandalization” play a central role in recognizing and institutionalizing a cause's societal significance. The study contributes to our understanding of why certain problems persist over time and how entrenched solutions remain linked to them due to their characteristics as “explanatory repertoires.” Ultimately, this

study emphasizes the importance of grappling with the constructs of “explanas” to identify which societal actions and actors can effectively engage with contemporary societal challenges. By highlighting the dynamic interplay between imaginations of the future and organizing strategies, this paper offers valuable insights into the processes that underpin the creation and stabilization of societalization.

The Societalization of Economic Problems: How Germany and Austria’s Far Right Delegitimized Support for Ukraine After February 24, 2022

Till Hilmar (University of Vienna)

This presentation examines how far-right actors in Germany and Austria used economic narratives – particularly energy security concerns – to erode public support for Ukraine following Russia’s full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. It explores how economic grievances became culturally framed, transforming energy price inflation into a symbolically charged issue that challenged solidarity with Ukraine.

Initially, German and Austrian debates reflected a shift toward civil inclusion, seeking to recognize the war as a European crisis and Ukrainian victims as “our victims”. However, these narratives soon faced counterarguments, particularly from the far right. Two competing discursive breaches emerged: one positioning economic disruptions, especially gas price inflation, as a crisis threatening national prosperity, and another framing dependence on Russian energy as a moral failure. Using Jeffrey Alexander’s concept of societalization, I trace how energy security became a key battleground for the struggle over meaning.

The contribution examines relevant differences in the historically formed discursive resources between Germany and Austria. In Germany, “alternative” interpretations of global affairs, shaped by the legacies of the GDR, remain especially influential in the post-communist East and are articulated today by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). In Austria, a non-NATO member, far-right discourses by the Freedom Party (FPÖ) have reframed “neutrality” in the context of the Ukraine war by invoking economic security arguments. I explore how these pathways allowed the far right in both countries to exploit economic grievances and, in a process of cultural struggle with competing interpretations, frame energy security as antithetical to solidarity with Ukraine.

Decentring and Decolonising Climate Discourse: The Role of Spirituality and Emotions in Expanding Solidarity Towards a Shared Planet

Sarah Schäfer (University of Vienna)

In my paper, I will apply the Civil Sphere Theory to the discourse on climate change, emphasising the role of emotions, cultural narratives, and decolonial approaches in shaping collective action. While international climate governance is dominated by technocratic expertise and economic rationality, its failure to generate large-scale environmental transformation highlights the limitations of scientific discourse alone.

Drawing from the more recently evolving field of Critical Cultural Sociology, I explore how spiritual discourses contribute to a decentred deliberation on climate politics. In my case study, I focus on Tibetan Buddhist perspectives with particular attention to the environmental action surrounding the renowned Buddhist teacher Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche. By contextualising Tibetan Buddhist attitudes towards climate change and examining discourse practices around Khyentse Rinpoche’s environment initiatives, such as Zero Waste Programmes in dharma centres, I will demonstrate how spiritual narratives extend notions of solidarity towards a shared planet in times of climate crisis.

While the normative codes of the civil sphere in relation to climate change are not universally fixed, I argue that they bear the historical imprints of coloniality and Western epistemic dominance. Spiritual traditions have historically contributed to the formation of moral communities that sustain justice, often through ritualistic and emotional engagement. This resonates with Buddhist environmentalism, where compassion and the notion of interdependence serves as the backbone for ecological action. By foregrounding spiritual narratives within the civil sphere, this paper seeks to decolonise climate discourse and broaden understandings of solidarity in the struggle for a sustainable future.

Rather than homogenising Tibetan Buddhism or reducing it to an exoticized ‘Other,’ I highlight its internal diversity and strategic engagements with global climate politics based on my empirical case study. I suggest that expanding such spiritual narratives to the civil sphere beyond Western-centric frameworks can potentially foster depolarisation in pluralistic societies.

11:30–13:30 Panel 8A: Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory

Democracy and Cultural Trauma

Hee-Jeong Lee (Kongju National University, South Korea)

This study aims to explore democracy and cultural trauma in South Korean society. To do so, we examine the self-coup declared in December 2024 through the lens of cultural trauma. The self-coup, which was attempted for the first time in 44 years since the military regime in the 1980s, was declared to eradicate pro-North Korean forces and protect the liberal democratic order. However, South Korean society's response was immediate. “Is this democracy?” citizens asked. They criticized it as “something that could only happen during the military dictatorship” and “no different from a dictatorship.” The National Assembly, which lifted it within just six hours, impeached the president. In January 2025, the president was arrested and has been under investigation. During this process, the president's approval rating rose from 16% immediately after the declaration of the self-coup to 39% in mid-January 2025. This process raises interesting questions about South Korean society: Why did South Korean society immediately oppose self-coup? Why did both liberal and conservative forces oppose self-coup in the immediate aftermath of self-coup? Why did young people in their 20s and 30s who did not experience martial law oppose martial law? Why have South Korean society's responses been divided and changed over time? To answer these questions, this study explores how martial law is being represented and its meanings have transformed in Korean society from a cultural trauma perspective. We trace trauma narratives from December 2024 to January 2025 using media data, civil society announcements, and minutes of the National Assembly.

From Witnessing to Solidarity: Social Media and the Making of Cultural Trauma Narrative after Mexico City's 1985 and 2017 Earthquakes

Gabriela Müggenburg y Rodriguez Vigil (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid)

This paper examines the role of social media users in constructing a narrative of cultural trauma following the 1985 and 2017 earthquakes in Mexico City and surrounded areas. The fact that both tragedies occurred on September 19th, 32 years apart, intensified the collective trauma, underscoring the profound symbolic significance of this share date. Through 29 interviews and a digital ethnography, this research explores how users transitioned from media witnessing to participating in short-term and long-term actions to alleviate suffering, while simultaneously creating cultural symbols and rituals of remembrance. This shift is framed within the context of cultural trauma, where a severe emotional shock is transformed into a collective experience of healing and concrete solidarity. The study focuses on the role of social media in facilitating this transformation and assesses its effectiveness in consolidating civil repair and strengthening the Mexican civil sphere and beyond. Findings reveal that closeness, trust, and the affordance of social media platforms were crucial in shaping how media witnessing evolved into various levels of civil engagement. These factors facilitated collective action that transformed trauma into hope and unity. Cultural symbols continue to circulate annually, nurturing Mexican civil sphere and younger generations with the lessons learned from both earthquakes, alongside remembrance rituals that have persisted since then.

Eventful Sociology and Civil Sphere Theory: Resisting Unrest in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Matthew Coetzee (University of Notre Dame)

This paper contributes to Alexander's (2006) Civil Sphere Theory (CST) by expanding its focus on civil repair beyond post-crisis institutional processes to include grassroots, real-time mobilizations that emerge during moments of socio-political breakdown. Focusing on the July 2021 unrest in South Africa, when state institutions collapsed and over 350 people lost their lives—including at least 36 victims of racialized violence—I explore how grassroots communities initiate civil repair in real time during moments of socio-political breakdown.

Based on 120 in-depth interviews with community respondents from three areas of Durban—Durban South, Durban North, and Durban West—I argue that civil repair begins *during* crises, driven by cultural trauma and collective identity, rather than occurring solely as a post-crisis response. This temporal shift expands CST by redirecting attention from formal institutions and media narratives to grassroots, face-to-face interactions that actively shape solidarity codes and cultural repertoires in real time. I demonstrate that grassroots performances, the creation of moral narratives, and the framing of events through social media play an integral role in initiating and sustaining processes of civil repair.

To capture the varied outcomes of civil repair, I propose a typology of repair trajectories: *antifragile* (where communities emerge more cohesive), *restorative* (returning to pre-crisis stability), and *precarious* (marked by unresolved tensions). My analysis demonstrates that Durban West experienced antifragile repair, Durban South exhibited restorative repair, and Durban North faced precarious repair.

This project highlights the transformative potential of grassroots civil society during crises. It illustrates how spontaneous community responses—shaped by cultural repertoires, collective memory, and moral solidarity codes—play a critical role in sustaining democratic values and fostering inclusive solidarity in diverse and divided societies with less robust institutions.

Navigating a Troubled Past in Multiethnic Contexts

Carina Carlhed Ydhag (Stockholm University)

This paper is based on one-year ethnographic fieldwork and focuses on how Beechwood School, a multiethnic school in a stigmatized neighborhood, copes with the uncivil gaze from outside the school while sheltering students from the risk of Islamophobic sentiments in society. The school has an institutional history of being scrutinized in the media for uncivil choices, as the former leadership failed to manage the school's finances and was accused of radicalizing its Muslim students. Today, a couple of years later, the school has recovered with a new headmaster and organizational structure. However, it still struggles to be viewed as a civil institution in the eyes of the majority Sweden. The backdrop of the institutional memory of a troubled past serves as a driving force to cultivate a school culture that deals with destructive memories while striving to create a constructive future for its students. The school personnel work to foster an inclusive culture of a multicultural mode of incorporation. However, the shadow of being coded as uncivil by a less Muslim-friendly society interferes with this effort, as the experiences within the school's walls do not align with the school's interactions with the broader community. The paper aims to analyze the doings of an inclusive school culture while balancing civil and uncivil values, listening in on school staff and the students' experiences of this dilemma.

11:30–13:30 Panel 8B: Spaces of Care: Childhood and Beyond

The civil sphere of children's theater

Rebecca Brinch, Ylva Lorentzon & Anna Lund (Stockholm University)

This paper examines the evolving representation of migration in Swedish children's theatre since 2015, in the context of significant shifts in artistic priorities and national migration policies. While political discourse has increasingly adopted anti-immigration sentiments, artistic venues have embraced themes related to migration, exemplified by the inclusion of multiple languages and varying performer backgrounds. Through the analysis of five contemporary theatre productions staged in Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö, the paper focuses on a theorization of aesthetics of migration aimed at young audiences.

This analysis seeks to illuminate how incorporation processes are framed through three recurrent thematic Broch frameworks: firstly, the drive towards authenticity in migration narratives, which often minimizes imagination; secondly, the portrayal of migration as an urban phenomenon that selectively highlights certain aspects while rendering others invisible; and thirdly, the multifaceted role of multilingualism in theatre. This latter point underscores that while multilingualism can signify multicultural incorporation, it risks reinforcing stereotypes or serving merely as a didactic tool. By investigating these themes, the paper seeks to establish how theatre can cultivate a memory culture surrounding migration in Sweden, considering the interplay of place, (non)belonging, and perceptions of Swedishness. The data consists of observations of production work and stage-audience encounters, interviews with theater professionals and young audience members, and cultural performance analyses of studied plays.

Contested Care: Navigating Capitalist Contradictions in the Public Sphere

Julia Schmid (University of Vienna)

The civil sphere, rooted in values such as equality, freedom, solidarity, and justice, provides a lens to examine the contradictions of capitalist societies. These contradictions become particularly visible in the domain of care, where market-driven logics—shaped by privatization, commodification, and financialization—clash with the fundamental

human need for support and well-being. My dissertation uses the example of residential long-term care in Austria to explore how these structural tensions shape both institutional practices and the lived experiences of those navigating them. Theoretically, the study integrates approaches from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School with feminist and intersectional perspectives to analyze contradictions as both structural tensions and relational struggles. This dual focus—on material conditions and agency—highlights how contradictions manifest not only through economic pressures but also in public narratives and political rhetoric that frame care as either a private responsibility, a market asset, or a civic right. While these discourses do not determine social realities, they shape the terms through which contradictions are justified, resisted, or redefined. This presentation will outline the conceptual foundations of my research, emphasizing the interplay between structural forces and individual experiences of societal contradictions. While empirical findings will not yet be available, the discussion will explore how care becomes a contested terrain where the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice are both challenged and symbolically renegotiated in the public sphere.

The sensory landscapes of incorporation: An exploratory ethnography of children sports in Norway

Marianna Melenteva (University of Inland Norway)

This presentation combines Jeffrey Alexander's Civil Sphere Theory with Sarah Pink's sensory ethnography. The aim is to explore the incorporative practices of local children and youth sports teams in Norway by highlighting the affective dimension of the civil sphere. Drawing on extended ethnographic field observations during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 sport seasons, I ask if, how and why interactions in the sensory landscapes of the civil sphere allow children a sense of incorporation. Observations in children's basketball teams and in a swimming club show that the connection between lived sensory experiences and feelings of togetherness can reside in sensory landscapes. In this affective landscape, I argue, the civil sphere's feeling structures collide with and sometimes fuse in the ongoing creation of an 'organized social-sensory space.' During interactions and encounters in sensory landscapes, sport actors utilize the available environments to navigate and maneuver various cultural structures. Affective responses to these sensory interactions vary and, in turn, this influences whether encounters and interactions can lead to either successful or failed incorporation. In underlining the importance of emplaced sensory encounters in children's sports, I suggest that the term, 'cohe-sense' can help us understand how experiences of emplaced belonging intertwine with the affective dimensions of togetherness and the civil sphere.