

On Media, Ritual and Identity

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## 2 Mass communication, ritual and civil society

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In political theory and empirical social science alike, there is a growing recognition that a fully-differentiated civil society is necessary for the development of an inclusive, solidaristic, and democratic society. While the precise meaning of civil society is far from settled, one thing is certain: the mass media has an extraordinary impact on its forms and functions. While organizational structures are essential, the "currency" of civil society is influence and commitment, in the form of a symbolically powerful public opinion. Because most theories of civil society focus primarily on its boundary relations – its autonomy from the state and economy, and the powerful regulative institutions, such as law, which draw these boundaries in a sanctioned way – they fail to consider how civil society works as a communicative space for the imaginative construction and reconstruction of more diffuse, but equally important, collective identities and solidarities.

We will show what is at stake in this debate by reconsidering Elihu Katz's contributions to an understanding of media communication. Katz's micro-oriented work – encompassing his research on personal influence, the two-step flow model of media reception, and cross-cultural media reception (with Tamar Liebes) – exposes the errors of passive-actor models of media reception and mass culture versions of ideology critique. His later, more macro and anthropological research on media events (with Daniel Dayan) shows what is wrong with a model of mass communication predicated on rationalist and cognitivist grounds. We will argue that, when this body of work is considered as an interrelated whole, it underlines the need for re-centering civil society theory around a more empirically viable model of media communication. In the latter part of this essay, we will outline such an approach to civil society, one in which the media is involved in the construction of common identities and universalistic solidarities, in multiple publics and multiple sites of reception. While a common code and common narrative structure allows for intersubjectivity and cross-communication between different publics, the narrative elaboration of events and crises – understood as social dramas – is crucial for providing a sense of historical continuity in the crisis bound, episodic constructions of universalistic solidarity that continually form and reform civil society. We will illustrate this theoretical argument by examining some of our own ongoing empirical research into the cultural dynamics of civil society, in particular our research on the Watergate (Alexander 1988a, 1988b) and Rodney King (Jacobs 1996a) crises.

### CIVIL SOCIETY, SOLIDARITY, INSTITUTIONS

It is our contention that civil society does not, in the first instance, have to do with the autonomy of organizations *per se*, but rather with the differentiation of a particular kind of social relationship, one that embodies universalistic solidarity. What this means is that civil society must be conceived not only as a world of voluntary associations, elections, or even legal rights, but also, and very significantly, as a realm of symbolic communication. Those who are or would be included in civil society engage in cooperative and conflictual symbolic “conversations” about who deserves membership and just how far into non-civil realms the obligations of membership extend. Civil society membership is defined in terms of certain “timeless” qualities of personal motivation, social relationship, and group organization. While specific institutions and procedures are necessary for the creation and re-creation of a viable civil sphere, it is such symbolic communications that allow for the construction of common identities and solidarities. The incorporation of previously excluded groups cannot take place, we suggest, simply through a restructuring of power relationships or an extension of legal rights. These steps will be ineffective unless the previously excluded group is redefined in terms of the “timeless qualities” which citizens in good standing putatively possess. Furthermore, incorporation will not be a successful motivating goal unless it is defined as a struggle that involves far more than procedural participation and more equal material rewards. It must be dramatically narrated as a heroic triumph over the challenge to the utopian ideals of universalistic solidarity, in relation to which the failure of inclusion is viewed as the tragic triumph of particularism.

We will provide a more detailed and sustained outline of our own position on civil society later in the chapter. As a prolegomena to our initial discussion of Katz's work, however, we would like to discuss the “dominant paradigm” of civil society theory in terms of its assumptions regarding the media. By dominant paradigm we have in mind those theories which focus exclusively on the formal political arrangements, legal procedures, and narrowly defined institutional structures that are necessary for differentiating power away from the state and toward the civil sphere of voluntary action. This conception of civil society derives from the post-Hobbesian, liberal tradition of political thought. An early example of this can be found in the writings of Locke, who developed a theory about an independent sphere of fellowship, a “commonwealth” that emerges in the state of nature and is extended, via the social contract, to a civil law regulating social life.<sup>1</sup> Similar ideas about a differentiated sphere of voluntary action can be found in Ferguson's (1980 [1768]) argument for self control and “subtlety”; Adam Smith's (1761) emphasis on moral sentiments; Kant's discussions (1949 [1784]) of the relation between criticism, autonomy, and universal reason; and even Tocqueville's (1945 [1835]) argument that the sphere of voluntary political life is anchored in the collectively binding, extra-political world of law and the collective regulation of religion.

Even when liberal illusions concerning equality of interests and formal

conditions began to erode in the nineteenth century, the central assumptions of the dominant paradigm – that the good society could be achieved through an egalitarian distribution of power and the procedural guarantee of liberty – were left intact. All that had changed was the confidence in liberal society itself. Increasingly, it was seen as an empty sphere of atomized mass subjects, helpless against the onslaught of capitalism and public relations. From the perspective of this vision, the triumph of liberal-capitalist society was the tragedy of civil society. As Marx wrote, “none of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as he is in civil society, namely an individual withdrawn behind his private interests and whims and separated from the community.”<sup>2</sup> This argument, one of the earliest and most forceful articulations of what later came to be called the mass society thesis, could envision only an institutional solution to the tragedy of civil society. The assumption was that only the state could protect the atomized mass subjects against the impersonal and coercive social control of industrial capitalism. A similar argument has been made more recently by John Keane (1989, 1992), who has pointed to the need for institutional differentiation and the multiplication of voluntary associations to safeguard society from becoming dominated by a particular faction. Claude Lefort (1988) argues for a differentiation of law, power and knowledge, so that the centralizing potential of the state can be held in check by civil society. While he has replaced the centralizing power of capitalism with that of the state, and is, therefore, much more concerned with political democracy than with socialism, Lefort's reformist efforts still largely assume the same anonymous, passive mass subject.

For thinkers from Walter Lippman and John Dewey to C. Wright Mills, Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas, the disappearance of public life became axiomatic for any consideration of twentieth-century life. Their solution to the dilemma of mass society lay not so much in the statist reforms of Marxism and neo-Marxism but rather in a formalist proceduralism that emphasized civil society's regulative institutions, not its communicative ones. John Dewey (1927: 126-7) argued that the “machine age” had invaded and disintegrated the older communities without generating new ones. For him, the “problem of the public” was “to achieve such recognition of itself as will give it weight in the selection of official representatives and in the definition of their responsibilities and rights” (Dewey 1927: 77). This could be achieved by improving the methods and conditions of discussion and debate in the public sphere (Dewey 1927: 208). There is a striking similarity between this pragmatist argument and the more recent neo-Kantian one of Jurgen Habermas (1987, 1989, 1996), who argues that a proceduralist discourse ethics and an independent legal order can institutionalize and protect a sphere of public communication from the instrumental steering media of money and power, thereby maintaining a tattered tie between civil society and the lifeworld. Dewey and Habermas both assume the empirical existence of mass society, and both turn to a more rational ordering of public discussion as a necessary procedure for recovering civil society.

The problem with all of these approaches is that they can only conceive civil society as a sphere of power and decision-making.<sup>3</sup> But civil society is not merely

about the protection of a sphere of voluntaristic action from a centralizing source of power, whether it be the state or the capitalist economy. Parsons (1971) recognized that civil society is a sphere of influence and commitment, mediated through public opinion. For this reason, the media is critically important, not as a forum for public information but, rather, for public influence, identity, and solidarity. Because the “dominant paradigm” of civil society theory ignores this fact – its concerns are primarily differentiating the media as a truth-telling medium from the instrumental and distorting spheres of economy and state – its advocates are prevented from a real consideration of how the media actually works in civil society. Implicit in their exclusive focus on differentiation is a passive-actor, single-public, rationalistic model of media communication.

This brief critical discussion of the dominant civil society paradigm and its assumptions about mass communication provides a framework for considering some important implications of Katz’s very different approach to mass media. We wish to argue that Katz’s research on media effects and media events shows that the assumptions of the dominant civil society paradigm are wrong. From this demonstration, we will suggest that there is a general need to rethink the relationship between civil society, communication and the media.

#### TOWARD A VOLUNTARISTIC AND CULTURAL VIEW OF THE MEDIA

What unites all of Katz’s projects of media research is a common focus on agency and a rejection of the notion that the media text has a monolithic meaning for an atomized, passive audience. His early research concerned itself with the measurement of the media’s power to change individual opinions. The findings directly contradicted the assumptions of mass society theory, suggesting that the media had very limited effects and that the latter typically were filtered through the personal influence of opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957). Initiated by what have come to be regarded as classical research studies, *The People’s Choice* and *Personal Influence*, this research served as a definitive rejection of the “hypodermic needle” model which permeated all different types of media theory and research. Before the limited effects paradigm, media researchers had begun from the assumption that individual beliefs and personalities – not to mention “civilized culture” – were helpless against the onslaught of mass culture. The best-remembered version of mass society theory came from the Frankfurt School approach, whose practitioners argued that the “culture industry” functioned to sedate the masses and to remove those types of contradictions which make art and culture potentially liberating and revolutionary (see Adorno 1967; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Marcuse 1968). The same assumptions about individual effects held, however, in the conservative efforts to protect “Culture” from mass society (e.g. Leavis 1932; Leavis and Thompson 1932; Ortega y Gasset 1960 [1936]), and also in the vast corpus of research on propaganda (e.g. Lasswell 1927; Doob 1935; Jackall 1995).

What the limited effects paradigm accomplished was to recover agency and

community as important components of mass-mediated communication. Community was recovered through the finding that the effects of the media in any individual “cannot be accounted for without reference to his social environment and to the character of his interpersonal relationships” (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 25). The result of this finding was the “two-step flow” theory of media effects. Agency was recovered through the focus on how the media served to reinforce identity, through the diversity of ways it was used and the functions of gratification it provided. In other words, the meaning and impact of the media message varies according to how it is used: whether as information, personal identity, social integration or entertainment (McQuail 1983). And despite Gitlin’s (1978) claim that limited effects arguments were no longer valid after the era of television, a host of studies have shown that agency does operate for television reception (see, for example, Morley 1980, 1986; Press 1991; Liebes and Katz 1990).

One of the striking things about Katz’s research is its refusal to be dogmatically positioned on either side of the antinomy between structure and agency. It is clear that Katz rejects the passive-actor model of mass society theory, but this does not mean that he rejects all structural effects in a false celebration of unbounded agency. *Personal Influence*, for example, was never intended as a comprehensive paradigm of media research, nor did it refuse the existence of long-term effects (Katz 1987: S35). Limited effects does not mean, for Katz, an *absence* of effects. In fact, Katz (1987: S38) has criticized those gratification studies which are “too captivated by the infinite diversity of audience uses to pay much attention to the constraints of the text.” The point is that media texts provide a certain flow of cultural material from producers to audiences, who in turn use them in their lifeworld settings to construct a meaningful world and to maintain a common cultural framework through which intersubjectivity becomes possible, even among those who may never come into contact with one another. While media texts themselves may be understood as potentially infinite spaces (hence Eco’s [1984] theory of unlimited semiosis), in practice they are used to create and recreate certain delimited cultural forms, as Liebes and Katz showed so well in *The Export of Meaning* (1990). In other words, the media allows for the transformation of a limitless and unbounded space into a symbolically fixed place, a process necessary to the durability of civil society.<sup>4</sup>

While the limited effects paradigm demonstrated the importance of agency, community, and culture on the micro-interactional level, Katz’s later work with Daniel Dayan on media events argued for a similar relevance of these factors at the macro-societal level. Media events – such as the Middle East peace accords, British Royal weddings, American Presidential inaugurations and debates, and the Olympics – are live events (organized outside the media itself) that break the normal routines of media broadcasting, are covered by all broadcasters, and create a cultural situation where viewing is a virtually mandatory ritual of citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Media events, which attract larger audiences than any other form of communication media, have tremendous potentials in terms of media power, because they erase the divide between private and public, and also because they dramatize the symbols, narratives, and cultural codes of a particular society.

Media events serve the legitimation needs for societies (not necessarily states) whose members cannot gather together in a direct way. They provide common rituals and common symbols, which citizens can experience contemporaneously with everyone and interpersonally with those around them. They provide the cultural grounds for attachment to the “imagined communities” described by Anderson (1983), and they update the “invented traditions” studied by Hobsbawm (1983). In other words, media events are centrally involved in the construction of common identities and solidarities, and for this reason they are part and parcel to the workings of civil society.

Media events cannot be understood from a cognitivist framework, but require a cultural one. As Dayan and Katz note (following Turner 1977), media events produce a shift from the “indicative” to the subjunctive mode of culture; that is, from reality as it is to reality as it ought to be (see Dayan and Katz 1992: 20, 104, 119). This corresponds well with our notion of the media as the communicative institution of civil society, where a dialogue is maintained between “real civil society” – in which universalism is compromised by stratification and functional differentiation – and normative civil society, which maintains the idealized, utopian forms. Celebratory media events of the type discussed by Dayan and Katz tend to narrow the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby legitimating the powers and authorities outside the civil sphere. Mediatized public crises, on the other hand, tend to increase the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby giving to civil society its greatest power for social change. In these situations, the media create public narratives that emphasize not only the tragic distance between is and ought but the possibility of heroically overcoming it. Such narratives prescribe struggles to make “real” institutional relationships more consistent with the normative standards of the utopian civil society discourse.

### RECONCEPTUALIZING CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE MEDIA

What Katz’s research suggests is how important the media is for actively constructing common identities and common solidarities. At the micro-level, this means that the media is filtered through multiple communities, multiple webs of interpersonal relations, and multiple identities. At the macro-level, it suggests that the media is concerned not only with the diffusion of information to a mass public, but also – and this is particularly true for media events – with the dramatization of civil society and the creation of a common cultural framework for building common identities. Elaborated through the most compelling narratives of civil society (see Smith 1994), media events provide the cultural grounds for attachment to the social imaginary of civil society, and they provide plot points for updating the ongoing public narratives of civil society and nation. As a communicative institution of civil society, the media produces an output which is not authoritative control but influence. By its very definition, moreover, influence is not a unidirectional phenomenon, flowing from source to receiver, but multidirectional. Because the media gains influence by placing specific

statements against the background of more generalized community beliefs and commitments, it is filtered through the diverse publics and networks that make up civil society itself.

We argue that the model of the media derived from Katz’s research has a strong affinity to some of the most significant current departures from the dominant paradigm of civil society theory. These challenges suggest a multiplicity of public spheres, communities, and associations nested within one another, and also within a putative larger “national sphere” of civil society (Taylor 1995: 207–15). They also suggest that, while the Habermasian (1989) notion of the public sphere has been important for recognizing the centrality of discourse, it errs by hypostatizing a notion of communication as being involved singularly with rational processes of reaching consensus (see Alexander 1989; Lash 1985; Schudson 1992). In other words, there has been a turn away from the exclusive understanding of civil society as an institutional or informational space, in which mass subjects passively receive information about public affairs so that they might be better informed, more powerful voting citizens. The new understanding sees civil society as a cultural space in which different individuals and groups jockey to “narrate the social” (cf. Sherwood 1994) and where citizens actively construct their own understandings of real and ideal civil society by filtering overarching discourse and narratives through multiple public spheres and communities.

This turn to culture and agency in civil society theory does not imply a complete absence of structures and limits. Here, we should recall Katz’s warning to reception researchers who are too captivated by the infinite diversity of audience uses to look for the structuring properties of the text. There are a limited number of publics available to serve as interpretive communities for narrating the social. There is also a history of public discourse which serves to limit how events can be narrated into ongoing stories about civil society. More generally, there are structural limits to the ways in which an individual, group or community can produce publicly plausible explanations of events. In our own work we have focused on these limits, by mapping the semiotic and narrative structures of the “discourse of civil society.”

The media plays a central role in our understanding of civil society, not only as a space where information is circulated so that citizens can be well-informed voters (though that is certainly important), but rather as a cultural space where actors and events become typified into more general codes (e.g. sacred/profane, pure/impure, democratic/antidemocratic, citizen/enemy) and more generic story forms which resonate with the society’s culture. Expressive media – such as novels or movies – are fictional symbolic forms that weave the binary codes of civil society into broad narratives and popular genres. They constrain action by constituting a teleology for future events even as they seem to be telling stories about people and life in an ahistorical way. The fictional world thus impinges upon the “real” in a fundamental manner, even among those chroniclers who see themselves simply as objective historians *tout court* (cf. White 1973, 1978). News media, while also drawing on many of these fictional tropes, plays a more immediate role, acting as a symbolic public forum for different individuals and

groups, all battling for interpretive authority over a particular event. The role of binary oppositions is critical here; contrasts between purifying and polluting motives, relations, and institutions, permeate news accounts, linking the presuppositions of civil society to the ongoing rush of social events.

The mass media, then, provides the cultural environment from which common identities and solidarities can be constructed. This common cultural environment, the "discourse of civil society," consists of two structural levels. In terms of "deep structure," there is a common semiotic system through which public actors speak and through which public readers interpret what is being communicated. Alongside this deep semiotic structure there exists a "temporal structure," a set of common narrative frameworks through which public actors chart the movement of themselves, and others, in real historical time. These two cultural environments simultaneously constrain and enable public actions in civil society.

The "deep structure," or semiotic system of civil society, supplies the structured categories of pure and impure into which every member, or potential member, is made to fit. Just as there is no developed religion that does not divide the world into the saved and the damned, there is no civil discourse that does not conceptualize the world into those who deserve inclusion and those who do not (Alexander 1992). For this reason the discourse of civil society, just like the discourse of religion, constitutes a language system that can be understood semiotically, that is, as sets of homologies and antipathies, which create likenesses and differences between various terms of social description and prescription. This semiotic structure develops not so much through the agency of individual *speech*, but rather through the incremental changes inherent in the historicity of *language* (Saussure 1964 [1916]). In other words, while the semiotic code is always in a process of incremental flux, it appears to a language community as immutable.

Through this historical and cultural process of semiosis, civil society becomes organized around a bifurcating discourse of citizen and enemy, defining the characteristics of worthy, democratic citizens and also of unworthy, counter-democratic enemies. This "common code" not only allows for a degree of intersubjectivity among public speakers, but also provides a relatively stable system for evaluating events and persons. Code-like in form, it is based on binary relations of similarity and difference along the dimensions of *motives*, *relationships* and *institutions*. For each dimension of the code, there is a system of sacred signs and a system of profane signs. The sacred signs exist in relations of similarity to one another, and in relations of opposition to the profane signs (which themselves are understood as similar). It is this distinction between the sacred and the profane, what Durkheim (1965: 52) called society's most basic classification, that adds an important evaluative dimension to public discourse, helping to communicate information in a forceful and evocative way. Actors, as members of civil society, believe in the sacred side of the code, and thus maintain a modicum of moral reassurance; at the very least, they make their actions and representations accountable in terms of the sacred (Alexander and Smith 1993: 164–5). For the case of American civil society, the semiotic code is organized around the sacred signs of rational and controlled motivations, open and trusting

relationships and impersonal, rule-regulated institutions.<sup>6</sup> Each of these sacred signs is made meaningful in relation to its binary opposite, and in its relation to other binary pairs added in the process of code-making.<sup>7</sup>

While the semiotic system of civil society provides the "deep structure" of civil society – appearing as immutable to a language community – its narrative structure allows for the construction of common identities, expectations and solidarities. Narratives help individuals, groups and communities to "understand their progress through time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and antiheroes, epiphanies and denouements, dramatic, comic, and tragic forms" (Alexander and Smith 1993: 156). In this way, narrative transforms the static dualities of structure into patterns that can account for the chronological ordering of lived experience (Ricoeur 1984; Enrikin 1991). As studies of class formation (Somers 1992; Steinmetz 1992), collective mobilization (Hart 1992; Kane 1994) and mass communication (Darnton 1975; Jacobs 1996b; Schudson 1982) have demonstrated, social actions, movements (cf. Alexander 1996) and identities are guided by narrative understandings. Furthermore, by connecting their self-narratives to collective narratives, individuals can identify with such "imagined communities" as class, gender, race, ethnicity and nation. As Steinmetz (1992: 505) has noted, these collective narratives can be extremely important for how individuals evaluate their lives, even if they did not participate in the key historical events of the collective narrative.

The narrative structure of civil society consists of a plot, a set of characters, and a genre. *Plot* refers to the selection, ordering, evaluation and attribution of differential status to events (Steinmetz 1992: 497–9). A narrative's plot is fluid and complex in its relationship to events; as Eco (1994) has shown, it can "linger" on a particular event, flash-back to past events or flash-forward to future events. The basic plot of civil society is the story of integration and participation via citizenship.<sup>8</sup> In this plot, the *characters* are organized around the opposition between heroes, who fight for the extension of citizenship and rights, and the antiheroes who would restrict citizenship and threaten rights. The evaluational valences of the characters in civil society narratives are elaborated by the semiotic code, so that heroes occupy the sacred side and the villains the profane side of the code. Finally, the narrative of civil society is structured by a particular *genre*, which provides a temporal and spatial link between the characters and events of the narrative and also influences the relationship between the characters, narrator and readers. The narrative of civil society is structured predominantly by the genre of romance, which provides for a "theme of ascent" and which is the reason why civil society discourse has typically been a utopian one. In romance, as Frye (1957) has described, the hero has great powers, the enemy is clearly defined and often has great powers as well, and the movement takes the form of an adventure with the ultimate triumph of hero over enemy. Romantic genres are viewed by the audience from a perspective of wish-fulfillment, where heroes represent ideals and villains represent threats.

From the structured and generalized categories of civil society discourse to the

cathartic typifications of expressive media, to the diffuse but more historically and socially directed phenomenon of public opinion and to the institutions of news production, there stretches a continuum from the synchronic to the diachronic, from structure to process, from inflexible to flexible and from general to specific. These discursive constructions create reactions in civil society itself. They can trigger violent actions, dislodge powerful people and motivate the formation of social movements. This is particularly true of the cognitively oriented news media, and even more so for media events and civil crises. In the section to follow, we will illustrate this communicative power within civil society by focusing on two important American events: the Watergate crisis of 1972 and the Rodney King beating of 1991.<sup>9</sup>

### Watergate

In June 1972, employees of the Republican Party made an illegal entry into the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC. While this event ultimately led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon, the incident initially received relatively little attention. Despite the efforts of some Democrats and a few journalists, the news media largely played down the story after a short time, treating it as a relatively unimportant event. During the presidential election of that year, only 15 of 433 reporters were assigned to the Watergate story, and only one television journalist. Even after the national election of that year, 80 per cent of the American public found it hard to believe that there was a "Watergate crisis," 75 per cent felt that the Watergate event was "just politics," and 84 per cent felt that what they had heard about Watergate had not influenced their voting decision (Alexander 1988b).<sup>10</sup> Yet two years later, this same event had provoked the most serious peacetime political crisis in American history. How and why did this perception of Watergate change? The answer, we argue, is that it became a different event, one which was narrated as a core threat to the ideals of civil society. In this new narrative, "Watergate" mobilized a different side of the discourse of civil society, and President Nixon became associated with the profane code of motives, relations and institutions.

Even though it would take until May 1973 for the "Watergate crisis" to reach Richard Nixon, the identification of Watergate as itself a sign of pollution was already well under way by the summer of 1972. It was during this four-month period in 1972 that "Watergate" began to refer to a set of related events touched off by the break-in, including charges of political corruption, legal suits and arrests. The idea of corruption resonated with the profane side of the discourse of institutions: the legal suits and arrests reinforced the discursive pollution occurring in civil society by mobilizing the regulative institution of the law as a symbol of condemnation of the "event" of Watergate. Still, while the event of Watergate had already come to be narrated as a drama of moral evil by August 1972, it had not yet been attached definitively to a set of characters. There were not as yet any heroes to this narrative, or indeed any villains. Certainly, President Nixon had not yet been symbolically polluted by Watergate (Alexander 1988b: 197).

The crucial event in transforming the meaning of Watergate was the Senate Select Committee's televised hearings, which began in May 1973 and continued through August of that same year. The Senate hearings were not simply the functional outgrowth of the discursive logic of civil society. They were caused also by forces in the non-civil spheres, most importantly by ongoing conflicts between institutional and political elites. These conflicts did, however, increase the dramatic impact of the incipient Watergate crisis, centering the ambiguity around precisely who were the heroic characters and who were the antiheroic ones. With this increase in social drama came a corresponding increase in public awareness of Watergate: from 52 per cent in September 1972 to 96 per cent in May 1973 (Lang and Lang 1983). This increased awareness encouraged the television media to broadcast the hearings live. With the live coverage, Watergate became a media event, and entered squarely into the theater of civil society. The televised hearings constituted a kind of civic ritual, counterposing the utopian aspirations of civil society (embodied in the notions of office and duty) against the "real" institutional relationships which were now required to be consonant with the ideal vision.

Within this ritualized context, the characters of the hearing were narrated in terms of the opposition between heroes and antiheroes, and evaluated in terms of the binary structure of American civil discourse. This new understanding of the Watergate "event" provided the cultural environment constraining the strategies of political elites. For Nixon and his political supporters, the goal was to deflate the ritual and to redefine the event of Watergate in terms of the everyday world of mundane politics. But in the cultural context of the media event, reinforced by the "hushed tones" of the announcers and the break in ordinary broadcast routines, such a strategy encountered much resistance. The symbolic value of Watergate was already quite generalized, and the ritual form of the hearing was already in place (and reproduced by every broadcast). The ritual context of the hearings was reflected in public opinion data; while only 31 per cent believed that Watergate was a "serious" event before the hearings, by early July 50 per cent did, and this figure remained constant until the end of the crisis (Alexander 1988b: 205).

A final event compounded the developing narrative of Watergate and served to cement Nixon's symbolic status as an evil figure and a threat to civil society. This was the "Saturday Night Massacre" of October 1973, in which Nixon fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox. The firing of Cox – who occupied a symbolic position of rule-regulated procedure – made Nixon look like a deceitful figure who used the institutional office of the presidency to satisfy his arbitrary and egoistic personal needs. By the time of the impeachment hearings in 1974, Nixon had been narrated as a selfish and fractious person who was interested in his own wealth and power at the expense of civil society (see Alexander and Smith 1993: 184). As a *New York Times* editorial noted, the Nixon presidency resembled more of a dictatorship than a democracy.

One coherent picture emerges from this evidence. . . . It is the picture of a White House entirely on its own, operating on the assumption that it was

accountable to no higher authority than the wishes of and the steady accretion of power of a Presidency growing steadily more sure that it was above and beyond the reaches of the law.<sup>11</sup>

Still, impeachment was a different "event" than was Watergate. As the impeachment proceedings became added to the ongoing narrative, there was a new round of cultural contestation in civil society. Nixon's supporters argued that, while the President had made serious errors in judgment, on balance he had moved closer to a global civil society, through his major contributions to international peace, his foreign policy initiatives with the Soviets and the Chinese, and his termination of the Vietnam War (Alexander and Smith 1993: 186-7). In other words, the gulf between the indicative and the subjunctive was not as great, according to these supporters, as the public had been led to believe through the statements and actions of public figures in civil society. They argued that Nixon could not be impeached by the will of civil society, that is, through public opinion, but only through the regulative institution of the law, and that this required evidence which the pro-impeachment forces had not yet produced. With this turn in the narrative, supporters of Nixon began to pollute the motives of his critics as greedy and their relationships as manipulative (Alexander and Smith 1993: 187). Indeed, Nixon could not have been impeached by the communicative institution of civil society, but only by the regulative institution of law. Eventually, the House Impeachment Committee did decide that sufficient evidence existed to merit a legal trial in the Senate, but Nixon's immediately subsequent resignation meant that the ultimate empirical status of his actions in relation to the regulating normative structure of American civil society was never decided. It was, in fact, the mass-mediated mobilization of influence and public opinion, not the regulative institutions of civil society, that forced Nixon to resign.

### Rodney King

On March 3, 1991, an African American motorist, Rodney King, was pulled over for speeding. After a brief chase, King was met by twenty-one police officers, including members of the California Highway Patrol and the Los Angeles Police Department. In full view of all who were present, King was severely beaten by three white LAPD officers, in the presence of a sergeant and the remaining seventeen officers. Unknown to the police officers, the event was videotaped by an amateur cameraman, George Holliday, and sold to a local television station. Despite the fact that the city of Los Angeles had paid more than \$20 million between 1986 and 1990 in judgments, settlements and jury verdicts against Los Angeles police officers in over 300 lawsuits dealing with the excessive use of force, it was the Rodney King case that came to be seen as the defining event of racial crisis in Los Angeles. Understanding the cultural impact of the Rodney King beating will take us a long way toward understanding the way in which the media works in civil society.

While the Watergate case began slowly, with the ritualized and televised Senate hearing coming only a full year after the initial event, in the case of Rodney King it was the spontaneously recorded and nearly contemporaneous televised event itself which provoked the crisis. This does not mean that the event captured in the videotape *determined* the subsequent narration of the crisis. There was no necessary reason why Rodney King could not have been described as out of control and irrational, as, for example, television ideologue Rush Limbaugh was to do some time later (see Fiske 1994: 131). But the videotape, which was broadcast thousands of times, did result in a focusing of public attention on precisely how this "objective" event would be narrated. As such, it focused public attention on the competing narrations offered for the event, and quickly shifted public discourse in civil society toward the "subjunctive mode of culture" that Dayan and Katz claim is central to the power of media events.

Once the Rodney King beating became a media event, a process of cultural construction occurred concerning its meaning. The event of the beating was narrated in many different public spheres throughout the nation. From March until September of 1991, for example, hundreds of articles were written about the Rodney King crisis in the newspapers of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Most newspapers represented the beating as a wild deviation and a "shocking" event. Descriptions of the incident cast the officers as being irrational and excitable in their work, and as having used their powers illegitimately. Accounts from witnesses reported that the officers were "laughing and chuckling [after the beating], like they had just had a party."<sup>12</sup> These descriptions resonated with the profane discourse of motives and relationships in civil society, depicting violations of fairness, openness and justice. The event of the beating, when linked to the videotape, was understood as a way to expose the evil that existed in the police department. An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed that "this time, the police witnesses, knowing about the videotape, will probably not compound their offense by lying about what really happened."<sup>13</sup>

Still, if it had merely been a problem of a few individuals in need of administrative control, crisis need not have ensued. But the dramatic tension surrounding the Rodney King crisis increased through the construction of another important villain character: Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl F. Gates. Gates was repeatedly described as being unaccountable, racist, and ego-driven. Editorial opinion in the press became concentrated against Gates, offering a point of symbolic concentration and a direction for possible redressive action.

The people of Los Angeles have been unable to hold their chief of police accountable for anything - not his racial slurs or racial stereotyping; not his openly-expressed contempt for the public, juries and the Constitution he is sworn to uphold; not his spying on political enemies or cover-up of that espionage.<sup>14</sup>

Chief Gates is responsible for inflammatory comments, for the actions of his officers and for the \$8 million in taxpayer money paid out last year to satisfy complaints against the department. But because of rigid civil service

protections, the police chief is not accountable to the mayor, the City Council or to the city's voters.<sup>15</sup>

What this climate of media opinion created was a dramatic test of the ability of political elites to control the repressive apparatus of the state, to keep it from threatening the freedom of citizens in civil society. While the redressive actions called for were directed toward political elites, the source of the call was clearly the public opinion of civil society. An article in the *New York Times*, for example, reported that "public outrage" was causing the Justice Department to review every police brutality complaint made to the Federal government over the previous six years.<sup>16</sup> But there was also a question about whether this was a sincere effort or a "finely calculated strategy."<sup>17</sup> The reason for this question had to do with the increasing salience of the normative discourse of civil society, as it was now placed in a dialogue with "real civil society." Within this "subjunctive mode of culture," there was real concern that reaction to the beating was being interpreted through a narrative of class, racial and ethnic segregation rather than public unity. As an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* lamented, "It is profoundly revealing that while middle-class viewers recoiled in horror at the brutal footage, the victim, like many others familiar with police behavior in poor and minority neighborhoods, considered himself lucky that the police did not kill him."<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the social drama of the Rodney King crisis was set as a "contest," at least in the mainstream media. Would political elites be able to resolve the crisis through appropriate redressive action, or would the danger of liminality (inherent to the subjunctive mode) overwhelm their legitimacy and demand massive institutional changes? The answer to this question was far from determined; it depended, instead, on the dynamics of influence and commitment as they were constructed and transformed in civil society. Several of the attempts at redressive action — such as the grand jury investigation, the FBI probe, and the attempt by Mayor Tom Bradley to force Gates out of office — failed to produce any symbolic reintegration. Had all of the redressive actions failed, civil society would have been transposed from a romantic and utopian genre to a more tragic one, where the "reality" of irreconcilable schisms prevents full incorporation of all members of civil society. This deflation of the civil society narrative would have been a tragedy in the aporetic sense of resigned acceptance, a tragedy pointing to an evil "already there and already evil" (Ricoeur 1967: 313).

One redressive action was successful, however. That was the formation of the Christopher Commission, and the release of its report about the Los Angeles Police Department in July 1991. The Christopher Commission was comprised of representatives from all institutional branches of "elite" civil society. It was co-chaired by John Arguelles, a retired State Supreme Court judge, and by Warren Christopher, a former Deputy Attorney General and Deputy Secretary of State. Also included in the commission were two university professors, a college president, three accomplished lawyers, the president of the Los Angeles County Bar and a corporate executive. The decisive move toward symbolic resolution of the crisis came with the merging of the two previously separate commissions

one headed by Arguelles, the other by Christopher — into an expanded "Christopher Commission." As an event, the merging of the two commissions presented an opportunity for new narrations of the crisis to be made. Both Arguelles and Christopher made numerous public statements representing the merged commission as an independent, cooperative and objective body, whose orientation was directed toward the good of the public. They represented their merged commission as a movement away from the tragedy of factionalism and back toward the romance of local government. As the following excerpts demonstrate, their efforts were reflected in the media:

The heads of the panels . . . said they were seeking to distance themselves from the clash as the Police Commission forced Gates to take a leave.<sup>19</sup>

"I think it would be good for everybody if we could come up with some kind of coordinated effort," said retired State Supreme Court Justice John Arguelles, the head of Gates' five-member civilian panel. "There are [now] two committees that might be perceived as having independent agendas that they might want to advance."<sup>20</sup>

"In order to maximize the commission's contribution to the community," Christopher and Arguelles said in a joint statement, "we must concentrate on making an objective and thorough study of the long-term issues without being drawn into the controversy over the tenure of Chief Gates."<sup>21</sup>

In the developing narrative of the Rodney King crisis, the Christopher Commission came to be identified with the sacred discourse of civil institutions. When its report was released on July 9, it became a turning point for all of the narrative understandings of the Rodney King crisis. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, began to interpret the release of the Christopher Commission report as a symbolic completion of the crisis begun by the videotape. If the videotape provided the beginning of the narrative, the report enabled its closure, thus resembling a cultural situation that Turner (1969) has called "reaggregation." While authority figures had previously been represented as divided and politically motivated, they were now represented as being open and cooperative, unified in their support of the Christopher Commission report and motivated by the duty of office and concern for the public. Attention also shifted back to police chief Gates, who was represented as increasingly ego-driven and out of touch with the public. Former political adversaries, such as the Police Commission and the City Council, were now calling on one another to help in a common cause. Business and labor leaders, who had previously not been significant players in the social drama, were reported to be joining the unified effort. When Gates finally announced his resignation, the police department became purged of the figure around whom much of the symbolic pollution had concentrated. Public focus began to turn to the upcoming trial of the four officers indicted, the conviction of whom would signal redemption for the political leaders of Los Angeles, legitimacy for its institutions and moral uplifting for its citizens. Rather than treating the trial as a separate event, the media and its public understood it as the



final chapter of the narrative, clearly expecting the result to be the conviction of the officers.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, what we see with the case of the Rodney King beating is a media event that developed into a social drama. In other words, the media event produced by the beating was narrated as the first plot point of a crisis narrative about police brutality, factionalism and political divisiveness. In the African-American press, however, the media event was linked to a long, continuous, ongoing narrative about police brutality, white insincerity and the need for African-American empowerment. In this more epic form of the romantic genre, the African American community itself was identified as the hero and was endowed with the sacred characteristics of motives (active, reasonable, realistic), relationships (open, truthful, unified) and institutions (rule-regulated, lawful, inclusive). For the African American community, even though the understanding of the event was filtered through the shared semiotic code of civil society, the emplotment of characters and events was affected by the epic romance of African American deliverance (i.e. an Exodus narrative with continuous roots going back to the time of slavery). This is similar to what Dayan and Katz (1992: 141-5) discuss as "alternative and oppositional readings" of the event. Clearly, though, the alternative readings were motivated in large part by the subjunctive mode of culture, by the power of the utopian vision of civil society and by the semiotic and narrative structures through which the utopian vision becomes elaborated.

## NOTES

- 1 Locke *Second Treatise on Government* (Bk II, sect. 6).
- 2 Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. D. McClellan (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 54.
- 3 This is also true of many other approaches which we have not mentioned in our discussion, such as Bobbio (1987), who argues that the principle of democratic decision-making should be extended beyond the political sphere of voting into the voluntary sphere of civil society.
- 4 For a good discussion of the cultural distinction between space and place, see Chaney (1994).
- 5 Dayan and Katz also argue that media events are preplanned, although Scannell (1995) and Jacobs (1996b) have pointed to the fact that unplanned events such as crises, if they become "mediatized public processes" and incorporate the other characteristics of media events, should be viewed as part of the same class of events.
- 6 For a more detailed semiotic "map" of the discourse of civil society, see Alexander (1992), Alexander and Smith (1993), and Smith (1996).
- 7 The analytical process of code-making is described in great detail by Eco (1979).
- 8 Others have discussed this in far greater detail than we have space for here. See, for example, Cohen and Arato (1992: 415-20, 440-63), Marshall (1964), and Parsons (1971).
- 9 For a more detailed discussion of Watergate, see Alexander (1988a, 1988b, 1995); Alexander and Smith (1993); Lang and Lang (1983). For a more extended analysis of the Rodney King beating of 1991, see Jacobs (1996a).
- 10 In fact, according to Lang and Lang (1983), only 1 per cent of those surveyed after the election listed Watergate as an important part of their choice.

- 11 *New York Times*, July 31, 1974; quoted in Alexander and Smith (1993: 185).
- 12 *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1991: A22.
- 13 *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1991: B7.
- 14 *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1991: B7.
- 15 *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1991: B6.
- 16 *New York Times*, March 15, 1991: A1.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1991: B5.
- 19 *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1991: A23.
- 20 *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1991: A1.
- 21 *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1991: A23.
- 22 Indeed, when the not-guilty verdicts were read in April 1992, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "Outrage and indignation swept the city Wednesday as citizens rich and poor, black and white, struggled to reconcile the acquittals of four Los Angeles Police Department officers with the alarming, violent images captured on a late-night videotape" (*Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1992: A1).

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