

The civil sphere in war and peace: From Athens to Kyiv

Dialogues in Sociology
1–10
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DOI: 10.1177/29768667251388163
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Jeffrey C Alexander¹ 

Abstract

This essay explores the tragic paradox that haunts ‘actually existing’ civil spheres. The civil sphere represents history’s most creative and ambitious effort to replace violence with peaceful comity and domination with democracy. Yet, the very effort to define a space of nonviolent democracy is based on a binary discourse: the motives, relations, and institutions of civil spheres can be defined only in relation to antagonistic anti-civil qualities that encourage violence and oppression. Caught inside this paradox, members of the civil sphere experience their civil communities as fragile, as continuously threatened by putatively anti-civil forces outside them. It is for this reason that actually existing civil spheres have so frequently encouraged violent wars against city states, nations, and empires outside their boundaries and repression against excluded insiders as well. After laying these contradictions out conceptually, they are explored empirically via an interpretation of The Oresteia, Aeschylus’ tragic drama that cut to the heart of Athenian democracy. After this aesthetic investigation, the essay turns to the regional and global wars of the last 100 years, examining how the debilitating national boundaries of civil spheres have, not only allowed, but encouraged destructive paroxysms of violence right up to the present day.

Keywords

war, civil sphere, violence, the orestes, Aeschylus, Ukraine war

One generally assumes that I may treat no one with hostility except if the other has actively harmed me, and this is completely right, *if both parties exist in the civil juridical condition*. (Kant, 2006 [1795]: 73, emphasis added)

The episodic, millennia-long process of constructing a ‘civil sphere’ (Alexander, 2006) represents humankind’s most creative and courageous effort to control violence and undermine domination – by constructing a broad civil form of solidarity and by creating institutions that can effectively represent it. In this paper, I wish to explore the paradoxical nature of civil spheres, not only their democratic promise but the tragedies that lay concealed beneath them.

Violence has been a primary form of group relationship throughout human history, ‘nature red in tooth and claw’, in Hobbes’ famous phrase: aggression rather than cooperation, war rather than peaceful comity. Violence splits self from other, breaking extant bonds and preventing new ones from

¹Yale University, New Haven, USA

Corresponding author:

Jeffrey C Alexander, Yale University, 618 Whitney Ave., New Haven, CT 06511, USA.

Email: Jeffrey.Alexander@yale.edu

emerging, eliminating communal ties, isolating individuals one from the other.

Nonviolent relationships, whether conflictual or cooperative, can be created only if civil bonds connect otherwise separated parties. The possibility for creating a *civil* sphere rests upon a series of what, from a realist perspective, might be called utopian conceits: that people are independent rather than dependent and critical rather than deferential; that people are honest rather than deceitful, open rather than secretive, cooperative rather than aggressive, altruistic not selfish, autonomous yet deeply interested in others' well-being. Only if the motives of our fellow citizens and their relations are conceived in such a hopeful manner can we imagine the kind of civil solidarity that makes democracy possible, the trustful yet critical connection with one another that allows deliberation rather than domination, that envisions respectful pluralism, and sustains a democratic faith.

The paradox is that the very process of imagining such a world – a world that sacralizes such civil qualities as autonomy, honesty, and cooperation – requires us, at the very same time, to construct an imaginary world that is its very opposite: one that is anti-civil and profane. For we can understand good only by comparing it with evil; we can sacralize the civil only if we are, simultaneously, able to pollute the profane. Honesty must be related to dishonesty, rationality to irrationality, altruism to egoism, autonomy to dependence, democracy to dictatorship. Which explains why the discourse of civil spheres is binary, and how it is that, for those who inhabit them, civil spheres – no matter how deeply institutionalized – continue to be experienced as fragile. It is easy to imagine that dark and threatening forces of anti-civility are churning just outside of civil spheres, and just beneath them as well.

It is the imminent experience of danger and fragility that explains why civil spheres exclude as much as they include; why they feel compelled to energetically fight against actors and groups whose motives they imagine to be dependent and dishonest and whose relations they imagine to be aggressive. Because if the motives of actors and the relations they form are indeed anti-civil, then extended

solidarity and democratic self-government will be impossible to sustain.¹

This paradox at the heart of the civil sphere is not merely conceptual; it is real, and it can trigger tragic social facts on the ground. It is because they are always on the lookout for threatening *anti*-civility that civil spheres have frequently exercised violence against those who are outside their geo-political boundaries, and repression against those who are within. The core groups that create civil spheres have often abused and dominated fellow members of their national communities, citizens and non-citizens who are not considered to 'have what it takes', who are not imagined to be in possession of the sacred civil qualities that make trusting solidarity possible – whose skin color contrasts with their own; whose gender and sexuality are non-conforming; who worship a different god; who inhabit a different social class.

The binarism of civil discourse also explains why the creation of civil spheres *inside* of collectivities, whether city-states or nations, so often has fueled violent war-making *outside* them. In a world unregulated by supra-national norms, it is immensely tempting for members of domestic civil spheres to see non-democratic collectivities abroad as gravely threatening.² Which explains why civil spheres have so frequently legitimated viciously anti-civil violence against other, putatively primitive civilizations; against other, purportedly barbaric city-states; against other, supposedly evil empires and nations.

The final paradox that marks civil spheres is implied by the one I have just described. The idealizing promises of the civil sphere stop at the border of one's own collectivity. For the ancient Greeks and the republican city-states of the Middle Ages and early modern Europe, this meant the boundaries of their cities. For moderns, this usually means the boundaries of their nations. It is for this reason that civil suspicion about anti-civil outsiders fuels war. The national form of organization severely compromises the civil sphere's promise of universalizing solidarity.

All of this helps, I think, to understand the wrenching predicament that Europe finds itself in today. But before approaching our contemporary

crisis, and the episodes of war and peace that have preceded it, I wish to consider a much earlier history, indeed, the world's very first effort to construct a civil sphere in ancient Greece. For it has been from this ancient world that the democratic – and non-democratic – elements of our contemporary politics and culture derive.

My aim is to shine a spotlight on the origins of the wrenching paradoxes I have just conceptualized. I will do so, not by looking directly at Greek social life, but at its dramatic art, which was much more central to the civic life of the ancients than it is to our civic life today.³

II

Western 'civil-ization' has its origins in the efforts of Greeks, beginning in the late sixth century BCE, to create a form of social organization that would move beyond the endless cycle of violence, revenge, particularism, and domination that for centuries had made the world of Attica and the Peloponnese such a very dangerous place.

In *The Iliad*, the extraordinary poem composed centuries earlier, Homer valorized violence, revenge, tribal honor, and physical courage. Functioning as an ur-text for Greeks in the centuries that followed, Homer's epic narrated the 10th year of a vicious war the 'Achaeans' were waging against the wealthier and more cultivated city of Troy. Homer's cast of hero kings and their bonded soldiers had sailed across the Aegean Sea to punish and pillage. Why? By reason of a wound to their masculine vanity. Paris, the son of Troy's king, had kidnapped a Greek princess named Helen, the proverbial beauty 'whose face launched a thousand ships'.

Achilles – petulant, stubborn, courageous, virulently angry, and unutterably violent – was the Greeks' greatest fighter, a sulking macho hero who was, not only the pivot point of Homer's narrative, but of the Trojan war itself. When 'fleet-footed' Achilles finally agreed to leave his tents and reengage in the war, he murdered Hector, the greatest fighter on the Trojan side. Homer sketched a scene of gruesome violence, a murder that concluded with Achilles, the blood stained and crazed Greek

warrior hero, roping Hector's feet to the back of his chariot and dragging the dead Trojan's body round and round the walls of Troy. His aim was to force the mother, father, children and fellow citizens of his vanquished enemy to bear terrible witness to the physical, and metaphysical, desecration of his body.

Hector embodied hearth, home, and urban civility; Achilles represented bloodletting, male honor, revenge, and cycles of violence without end. Three hundred years after the creation of Homer's war poem, at the launch of Athenian democracy, the tables had turned. The Greeks were themselves busy building wealthy and sophisticated cities, Athens the most powerful and cultivated among them. In the Greek utopian imagination, their new city would suppress bloodlust and tribal particularism, creating a radically new ethos, one organized around civility, cooperation, law, and democracy.

Aeschylus, the first of the great Greek tragedians, was a teenager in 509 BCE, when Athenians expelled the monarchical family ruling over them and established the world's first democratic government in its place. He spent his mature life in the glory days of Athenian self-rule. In the *Oresteia*, the last three-play cycle of his storied career, Aeschylus dramatized the eventual triumph of law over revenge, peace over bloodletting, and self-government over tyranny.⁴

The first two plays of the *Oresteia* narrate a tragic cycle of murder, bloodlust, revenge, and murder again. To appease the gods preventing the Greeks from setting sail for Troy, King Agamemnon, ignoring the heart wending pleas of his wife Clytemnestra, had publicly sacrificed the life of their daughter Iphigenia, killing her with his own hand. When, after ten years of bloody war, Agamemnon returns victorious from Troy, Clytemnestra kills him, and herself ascends to the throne. In *Agamemnon*, the first play in his *Oresteia* cycle, Aeschylus describes the avenging wife's motivation in terms of the primitive logic of death-for-death. 'Here is anger for anger', the Chorus sings: 'The spoiler is robbed; he killed, he has paid ... He who has done shall suffer; that is the law' (1560–64).⁵ What ineluctably follows from this logic of an-eye-for-an-eye is Aeschylus' subject in *The Libation Bearers*, the cycle's second play.

Clytemnestra is herself murdered by Orestes, Agamemnon's (and her own) avenging son. Aeschylus depicts Orestes as offering the familiar, and ultimately self-destructive, rationale. 'War-strength shall collide with war-strength' (461), the murderer explains; the Chorus approvingly chimes in: 'The cure for this [is] raw brutal bloodshed' (472–4).

In the *Oresteia*'s concluding play, Aeschylus dramatizes a moral reversal, the triumph of civil morality over violent revenge. *The Eumenides* begins with the Furies, ancient goddesses of death and underworld, determined not to let Orestes get away with matricide. Planning his murder, they reiterate the Homeric case for violence. 'We are the Angry ones' (499), the Furies proudly announce: 'Fear is good. It must keep its watchful place at the heart's controls. There is advantage in the wisdom won from pain' (517–21). Indeed, the Furies ridicule the very idea of a civil peace: 'In the city, if the man rears a heart that nowhere goes in fear, how shall such a one any more respect the right?' (522–25).

Fearing death at the hands of the vengeful Furies, Orestes flees to Athens, planting himself in front of Athena's temple gates. The goddess immediately takes the matter in hand, embarking on a path that will lead to a new, more universalizing standard of justice. Admonishing the Furies that they have given 'only half the argument', she insists that 'here are *two* sides' (428, emphasis added). Having once supported the Furies' effort 'to avenge the blood of the murdered' (320), the Chorus now shifts to the more universal side. 'Examine him then yourself', they tell Athena, admonishing her to 'be fair' (433). Assuring Orestes, 'I respect your rights' (475), the goddess of Athens then does a most astonishing thing. She establishes an oath-bound trial by jury. 'I shall select *judges* of manslaughter and swear them in' (483–4, emphasis added), she announces to Orestes, the Furies, and the chorus of older Athenians looking on. In doing so, Athena declares that she will 'establish a court into all time to come' (484).

Athena has created a regulatory institution, in the conceptual language of Civil Sphere Theory (Alexander, 2006: 107–92). Designed to control

violence on behalf of the community, an embryonic civil discourse emerges in its wake. 'I will pick the finest of my *citizens*', Athena asserts, and 'they shall swear to make no judgment that is not *just*, and make clear where in this action the *truth* lies' (487–89, italics added). Affirming the path Athena has taken, a Chorus member calls on the assembled citizens to 'speak in defense of *reason*', to 'refuse the life of anarchy' and domination, that is, 'the life devoted to one master' (526–8, emphasis added).

Characterizing the tribunal as a 'deliberative assembly' (570), Athena testifies that the judicial process she has initiated will be history's 'first *trial* for bloodshed' (682, emphasis added). She commands the litigants to 'call your witnesses' and instructs them to 'have ready your proofs as evidence under bond' (485–6), so that 'their case be *fairly* tried' (573, emphasis added). Declaring that 'all must stand upright', Athena points to what is destined to become another key regulatory institution of Athens' civil sphere – the vote. Instructing that 'each man [take] his ballot in his hand',⁶ she asks each citizen on the jury to 'think on his oath and make his judgment' (709–10).⁷

After each side has presented their case, Athena inquires: 'Shall I assume that enough has now been said, and tell the judges to render what they believe a true verdict?' (674–5). Apollo has been observing the proceedings, and he answers affirmatively. Addressing the citizen jury, the god reminds them of their universalizing commitments to rationality and truth: 'You have heard what you have heard and as you cast your votes, good friends, respect in your hearts the oath that you have sworn'. The jury vote is split 6–6, with Athena herself casting the deciding vote to acquit Orestes of 'the charge of blood' (752). Applauding what she characterizes as 'the reverence of citizens' (690–1) – their respect for newly civil values – Athena tells them henceforth 'to govern and to grace' (697). Praising the new system of democratic justice, she attests, once again, that it is 'such as is nowhere else found among men' (702).

The Furies are embittered. In an effort at assuagement, Athena reminds them that the jury's decision 'was the result of a fair ballot' (795–6), and warns

them to ‘be reasonable’, to suppress their violent ambitions, to ‘put to sleep the bitter strength in the black wave’ (832). In a dramatic peroration, the goddess offers a masterful poetic remonstrance on behalf of the nonviolent solidarity that the newly established civil space can create.

Let not the dry dust that drinks the black blood of citizens through passion for revenge and bloodshed be given our state to prey upon. Let them render grace for grace. Let love be their common will. (978–85)

In place of the ancient ethos of anger, domination, and bloodlust, which defined an endless cycle of violent revenge, the *Eumenides* offered Athenians a universalizing ethic, one that emphasizes truth and reason, and evokes a democratic spirit of consensus and cooperation.⁸

But there is a catch. In an extraordinary example of what Aristotle would later conceptualize as ‘anagnorisis’ (surprise, recognition), Aeschylus goes on to dramatize the paradox that marks a democratic civil sphere. What he shows is that the civil order institutionalized inside the city is not intended to prevent violence and war from being practiced on those outside — far from it.

After warning the Furies against taking revenge, Athena adds a stunning qualification. It is ‘only in this place that I haunt’ (858) that her paean to non-violent comity is intended to apply. Reiterating ‘do not inflict your bloody stimulus to twist the inward hearts of young men’ (859), she now conditions the warning by adding some fine print: Do ‘not engraft among my citizens that spirit of war *that turns their battle fury inward on themselves*’ (862–3, emphasis added). Athena declares she is not against violence in and of itself. She means to demand civility only inside Athens’ walls. ‘Let our wars range *outward*’, she declares, and ‘and may they range *full fierce and terrible*, for those desiring high renown’ (864–5, emphasis added). War full fierce and terrible, the same righteous violence waged by the Homeric heroes of old. The message is clear: ‘No true fighter ... fights at home’ (866). Newly created regulative institutions may sustain a sphere of civil peace domestically, but

the military spirit, the spirit of Achilles, must continue to be projected abroad.

Indeed, Aeschylus was not only a dramatist of civil democracy, but a warrior and patriot. At the age of 35, soon after the performance of his first plays, Aeschylus fought shoulder to shoulder with other Greeks to defend his city against the invading Persians, the greatest empire of that day. He was injured in the pivotal Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, and his brother was killed. Ten years later, Aeschylus fought in the sea battle at Salamis, when the Greeks held off a second Persian invasion. Aeschylus died three years after the first performance of his *Oresteia*, in 455. The dramatist himself composed the epitaph on his tomb, enshrining his service as a warrior at Marathon, failing even to mention his achievements as a playwright.

Noting Aeschylus’ ‘treatment of an abundance of war as a blessing’, a contemporary historian rightly emphasizes that ‘Aeschylus has no hesitation in avowing strong support for the war policy’ of his native city state (Sommerstein, 2018 [2010]: 204). Throughout the entire span of the fifth century, there was scarcely a time when Athenian democracy was not at war, when its domestically civil citizens were not fighting ferociously and violently against invading forces from outside Greece or hostile city states within it. By the time of Aeschylus’ death in mid-century, democratic Athens had become a bristling imperial power, dominating other Greek cities militarily and demanding tribute from them economically.

Athens was ... committed by 459 to a war against Corinth which was almost bound to become ... a war against Sparta and her whole alliance; and in this war it was Athens that first took the offensive both by land and by sea. At the same time Athens was also at war with Aegina, and ... she had to send a scratch force of under- and over-age soldiers to defend Megara against a Corinthian invasion ... And even that was not enough for the Athenians. The state of war still continued between them and Persia, and in this same year an expedition of 200 Athenian and allied ships was sent to Cyprus [and] soon Athenian troops were fighting a land war in Africa ... These twelve months of fighting cost the lives of about one

in every twenty adult male Athenian citizens. (Sommerstein, 2018 [2010]: 200)

In his masterpiece *The Heroic Temper*, Bernard Knox described the *Oresteia* as ‘a pageant of man’s advance ... from savagery to civilization’, a story about how ‘force is superseded by persuasion, armed vengeance by the court of law, civil war by debate in assembly’ (Knox, 1992 [1964]: 58). It should now be clear, however, that this was not the whole story.

III

The tragic paradox that clawed at the heart of Greek democracy has been recapitulated time and again in the course of Western history. Building upon the civil discourse and institutions of ancient Greece – the civilization it had subjugated – Rome flourished as an *imperial* republic. Until, that is, Julius Caesar returned home from his decade as governor of colonial Gaul, crossed the Rubicon, dismissed the Senate, started a civil war, and eventually declared himself dictator for life.

‘Caesarism’ became a metaphor for the dark possibilities triggered by the paradoxes of actually existing civil spheres. For centuries, fears of Caesarism cast a shadow over the fragile precariousness of democratic life (Baehr, 1998). ‘Bonapartism’ eventually replaced it (Baehr and Richter, 2004). After French revolutionaries overthrew the ancient monarchical regime, the civil code of ‘liberty, equality, and fraternity’ was briefly institutionalized. Soon after, its leaders began to see anti-civil enemies everywhere. The revolution ate its own children, and it became fatally destabilized – even as it faced anti-revolutionary military forces outside. A little corporal named Napoleon Bonaparte stepped in to save the day. The price was French democracy. Claiming he was defending the ideals of revolutionary France, Napoleon waged war against Europe and eventually crowned himself Emperor.

Bonapartism now became the ghost that haunted democratic life. In Max Weber’s later work, it became transmogrified into the ambiguous notion of charisma. The great sociological thinker came to believe that it was Germany’s Caesarism that had caused it to lose the First World War, and that

another, more democratic form of charismatic domination might save it (Baehr, 2008; Weber, 1978).

IV

Weber described the modern state’s great achievement as its ability to pacify the nation by monopolizing the means of violence. But it is an empty promise, as the history of the twentieth century sadly shows. It was not despite, but because of, state monopolization that violence continually resurfaced. Internally pacified states, especially despotisms but frequently also democracies, have unleashed the violence they monopolize against societies outside them, with war and imperialism the result. They have also deployed physical brutality against their own internal populations, triggering repression, civil war, and sometimes even genocide.

Despite the miasma of the first *fin-de-siecle*, leading European and American thinkers welcomed the twentieth century, believing it would deepen enlightenment and make the world more modern, rational, and democratic (e.g. Cassirer, 2020 [1927]). Yet, from the onset of the First World War in 1914 to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Western societies have been mired in intensely destabilizing global conflicts, their putatively pacific civil democracies invested, deeply and passionately, in violent, and often, global wars.

Each shattering episode pitted democratic against antidemocratic regimes. Authoritarian nations and empires without self-regulating civil spheres made war against democratic nations that possessed them, and vice-versa. World War I was started by an Austrian Emperor, who was soon joined by a German Kaiser. World War II was started by a Nazi Fuhrer, soon joined by a Fascist *Il Duce* and an Eastern emperor whose people revered him as the ‘Son of Heaven’. The Cold War was triggered by the imperial aggressions of a Bolshevik Commissar and fueled by the revanchist ambitions of his Chinese counterpart, the Chairman of the CCP. Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine was launched by a dictator whose official title is President of the Russian Federation, whose internet meme is translated as ‘bunker grandpa’ – *Bunkernyi*

did – and who wields top-down power that the tsars could only have envied.

Yet the democracies who were the victims of these tyrannical war machines do not get off scot-free. The binarism of civil discourse has made it easy for democratic citizens to hate, to make ideological opponents into mortal enemies, to act barbarously in the name of their self-conceived civilizing mission. In the first half of the twentieth century, France, Britain, and Holland were twice victims of Germanic militarism, but for centuries, they themselves had been militarily menacing imperial powers, brutally subjugating local peoples in the name of civil-izing them. The United States – the nation that Tocqueville hailed as inventing modern democracy – wiped out the indigenous peoples of North America, enslaved Black Africans, and exercised military hegemony across Latin America for two centuries. During the world wars of the twentieth century, Americans polluted all things German, whether at home or abroad. And as Americans confronted the militarized Japanese army – the ‘Empire of the Sun’ – they ardently deployed orientaling discourse that polluted their enemies as inherently violent, duplicitous, and sub-human (Toland, 1970).

Despite such mutual demonization, each of these earth-shattering and brutally violent military confrontations triggered dreams of global peace.⁹ The victors decided that, to achieve pacification, civil spheres would have to be more deeply institutionalized in the conquered nations and more widely available outside of them. The dictatorships that had initiated the world wars were forcibly transformed so that their civil spheres would control their national governments (e.g. Dower, 2000). Infrastructures of international democracy were constructed, which aimed at extending a civil sphere beyond nation states for the first time. After WWI: the League of Nations; after WWII: the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization for Europe, the United Nations for the world; after the Cold War, visions of a world united by ‘globalization’ and the extension of EU and NATO borders right up to Russia itself.

None of these postwar efforts to erect a supranational civil order managed to overcome the cultural and material realities of the nation state. The League of Nations was hobbled by nationalism –

an inward-looking America refused to join the organization that its own President had helped create – and later exploded by Communism, Fascism, and Nazism. The United Nations was strangled at its birth by the victors’ decision to give veto power to each member of its governing elite, the UN Security Council. The singular exception was the EU. After a thousand years of war, Europe finally become internally pacified. Even so, its governing structure was by no means internally democratic. Critical decisions are made by unelected EU Commissioners in Brussels, and the communicative and regulative institutions of the embryonic European civil sphere are either weak or non-existent. Still, European nations have not made war against one another for the last 75 years.

While there has been no global war, the reason has less to do with the putative success of civil internationalism and more to do with MAD, with the rational calculation that nuclear warfare will trigger ‘mutually assured destruction’. On the regional level, war-making has despoiled the post-WWII landscape, with two million dead in almost 300 armed conflicts, some 50 of which remain ongoing. Some of the most savage among them have been waged in the name of protecting the civil sphere of the United States. Think Korea, Vietnam, Central America, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, and most recently Gaza and Iran.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, it was because the victim nation, in striking contrast with the aggressor, had managed to sustain an independent, post-Soviet civil sphere. Which made it possible for Ukraine to take widely noticed steps to become formally integrated with the EU, beginning with the Association Agreement in 2014. These civil achievements challenged Putin’s claim that Ukraine was bound to Russia’s un-civil sphere via primordial bonds of national, religious, and ethnic solidarity (Polkhy, 2023). There exists no global civil sphere whose elected officials can order Russia’s violent leaders to submit to trial by a jury of their peers, with imprisonment the possible result – as Athena had once submitted Orestes and the Furies to the ‘first trial for bloodshed’ that ‘put to sleep the bitter strength in the black wave’ in order to ‘let love be their common will’.

Absent democratically elected powers and regulatory institutions to enforce norms of civility, international relations resemble a Hobbesian ‘war of all against all’. It is a matter of force against force, of the courage of Ukraine’s democratically empowered citizens against Russian mercenaries and misbegotten draftees – the latter supported by Chinese, North Korean, and Iranian autocrats, the former by the civil spheres of such transnational and national bodies as NATO, the US, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the Nordic nations.

The paradox of actually existing civil spheres has not been resolved. Internally, they remain fragile; externally, they remain delimited by the nation state. Organized violence remains, not just a last resort, but a primary mode for resolving political dispute. Which is to say that the 2500-year effort to create and empower civil spheres is hardly completed. Yet the very length and persistence of this effort gives us reason not to give up hope. When Vico hailed ‘the eternal and never-failing light of a truth beyond all questions’, he offered this reassurance: ‘That the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind’ (Vico, 1968 [1725]: 96 [para 331]).

Acknowledgements

This paper is a revised version of a Plenary Lecture delivered to The Civil Sphere in Central and Eastern Europe conference, The European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), 30 June 2025. I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Susann Worschech, Professor of Sociology at Viadrina, for extending the invitation to deliver this lecture.

ORCID iD

Jeffrey C Alexander  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3600-8023>

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. On the binary relationships defining the discourse about motives, relations, and institutions that constitute civil spheres, see Alexander (2006: 53–68). On the central role that evil plays in constructing the good, not only in civil spheres, but in meaningful discourse as such, see Alexander (2003).
2. This represents a cultural-sociological approach to Kant’s argument in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (2006 [1795]) that republican nations do not make war against one another. It is difficult, indeed highly unlikely, for civil spheres to direct the states they control to wage violence against other democratic states, i.e. states that are, like themselves, controlled by civil spheres. In international relations, this constitutes a boundary limit on the symbolic imagination, one that does not restrict the projection of binary coding on the domestic scene. In the latter, groups and individuals who are, in fact, fully qualified to participate in the civil sphere are continuously constructed as dangerously anti-civil. For an early, more institutionalist understanding of what has come to be called the ‘democratic peace’ paradigm in political science, see Russett (1994).
3. Essaying the role of tragic drama in Athens, Daniel Mendelsohn observes ‘that the fates of Athens and of tragedy were so closely entwined suggests a profound organic connection between the polity and the genre ... The circumstances under which the Athenian citizen attended these dramas, followed these plots, and analyzed these conflicts ... emphasizes the theater’s public and civic concerns. All Greek tragedies were originally composed for and performed as part of a grand religious and civic ceremonial known as the City (or ‘Greater’) Dionysia, held each spring in honor of Dionysius ... The climax of this celebration, which went on for five days and featured magnificent processions and sacrifices, was the theatrical performances [which] had virtually nothing in common with the ones we are familiar with today ... Greek plays were

performed in broad daylight, the performances starting at dawn and ending at sundown. This meant, among other things, that the citizens who attended the plays were not anonymous, as we are, but as plainly visible to one another as the actors and chorus on the stage ... The identity of the audience specifically as members of the *polis* was reflected in the elaborate pre-performance ceremonials. Before the performances began, the city's ten leading generals, the *strategoí*, solemnly poured libations before the vast audience. (The Theater of Dionysus could hold as many as 18,000 spectators [about one-half the population of citizens, itself nearly 40% of the total Athenian population]) ... The names of citizens who had greatly benefited the city ... were recited by heralds, each civic benefactor receiving an honorary garland or crown. Finally, the sons of Athenia soliders who had died in the city's wars – boys who had since been raised at the state's expense – were paraded before the vast audience. The official proclamation that was recited by a herald during this portion of the ceremonies [– “They are invited to seats of honor in the theater” –] underscored the elaborate connections between the city, its citizens, and the theatre that lay at the heart of the entire festival’ (Mendelsohn, 2016).

4. The *Oresteia* is ‘the work that sets the agenda for all of Greek tragedy’s subsequent engagement with the polis’ (Goldhill, 2000: 34).
5. Here and following, quotations are from the Richmond Lattimore translation (Aeschylus, 2013 [458 BCE]), the numbers in parentheses referring to the lines of the play.
6. As the gendered pronoun indicates, the revolutionary democratic structures Athena was dramatizing did not promote a fully incorporative civil sphere in the contemporary sense. Women were excluded, along with propertyless men and an enslaved population consisting mostly of captured enemy soldiers. In the context of the Athenian debates about the legitimacy of these exclusions – which has continued to be fiercely waged among classical scholars today – Aeschylus himself occupied a decidedly progressive position (Goldhill, 2000; Wallace, 2004). See also n. 8, below.
7. For the central role that oath-taking plays in the civil sphere’s regulative institutions, see Alexander (2023).
8. The *Oresteia* can be understood, in other words, not only aesthetically, but sociologically. As a fictional

‘media of communication’ (Alexander, 2006: 75–80) in the Athenian civil sphere, it crystallized in artistic form a ‘left’ interpretation of currents swirling inside contemporary Greek political and moral life. In the late 460s and early 450s, the Athenian leader Ephialtes initiated a reformist campaign to democratize the Council of Areopagus by lowering the property qualifications for election. Ephialtes’ subsequent assassination triggered an intense political crisis, in the midst of which Pericles continued ‘the process of democratizing the political institutions of Athens from top to bottom’ (Sommerstein, 2018 [2010]: 199). Drawing from both aesthetic and historical material, Sommerstein concludes that Aeschylus was ‘a committed supporter of the new democracy and the main lines of its external and internal policies’ (Sommerstein, 2018 [2010]: 205).

9. In this and the two paragraphs following, I draw from Alexander (2007).

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