

The Long and Winding Road: Civil Repair of Intimate Injustice*

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Over the last decade, I have been trying to help fashion a new kind of critical social theory, one that can contribute to the “new theoretical reflection and interpretation of social contestation and political action” (Cohen 1982:xiii) that such post-Marxist thinkers as Cohen and Seyla Benhabib (1986) called for two decades ago but that has seemed less and less ascertainable with the passing of time. Outlining a sociological approach to what I call the “civil sphere” of society, I have defined what I would like to think is a new object domain for sociology, one centering on the expansion and contraction of democratic solidarity. Through a series of conceptual elaborations and empirical investigations, I have begun to sketch out core components of this “civil sphere.” These cultural and institutional components are fundamentally ambiguous, and they form contradictory relations with the “non-civil” domains that surround the civil sphere.

INTELLECTUAL ROOTS OF A NEW PROJECT

Three theoretical streams have informed this effort to conceptualize the civil sphere as a domain that provides a new sociological understanding of the possibilities for justice.

(1) In terms of recent *philosophy*, the theory builds upon the post-Marxist, neo-Kantian democratic idealism of Habermas, but it employs a culture-theoretic position to get beyond his rationalist insistence that democratic discourse can be merely pragmatically grounded. The theory builds also upon Foucault’s postmodern inversion of Enlightenment rationality, while insisting, nonetheless, that there is, in fact, a real universalizing strand of “modern” discourse. This universalizing dimension—at once democratic, Western, and Axial (Eisenstadt 1982) in origin—allows knowledge to be separated from power, contra Foucault. Only such a separation can leave open the possibility for the critical thinking and action that create justice.

(2) Such an effort to encompass both the darker and brighter sides of modernity can be articulated only by a *cultural theory* that expresses the necessary interrelation of symbolic evil and symbolic good. In pursuing what I have called the “strong program” of cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith forthcoming), I follow Wittgenstein’s insistence on the relative and relational character of meaning and the semiotic argument that symbolic languages are constructed upon binary codes and contextualizing narratives. In a series of empirical studies, my students and I have found that, at the normative core of democratizing-modernizing societies, there is a binary “discourse of civil societies.”¹ This code, and its associated narratives, simultaneously establishes categories for emancipation and inclusion, on the one hand, and repression and exclusion, on the other.

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¹E.g., Rambo and Chan (1990), Smith (1994, 1998, 2000), Sherwood (1994), Magnuson (1997), Jacobs (1996, 2000), Ku (1998, 1999), Gheytanchi (forthcoming); for the strong culture program more generally, see, e.g., Edles (1998, 1998), Kane (1992, 1997, 2000), Smith (1991), Somers (1995).

(3) In terms of the sociological tradition, I have drawn upon and radicalized the often suppressed, and almost always neglected, democratic thread in Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons, and I have interwoven this thread with the Marxian idea of contradiction, approaching the latter in an imminent rather than naturalistic way. Vis-à-vis the first group of classics, I have clarified the central importance of universalistic solidarity in such concepts as “society” (Durkheim), “fraternization” (Weber), and “the societal community” (Parsons). The utopian ideal of an ever-expanding solidarity, I suggest (cf. Benhabib 1986), forms an imminent normative standard that undergirds every progressive social movement, every institutional effort to redefine the limits of citizenship.

But this solidary ideal is never institutionalized in an unambiguous way. The binary nature of civil discourse calls attention to how democratic solidarity has been secured, from the beginning, through justifications for anticivil repression. Following Marx but also a particularly supple strand in Eisenstadt’s neofunctionalist thought (Alexander and Colomy 1985), I have expressed this ambiguity by speaking of the “contradictions” of civil society (Alexander 2000). These contradictions are triggered by the inherently partial nature of institutionalization (Alexander 1992). Indeed, efforts to institutionalize the normative ideals of civil society, even the most successful, do not result in equilibrium and order. They have the effect, rather, of increasing the tension between what Habermas (1996) calls “normativity” and “facticity.” This tension establishes the empirical framework for the continuous social conflicts over justice that mark modern and postmodern societies. The fact that progressive, reformist, and revolutionary conflicts are sparked, not by the utter irrelevance of civil culture and institutions, but by their partial and contradictory institutionalization (cf. Habermas [1963] 1989:79–88), demonstrates the ethical and organizational continuity of democratic-cum-modern societies and their continuous capacity for self-scrutiny, self-criticism, and basic structural change. Drawing a connection between Castoriadis and Habermas, Cohen (1982:223; italics added) once remarked that “the *institutionalization* of a society presupposes the imaginary capacity crucial to the creativity of socio-historical actors.” In normative terms, this sociological truth is a good thing.

The contradictory institutionalization of civil society is triggered not only by the inevitable gap between normativity and facticity. It is generated also by the dualistic, and therefore fundamentally ambiguous, nature of the discourse that is at the core of the civil sphere itself (Alexander 1991; Alexander and Smith 1993). What democratic theorists have tended to ignore—from Marx and Durkheim to Habermas, Rawls, and Parsons—is that civil discourse, not merely from its first modern institutionalization in the seventeenth century but from its first appearance in ancient Greece 2,000 years before, has included not only classifications for inclusion but categories for exclusion. If the former justify inclusion, the latter justify, indeed they seem to mandate, repression.

The reasons for the binary structure of civil discourse are complex. In part, it follows from the processes of classificatory splitting discovered by structuralism, cognitive psychology, and psychoanalysis. But there is also a reason that can be found at the political-normative level itself. This reason can be discovered by a simple thought experiment. In order to establish a self-governing, antihierarchical community, those with whom one interacts must be assumed to be trusting, open, honest, independent and rational, honest and calm, cooperative, and able to manage self-control. If the members of a community are believed to be suspicious and distrustful, secretive and dishonest, dependent and irrational, unable to control their emotionality, or fundamentally aggressive, it becomes difficult to conceive them as able to sustain a self-governing, democratic community; to the contrary, it would seem as if a community composed of such actors would be compelled to depend upon various forms of hierarchy and external control.

The qualities that are necessary to form a democratic self-governing community, and those that would make it impossible, form a binary code such that, in semiotic terms, the meaning of one side cannot be understood without the other.

The Binary Discourse of Civil Society

Motives

<i>Civil Motives</i>	<i>Anticivil Motives</i>
Active	Passive
Autonomous	Dependent
Rational	Irrational
Reasonable	Hysterical
Calm	Excitable
Self-controlled	Wild-passionate
Realistic	Distorted
Sane	Mad

Relations

<i>Civil Relations</i>	<i>Anticivil Relations</i>
Open	Secretive
Trusting	Suspicious
Critical	Deferential
Honorable	Self-interested
Altruistic	Greedy
Truthful	Deceitful
Straightforward	Calculating
Deliberative	Conspiratorial
Friendly	Antagonistic

Institutions

<i>Civil Institutions</i>	<i>Anticivil Institutions</i>
Rule regulated	Arbitrary
Law	Power
Equality	Hierarchy
Inclusive	Exclusive
Impersonal	Personal
Contracts	Bonds of loyalty
Groups	Factions
Office	Personality

The sociological problem is this: What are the social referents of these cultural categories? This has been a matter for history to decide, and, from a normative perspective, it has never been decided in a consistently beneficent way. From the beginning of its institutionalization in ancient Greece, large categories of persons who would have putative membership in civil society have been excluded from it. Their otherness has been constructed in terms of civil incompetence, their exclusion essentialized as a matter of democratic self-protection. It is no wonder that dominated groups have struggled not only for power but for cultural reclassification.

BEYOND FORMAL RECOGNITION AND NORMALIZATION

Even from such a schematic description, it should be clear that my approach to civil society has little to do with a focus on the "formal institutions of democracy," the "formal

official civil society,” or even the “formal *recognition* of rights” that Chet Meeks (in this issue of *Sociological Theory*) mistakenly identifies as the conservative limits of my work. To the contrary, my developing perspective was initiated as a criticism of merely formal understandings of democracy (Alexander 1990) and of narrowly Tocquevillian (recently Putnamesque) concerns with voluntaristic association. Such approaches are sociologically uninteresting and normatively uncritical (Cohen 1999). Nor does the focus on recognition—a concept, Meeks does not seem to recognize, that is fundamentally at odds with the formalist tradition (Honneth 1995; Alexander and Lara 1996)—illuminate the undergirding of sociocultural structures that make civil society possible. It is these deep structures, not the formalities of democracy or the simple process of recognition, that allow identity politics and multiculturalism to enlarge universalism and civility rather than to fragment and particularize it (cf. Calhoun 1995).

This deep sociocultural structuring of a universalizing solidarity ensures the “promise” of civil society that the Foucaultian insistence on the omnipresence of normalization ignores, an insistence that Meeks faithfully upholds. To take the measure of Foucault, here is the critical theoretical fact that must always be kept in mind: The existence of a norm, and its partial institutionalization, cannot be equated with normalization, a concept connoting ideological hegemony, social conformity, and de-individuation.² Foucault’s power-knowledge nexus can envision only normalization because it equates *cultural* conformity—acting in accordance with normative prescriptions or ideals—with *social* conformity. This is a fundamental theoretical error, one that has plagued even the most sophisticated theorizing from Parsons to Bourdieu (Alexander 1979, 1995). This mistake leads not only to the empirical distortion of contemporary life but also to moral pessimism. It often produces political irresponsibility as well, for it denies the possibility that there can be justice without radical rupture, without severing the carefully woven filaments of democratizing and modernizing societies. To emphasize this possibility, I need only to quote Meeks’s eloquent admonition back to himself: “We would be wrong to conflate a universal sense of society and inclusion with cultural dominance and normalization.” It is the universal sense of society, or, better yet, the sense of a universal society, that is, in fact, the whole point of my civil society work.

A CRITICAL MODEL OF BOUNDARY RELATIONS

Responding to the criticisms of Chet Meeks and Eyal Rabinovitch allows me to explore how the new critical theory I am developing applies to the intimate spheres of gender and sexuality and to the social movements that have protested against the norms and practices of the particularistic forms of justice that, until recently, have been associated with these spheres.

In a plural and differentiated society, there will always be multiple and fundamentally different spheres of culture and practice (Walzer 1984; Boltanski and Thevenot 1990)—market economies; private families; scientific institutions; minority sexual, racial, and ethnic communities. Still, as long as a social system contains one putatively civil sphere—one imminently utopian social sphere whose culture and institutions are proclaimed to be civil and democratic—the question can always be posed: What is the relation between the idealizing requisites and demands of the civil sphere and the noncivil spheres that surround it?

²This potentially radical understanding of norm is one of Benhabib’s (1986) central points in her early and still important reconstruction of orthodox critical theory. Habermas himself has always insisted that the inevitable imbeddedness in language, and thus implicitly in norms, ties demands for immediate satisfaction to utopian, critical exploration: “The claim to happiness can be made good only if the sources of that semantic potential we need for interpreting the world in the light of our needs are not exhausted” (Habermas 1983:156).

In my model, I call these the “boundary relations” between civil and noncivil spheres, and I believe that they have assumed three ideal-typical forms. The activities of noncivil spheres can be seen as providing “facilitating inputs” to the civil sphere or as presenting “destructive intrusions” into it. In the former case, the existing boundary relations between civil and noncivil spheres will be left intact. In the latter case, by contrast, the norms and practices of the noncivil sphere will be criticized on the grounds that they endanger the integrity of the civil sphere. It is this construction—and it is a hermeneutically inspired interpretation from imminent principles rather than a naturalistic induction from empirical facts—that stimulates the third possible boundary relation, which is the actively reconstructive route of “civil repair.” Through communicative, legal, and organizational intervention, the offending practices, whether sexism, racism, or economic exploitation, are symbolically polluted and reconstructed to one degree or another.

How this process occurs—whether it is necessarily linear and progressive, whether it involves mixed cases and compromise formations, whether civil repair is compatible with maintaining plurality and difference—is what the disagreements between me and my critics are about. Because the Rabinovitch paper (in this issue of *Sociological Theory*) is more meaty empirically and more differentiated conceptually, and because it reveals much more familiarity with my ideas, I will address these questions primarily through a discussion of how the boundary relations model might illuminate the uneven process of gender incorporation. In conclusion, I will return to Meeks’s argument, this time questioning not only his theory but his empirical claims.

JUSTIFYING GENDER DOMINATION: RELATIONS BETWEEN THE INTIMATE AND CIVIL SPHERES

It is illuminating of the contradictory nature of civil society, and of the infernal, often maddening suppleness that marks its binary symbolic code, that, when the egalitarian codes of democracy were first institutionalized on a national scale in seventeenth-century Europe, women could be conceived as having absolutely no place. As Blackstone, the first great codifier of democratic law, put it, once women were married they ceased to have any civil existence at all: “Husband and wife are one person in law, that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing; and is therefore called . . . a *feme covert (sic)*” (in *The Law of Domestic Relations* 1995; original italics). The fictive social contracts—which allowed democratic societies to move from the state of nature into the public world of civil society—were represented as having been written by men. With women relegated to the private, invisible sphere of family life, first protected by fathers, later by husbands, what Carole Pateman called the “sexual contract” always accompanied the democratic one.

In a world presented as conventional, contractual and universal, women’s civil position is ascriptive, defined by the natural particularity of being women; patriarchal subordination is socially and legally upheld throughout civil life, in production and citizenship as well as in the family. Thus to explore the subjection of women is also to explore the fraternity of men. (Pateman 1988:121)

The Republican traditions that inspired the first great democratic revolutions were irredeemably masculinist. As Joan Landes (1988:2–3) pointed out, the very conception of public derived from the latin *publicus*, meaning “under the influence of *pubes*, in the sense of ‘adult men,’ [the] ‘male population.’ ” In describing the early American Republic, Mary

Ryan explained how female motives were constructed as antithetical to civil ones. "Republican ideology," she writes (1992:266; italics added), "held that the female sex embodied those uncurbed human passions that inevitably subverted the *self-control* and *rationality* required of citizens." Under this semantic but also very political distortion, civil wisdom is contrasted with domestic love, and female exclusion is represented as being compelled by the necessity to protect against enslavement. These associations are manifest, for example, in an after-dinner "toast to the ladies" that one (male) wit offered at a civic occasion in New Orleans, circa 1825: "The fair sex—Excluded by necessity from participation in our labours: we profess *equality*, [but] the presence of woman would make us *slaves*, and convert the temple of wisdom into that of love" (Ryan 1992:266).

However, despite its strangeness and even repugnance to contemporary sensibilities, there is not an "objective contradiction" between the promises of a democratic society and the subordination and exclusion of women from its civil sphere. It is not something that, in and of itself, manifestly defies the norms of a plural and differentiated society. To believe so betrays the naturalistic approach to contradiction so well displayed in the later, though not the earlier, Marx. Between the belief that there are irredeemable differences between men and women, and the conviction that such differences *unfairly* disqualify women from participating in the civil sphere, there is no more of a "factual" contradiction than between capitalist market relations and the democratic promises of civil society. As the French say, "*ça depends*." What it depends on is context.

Women's Difference as Facilitating Input

Throughout the nineteenth century, a period of dramatic advances in the institutionalization of civil society in such domains as class and, to a much lesser but still real degree, as race, female subordination in the family sphere seemed perfectly compatible with the sphere of civil equality. Indeed, it was conceived as a fundamentally important facilitating input to it.

This understanding of boundary relations, not only accepted but actively promoted by women as well as by men, was crystallized by what feminist historians have called the "ideology of separate spheres." As the historian Jeanne Boydston (1995:144) has put it, "the doctrine of gender spheres expressed a worldview in which both the orderliness of daily social relations and the larger organization of society derived from and depended on the preservation of an all-encompassing gender division of labor." In terms of the present argument, separate sphere ideology legitimated the antidemocratic exclusion of women by constructing them in terms of the negative categories of civil discourse. In 1825, a widely read periodical, *Ladies Museum*, applied this binary code to the men and women of its day.

Man is strong—woman is beautiful. Man is daring and confident—woman is diffident and unassuming. Man is great in action—woman in suffering. Man shines abroad—woman at home. Man talks to convince—woman to persuade and please. Man has a rugged heart—woman a soft and tender one. Man prevents misery—woman relieves it. Man has science—woman taste. Man has judgment—woman sensibility. Man is a being of justice—woman of mercy. (quoted in *ibid.*)

This binary rhetoric specifies the more general categories of civil discourse to gender. It genders civil discourse, providing a pragmatically available *parole* to the more structural *langue*. The very same feminine qualities that were conceived as allowing women to manage the intimate sphere—which were vital because they allowed not the reproduction of labor power but the reproduction of democratic virtue—were the very same characteristics

that disqualified women from participating in the body politic. John Keane has explained how women's noncivil qualities were understood as resulting from her centrality in the intimate sphere.

Within this [intimate] sphere, women's functions of child-bearing, child-rearing and maintaining the household are deemed to correspond to their *unreason, disorderliness* and "closeness" to nature. Women and the domestic sphere [were] viewed as inferior to the male-dominated "public" world of civil society and its culture, property, social power, *reason* and *freedom*. (Keane 1988:21; italics added)

Women's Difference as Destructive Intrusion

Despite this prevailing, anti-inclusive model of facilitating input, the first wave of democratic revolutions had the effect of drawing women along with men into its effervescent wake. The result was a growing suspicion, among some parties, that women might actually not be so different from men after all. In America, as Linda Kerber (1995:90) has observed, "the experience of war had given words like independence and self-reliance personal as well as political overtones."

As the song played at Yorktown had it, the world could turn upside down: the rich could quickly become poor, wives might suddenly have to manage the family economy, women might even shoulder a gun. Revolutionary experience taught that it was useful to be prepared for a wide range of unusual possibilities; political theory taught that republics rested on the virtue and intelligence of their citizens. (ibid.)

The American Revolution had markedly increased the authority and attraction of the liberating side of civil discourse, with the result that efforts to further institutionalize it intensified. For many women, their subordination in the separate sphere of the family began to seem an abomination, a destructive intrusion into the normative and institutional core of the newly democratic nation. In one early post-Revolutionary proclamation, Judith Sargent Murray decried the idea that girls should be trained in fashion, flirtation, and charm, with the aim of procuring a successful marriage. She insisted, instead, on the socialization of girls to civil, not specifically feminine, values: "*Independence* should be placed within their grasp [and] the Sex should be taught to depend on their own efforts, for the procurement of an establishment in life" (quoted in ibid.:91; italics added).

If female difference were criticized, then male superiority would be reframed as a potential threat to the civil sphere. The argument that began to emerge was not that men were unloving or uncaring—such criticisms would have evoked not civil standards but the values of the noncivil family sphere. Rather, the criticism launched by post-Revolutionary American women drew directly upon the constructions of antidemocratic repression against which Americans had fought the Revolutionary War. When Abigail Adams, wife of the second president, suggested that women ought to have the right to participate in the new system of government, she offered as the reason that "all men would be tyrants if they could" (quoted in ibid.). In the late twentieth century, feminist criticism would employ the term "patriarchy," but the civil reference of the category was much the same: The dependent and authoritarian relations that might well prevail between men and women inside the family should not be allowed to intrude upon the relations among men and women in the civil sphere. Now viewed as a "destructive intrusion" rather than facilitating input, such relations were deemed not only to be noncivil but anticivil, a characterization that implied, perhaps, that they should no longer be allowed even within the intimate sphere itself.

When nineteenth-century temperance activists pilloried men for drunkenness and licentiousness, and for violence against their children and wives, it was just such civil criteria that were being critically deployed.

At the conclusion of history's first national women's congress, the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848, 100 persons signed a document entitled *Declaration of Sentiments* attacking the threat to civil ideals posed by the ideology and practice of separate spheres and by the underlying principle of innate female difference. Asserting that "all men and women are created equal," the document insisted, in a less metaphorical than literal extension of the *Declaration of Independence*, that both sexes were "invested by their creator with the same capabilities." By violating such a civil stipulation, the traditional relations between men and women were condemned as undemocratic, and the polluting language of civil society was everywhere employed.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and *usurpations* on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an *absolute tyranny* over her. . . . He has *compelled* her to *submit* to laws. . . . He has oppressed her on all sides. . . . He has made her . . . civilly dead. . . . He has taken from her all right in property. . . . He has made her, morally, an *irresponsible* being [and] she is *compelled* to promise *obedience*. . . . He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but [encouraged] to make her willing to lead a *dependent* and abject life. (*Declaration of Sentiments* [1848] 1995:568; italics added)

"We are a nation and not a mere confederacy," as one suffragist put the matter in 1880. "The theory of a masculine head to rule the family, the church, or the State is contrary to republican principles and the fruitful source of rebellion" (quoted in Edwards 1997:11).

Gender Universalism and Civil Repair

If male superiority and tyranny in the domestic sphere were considered a destructive intrusion into the civil one, it followed that there must be a project of civil repair. In the course of the Second Great Awakening, women had achieved unprecedented equality in the religious sphere, and they also played powerful roles in the growing Abolitionist movement. As the nineteenth century progressed, there were, in fact, increasing demands that women be given a civil status appropriate to their equal capacities. These took the form of demands for equal education, equality before the law, and, eventually, the right to vote. Activists viewed these policies as steps to deepen the institutionalization of the liberating discourse of civil society. At the "Women's Centennial Agenda," the counterconvention to the American Centennial in 1876, the feminist declaration *avant la lettre* charged that "women's degraded, helpless position is the weak point in our institutions today" (Anthony [1876] 1995:225).

To avoid any suggestion of American exceptionalism, and to emphasize the systemic nature of the processes I am describing here, it seems important to note that the other great revolutionary effort to institutionalize civil principles, the French Revolution, initially produced the same movement from separate sphere arguments to universalistic demands for women's rights. In the land of the Enlightenment, it is hardly surprising that the argument over women's civil capacity, which centered on difference versus universality, would focus more attention on the possession of reason. In his essay "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship," the influential liberal physiocrat, the Marquis de

Condorcet, emphatically made the link between reason and civic participation central to his famous argument for the inclusion of women.

Now the rights of men result simply from the fact that they are sentient beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning concerning those ideas. Women, *having these same qualities*, must necessarily possess equal rights. Either no individual of the human species has any true rights, or all have the same. And he or she who votes against the rights of another, of whatever religion, color, or sex, has thereby abjured his own. (quoted in Landes [1790] 1988:114; italics added).

Rather than viewing female-specific social activities as indicating fundamental difference, and thus as constituting grounds for confinement to a separate sphere, Condorcet dismissed “motherhood and ‘other passing indispositions’” as indicating nothing at all about women’s civil capacities (quoted in *ibid.*:115).

Stimulated by the effervescence of the Revolution, the most influential and radical feminists emphasized human universality and the shared capacities that men and women possessed. “The nature of reason must be the same in all,” Mary Wollstonecraft declared in her pathbreaking book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It was on this basis that Wollstonecraft declared traditional female subordination a threat to the civil values of the Revolution. Addressing herself to the all-male Constituent Assembly, she asked “whether, when men contend for their freedom, and to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own happiness, it be not inconsistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their happiness?” Such paternalism, she argued, must be criticized as a destructive intrusion into the realm of revolutionary democracy—as long as it was agreed that the intellectual and moral capacities of women are equally constructed in a civil way. “Who made man the exclusive judge,” Wollstonecraft demands, “if woman partake with him the gift of reason?” (quoted in *ibid.*:127).

Assuming that civil, not separate sphere, standards must apply to male–female relations, protofeminists attacked male paternalism as uncivil, warning that it presented a destructive intrusion into democratic life. As Wollstonecraft observed:

If women are to be excluded without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason—else this flaw in your NEW CONSTITUTION (*sic*) will ever shew (*sic*) that man must, in some shape, act like a *tyrant*, and tyranny, *in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front*, will ever undermine morality. (quoted in *ibid.*; italics added)

In 1790, Etta Palm, another leading revolutionary activist, similarly asserted that civil values must reconstruct the intimate sphere. In a scathing speech, she told her male revolutionary confreres, “we are your *companions* and not your *slaves*” (quoted in *ibid.*:119; italics added). Once again, traditional forms of maleness were being reframed as the signifieds of anticivil signifiers—as indicating the failure not only of women but of men themselves to exercise rationality, self-control, and honesty. In Wollstonecraft’s words, “men are certainly more under the influence of their appetites than women; and their appetites are depraved by unbridled indulgence and the fastidious contrivances of satiety” (quoted in *ibid.*:131).

THE COMPROMISE FORMATION OF PUBLIC M/OTHERHOOD³

It was such confrontations as these that laid the basis for the “feminist” movement to displace the “woman” movement in the early years of the twentieth century (Cott 1987: 1–10). That it would take more than 100 years for such an assertive female movement to build upon the earliest expressions of gender universalism demonstrates that, in the early phases of the institutionalization of civil society, most men, and women, were not persuaded by representations that female subordination constituted a destructive intrusion to democracy, much less by policy recommendations for its civil repair. Abstract models of boundary relations are one thing; the messy reality of actual processes is another. In concrete historical terms, civil repair is never a linear process—in any domain. It cannot be deduced from the ideal-typical concepts of a theoretical model. Feminist historians, social scientists, and philosophers have reluctantly come to grips with this fact, though in thinking about what to make of it they have sometimes fundamentally disagreed.

As Kerber attests, the postrevolutionary efforts to apply civil democratic codes to women often met fierce resistance. “To accept an openly acknowledged role for women in the public sector,” she writes (1995:92), “was to invite extraordinary hostility and ridicule.” The ideology of natural difference and the practice of separate spheres were simply too deeply entrenched. Arguments about female intellectual power and political autonomy were analogically linked to masculine manners. Typical of such responses was a newspaper letter written by a Marylander calling himself “Philanthropos,” in 1790, that warned against any overly literal interpretations of the phrase “All mankind are born equal.” Philanthropos was concerned with the separation of spheres. If equality were “taken in too extensive a sense,” he argued, “it might tend to destroy those degrees of subordination which nature seems to point out,” most particularly the subordination of women to men. Philanthropos suggested an alternative that proved prophetic, pointing the way to a compromise between maintaining separate spheres and furthering civil repair. “However flattering the path of glory and ambition may be,” he declared, “a woman will have more commendation in being the mother of heroes, than in setting up, Amazon-like, for a heroine herself” (quoted in Kerber 1995:92).

What quickly became apparent, in the face of the concerted opposition to gender universalization, was that women would be allowed to enter the public realm only if they remained tethered to their subordinate status and separate sphere. Protected by the ideology of what Kerber called “the Republican Mother,” men and women alike justified partial participation in public life on the basis that women would become better—more virtuous and more democratic—mothers to their male children and provide more soothing emollients to their already civilly virtuous husbands. Making use of what we would today call gender essentialism, they claimed control over a special expertise that allowed them to influence certain domains of public affairs. But the very mothering qualities that legitimated some degree of female public participation confirmed their fundamental difference from men. Republican motherhood was, in fact, merely another kind of “otherhood.” Public m/otherhood simply put a positive spin on the very anticivil qualities that excluded women from full participation in civil society.

The new role of Republican M/otherhood can be seen as what Bellah (1970) once referred to, following Freud, as a “compromise formation,” one that responded to a classic situation of role strain. On the one hand, the increasingly strained boundary relations between familial and civil spheres could not be resolved by civic repair; on the other hand, women were unwilling to return entirely to the confines of their traditionally assigned

³The neologism m/otherhood is my own.

place. The result was the creation of a new role, whose compromise character was revealed by the manner in which it persistently combined “not only” with “but also.”

The concept [of Republican Mother] defended education for women not only for their autonomy and self-realization but also so that they could be better wives and better mothers for the next generation of virtuous republican citizens—especially sons. (Kerber 1995:93)

According to its advocates, the role of Republican M/other would provide sorely needed facilitating inputs to the American civil sphere. As one (male) newspaper editor put it in 1844, the family is “the foundation of public morality and intelligence” (quoted in Ryan 1992:273). Another wrote, “if all is right in the private domain, we need not be concerned for the public” (*ibid.*). Ironically, but very functionally, the authority for this civil contribution came from the very emphasis on inherent difference that excluded women from more assertive, and genuinely civil, participation. Public m/otherhood allowed some female activity to be viewed as a facilitating input to civil society, but it stalemated women’s efforts to gain actual incorporation into it.

The sorry story of a Madam Ranke, who addressed a meeting of unemployed men camped in New York City’s Thompkins Sqaure in 1857, records this stalemated attempt to desegregate the male public. When Madam Ranke took the public podium, she was greeted by cries like, “Don’t listen to a woman,” or alternatively, “Damn it, don’t interrupt a woman.” The female voice was neither easily blended nor distinctly heard in the embattled sectors of the male public sphere, and Madam Ranke was escorted from the square under a protective escort of women. (*ibid.*:270)

Kerber salutes the Republican Mother as a “revolutionary invention,” yet she points, equally emphatically, to its “deeply ambivalent” status. While sanctioning participation, the new role ensured the continuity of women’s uncivil status.

Republican Motherhood legitimized only a minimum of political sophistication and interest. . . . Women were expected to be content to perform their narrow political role permanently and were not expected to wish for fuller participation. Just as planters claimed that democracy in the antebellum South rested on the economic base of slavery, so egalitarian society was said to rest on the moral basis of deference among a class of people—women—who would devote their efforts to service by raising sons and disciplining husbands. (*ibid.*:95)

In France as well, the social and cultural barriers to the civil repair of gender relations generated what Landes (1988:2) calls a “paradoxical” compromise. Even Mary Wollstonecraft found it “difficult to deny the central presumption of her age, that women possess natures different from men” (*ibid.*:13). Despite her insistence on the principle of women’s rationality, the great protofeminist believed that most women actually were less rational in practice. Without the semantic anchor in civil discourse that had been provided by women’s putative rationality, it became difficult for Wollstonecraft to enthusiastically recommend the full civil inclusion of women.

Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation. . . . This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain

to render a rational creature useful to others, and content with its own station: for the exercise of the understanding, as life advanced, is the only method pointed out by nature to calm the passions. (quoted in *ibid.*:132)

If female activists were themselves so uncertain about the civil qualities of women, French men were much more so. Such widespread lack of confidence allowed free rein, in France as well as in America, to the compromise formation of Republican M/otherhood. Women did indeed play active, and at times vitally significant, public roles during the early Revolutionary period. The legendary march of women to Versailles in October 1789, for example, represented a strategically significant moment of women's public participation. Yet, even in this great march, Landes (*ibid.*:109; italics added) is careful to inform us, the Parisian women only "asserted their right *as women* to participate in public affairs," not as potential citizens. Their aim was to call upon the self-exiled king and to bring him back to Paris.

They desired to see the king [back] at Paris, where he would find wise women to give him good counsel. They referred to him as "poor man," "dear man," "good papa." The marchers appealed to the king in a paternalist discourse, yet they cried out for "bread and arms." (*ibid.*:109–10)

As a contemporary feminist, Landes is pointed in her criticism of the new kind of otherhood role: "[It] functioned to preserve difference and hence guarantee sexual inequality," despite its connection "to a universalist, egalitarian protest" (*ibid.*:123).

As citizens, women would be educated beyond their limited horizons and wholly self-oriented concerns in order to embrace the larger polity, but ultimately in a passive not an active manner. . . . The potential for providing women with a route into the public sphere by way of republican motherhood was undermined by the claims of nature. . . . If women's service to the community was viewed as a function of her mothering role, the most likely consequence was to offer women political representation in a *mediated* fashion. (*ibid.*:138; original italics)

In the hothouse atmosphere of revolutionary France, this compromise formation proved much less viable, and ultimately less productive, than it proved to be in the immensely more stable, and less radical, American scene. By 1791, the Committee of General Security recommended that women's rights to active public participation be entirely eliminated. The cultural framing for this recommendation emphasized the uncivil qualities of public behavior that were held to be the inevitable product of women's difference. Because their "moral education is almost nil" and because they are "less enlightened concerning principles," the committee's representative told the convention, "women's associations seem dangerous."

Their presence in popular societies, therefore, would give an active role in government to people more exposed to *error* and *seduction*. Let us add that women are disposed by their organization to an *over-excitation* which would be deadly in public affairs and that interests of state would soon be sacrificed to everything which *ardor in passions* can generate. . . . Delivered over to the heat of public debate, they would teach their children not love of country but *hatred and suspicions*. (quoted in *ibid.*:144)

In the United States, the contradictory effects of the compromise formation were far less dramatic, but they were equally fateful and far-reaching. In fact, as feminist historians have long noted, by framing a limited degree of female participation as a facilitating input to the public sphere, Republican M/otherhood provided legitimation for women to make their sphere less hermetically separate than ever before. Yet, as many contemporary feminists have insisted on also pointing out, the nineteenth-century American women who moved into the public sphere justified their participation, not by proclaiming their equal civil competence, but by utilizing notions of innate “difference” and the ideology of separate spheres. In the 1870s, for example, women made use of what Ryan calls “an arsenal of weapons and an array of avenues through which to influence public policy.” But Ryan immediately adds the following qualification.

In keeping with the Victorian moral code, [these] female sex reformers used the stereotype of pure womanhood as a point of personal privilege in the matter of prostitution legislation. . . . The politics of prostitution, like female moral reform, was but one rather prickly way to generate gender identity. It placed the women citizen in a defensive position and identified her by her sexual and reproductive biology. To contemporary feminists, this is an invitation to essentialism and a narrow base on which to mount gender politics. (Ryan 1992:281)

In fact, it is possible to argue that the creation of the new role of public “m/otherhood” established a paradigm that allowed every subsequent phase of female participation to be justified, and narrated, in an anticivil way. The editors of the leading anthology of contemporary feminist history make the following observation.

At an ever-accelerating pace between 1820 and 1880 . . . women expanded [the] role [of Republican Motherhood] into what might be called “Reformist Motherhood.” Instead of influencing the public domain indirectly through the lives of their sons, women began to extend their role as nurturer and teacher of morals from the domestic sphere into the public sphere through church, missionary, and moral reform groups. Women sought to make the world conform more strictly to values taught in the home—sexual responsibility and restraint for men as well as women, self-discipline for those who used strong drink. [Then,] between 1880 and 1920 a new role developed that might be called “Political Motherhood.” . . . The “womanhood” identified with “mothering” was becoming less a biological fact—giving birth to children—and more a political role with new ideological dimensions. (Kerber and de Hart 1995:229–30)

During the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century, another historian has recently observed (Edwards 1997:3), Americans “were fascinated by the power and complexity of machines,” and “in political debate they used machines as a metaphor for both the electoral system and for parties.” Yet the ideology of separate spheres remained alive and well. Its metaphors could be readily adapted to the new technological situation.

Party structures found their ideal opposite in the gentle domesticity attributed to women. Like their English Victorian counterparts, leaders of American opinion hailed the home as “woman’s sphere,” a place where wives and mothers conserved family bonds and religious devotion. Both men and women of the era described women as “angels of the home.” To many, women’s selflessness and purity were the very qualities that unfitted them for politics. Politics, however, could not function without the

virtues women represented. The institutions of political life might resemble machines, but each party fought for deeply held values. At a fundamental level, elections were disputes about faith and family order. . . . In 1886, New York politician John Boyle O'Reilly expressed his abhorrence at the idea of woman suffrage. "It would be no more deplorable," he declared in a public letter, "to see an angel harnessed to a machine than to see a woman voting politically." (Edwards 1997:3–4)

In sharp relief to such observations, Rabinovitch makes an energetic and intelligent, but in my view fundamentally misguided, effort to convince us that the ethic of m/otherhood should, to the contrary, be viewed as the beginning of an argument for the "universal," democratic status of women. The difficulty in doing so is revealed by the fact that, in the process, he actually provides ample evidence for exactly the opposite position. Despite itself, his discussion reveals that the m/otherhood umbrella for women's nineteenth-century public interventions had the illocutionary force—the semantic effect—of affirming, rather than denying, women's second class, uncivil status.

Women's public demands for "shelter and protection for women," Rabinovitch acknowledges, rested on claims "about the denial for the victimized women of the possibility to live up to the ideal of true womanhood." In "keeping with the submissive nature of women," such demands affirmed the notion that women were "helpless." Citing Ryan's own investigations into how activist women used such tactics as public prayer, weeping, and silent presence to compel men to alter their behavior, Rabinovitch writes that "it seemed [as] if women could not directly speak unto men with discursive authority." He notes, for example, how one leading temperance activist, Francis Willard, hailed what she called the "omnipotent-weakness which is the incommunicable characteristic of womanhood" in order to justify women's rights to publicly preach. Rabinovitch allows that "Republican mothers . . . went to great lengths to reject any association with civil independence or autonomy, even as they demanded greater respect and recognition in civic politics," and he himself recognizes that reformers repeatedly associated their own intentions with "sympathy, sentiment, and passion at the expense of autonomy and civic independence."

PUBLIC STAGE AND CIVIL SPHERE

How could this be? How could a clearly particularistic and anticivil understanding of women also function, at the same time, as the basis for launching their public careers? How could unprecedented female public activism have the effect of underscoring, rather than undermining, the second class position of women? How could this new intervention of women into public affairs, which powerfully blocked the civic repair of female subordination, be hailed by some interpreters as the key transition to democratizing gender relations?⁴

This paradox faithfully reflects the contradictory social and cultural structures of nineteenth-century society. It is the failure to recognize these contradictions that must now

⁴Kerber notes the blocking quality of the motherhood trope explicitly:

Republican motherhood . . . was one of a series of conservative choices that Americans made in the postwar years as they avoided the full implications of their Revolutionary radicalism. In America responsibility for maintaining public virtue was channeled into domestic life. By these decisions Americans may well have been spared the agony of the French cycle of revolution and counterrevolution. . . . Nevertheless the impact of this choice was to delay the resolution of matters. . . . When the war was over, Judith Sargent Murray predicted a "new era in female history." That new era remained to be created [b]ut it could not be created until the inherent paradox of Republican Motherhood was resolved, until the world was not separated into a woman's realm of domesticity and nurture and a man's world of politics and intellect. The promises of the republic had yet to be fulfilled. (ibid.:95)

concern us here. We will see later that this failure has become a central bone of ideological contention within feminist scholarship, the trigger, indeed, for a new kind of “warring” of the schools (Cott 1995:363). This contemporary debate pits “difference” feminism against “universalist” feminism, a so-called cultural feminism emphasizing an “ethics of care” against a so-called political feminism upholding a more citizenship-oriented standard (cf. Hirsch and Keller 1990; Scott 1990). As we will see below, one of the problematic results of this contemporary philosophical, historical, and ideological dispute is its blurring of the vast disparity between contemporary multiculturalism, which emphasizes difference, and the pre-feminist, woman-centered “m/otherhood” ideologies of the nineteenth century.⁵

Before entering into these controversies, however, I want to suggest that the failure to recognize the contradictory nature of nineteenth-century women’s history stems, in the first place, from problems of a more theoretic-sociological sort. These have to do with contemporary approaches to public sphere and public participation. Misunderstandings about these terms go all the way back to Arendt’s pathbreaking efforts to reinsert the public, as a sphere of radical democracy, into political and social theory. More recently, however, the difficulties can be traced to the vague and diffuse manner in which the term “public” is deployed by Jurgen Habermas. The problem is the false equation of the mere fact of “publicness” with participation in the “civil sphere,” that is, the conflation of public with democratic. For publicness, both theoretically and in ordinary language, actually has many different meanings. It can suggest the simple fact of visibility. It can refer to governmental or official status. It can indicate, in a more democratic manner, a connection to the diffusively and invisibly expressed, yet normatively very restrictive, opinion of the demos, that is, to public opinion. In the Habermasian tradition, which interweaves normative, empirical, and theoretical claims, these meanings are typically blurred.⁶

The position I want to gesture toward here, but cannot elaborate because of the limitations of space, is more strictly sociological, and more specifically culture-theoretic. It is the dramaturgical notion of the public as stage, a virtual forum that exists in symbolic space.⁷ Upon this public stage, performances are delivered for, and projected to, the presumed audience of citizens. These performances are diverse, dramatizing a kaleidoscope of ethical positions and political programs. Racists, misogynists, homophobes, and militarists make their cases. So do movements and ideologies of a more expansive and inclusive sort.

The moral superiority of any public movement will, first and foremost, be dramatized in its own terms—as the validity of what Walzer calls a particular “sphere of justice” and what Boltanski and Thevenot call a *regime de grandeur*. It will also be legitimated by linking it to the rhetorics of other particularistic movements and other noncivil spheres. It is highly revealing, in this regard, that during the nineteenth century public m/otherhood

⁵Rabinovitch’s essay is conspicuously marked by such blurring, continuously moving back and forth between the contemporary multicultural rhetoric of difference, which rings with a powerful authenticity, and nineteenth-century difference talk, whose essentializing view of gender would create powerful negative reactions if it were clearly seen.

⁶In his most recent effort, Habermas (1996) has subtly but nonetheless fundamentally altered his understanding of public, rejecting face-to-face encounters for public opinion formation. Yet he seeks to maintain his early-liberal understanding of civil society as consisting primarily of voluntary associations. I use the word “seeks” because at many points Habermas adds that these are “civil” voluntary associations only if they are enmeshed in a “liberal political culture.” With this addition, he gets into the morass of ad hoc reasoning that Rawls encounters in his efforts to flee from neo-Kantianism in *Political Liberalism*. For a sustained and revealing argument against overlapping and overburdened meanings of the term “public,” see Weintraub (1997).

⁷The theoretical resources I draw upon here range from Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman, to Victor Turner’s decade of seminal theoretical breakthroughs, to the explorations of public dramaturgy and narration by Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1986, 1994, 2000) and recent discussions of performance theory. See also the range of empirical and theoretical studies of ritual and public-discursive behavior cited by me in footnote 2, above.

was often employed to legitimate other, equally particularistic but much less palatable ideological claims.

On this reordered plane of late-nineteenth-century public life, women continued to locate and exploit the political possibilities for their sex. In many ways women's public presence remained veiled and distorted by the manipulation of gender symbolism dating from antebellum political culture, which was now used to garnish the increasingly stark racial and class partitions of the public. During the [civil] war women were an honored presence, and female symbols were prolifically displayed amid the pageantry of sectional solidarity. When white dominance was reported in the South, it was portrayed as an act of public purification, a defense of the honor of the ladies. Meanwhile, antiwar Democrats in the North raised cheers to white ladies. Both labor and capital draped their interests in female symbols. The parades of the Workingmen's Party of California mounted wives and daughters in carriages . . . in support of their demand for a family wage, and as a countersymbol to Chinese immigration, which they pictured as a flood of bachelors and prostitutes. . . . The upper-class opponents of the Tweed Ring in New York characterized the rapacious city politicians as simian featured Irishmen preying on a demure Miss Liberty. (Ryan 1992:278)

When Union victory brought black freedom, Democrats around the United States reacted with a race-based appeal for white women's protection, warning of the sexual threat allegedly posed by black freedmen. From the secession movement of the 1850s to the disfranchisement campaigns of the 1890s, southern Democrats drew a strong connection between expansions of federal authority and the sexual violation of white women. Both were encroachments on the patriarchal home; rape and seduction served as consistent metaphors for the perils of excessive government force. (Edwards 1997:6)

To the degree that a society is democratic, however, publicly projected claims and demands must do something more than dramatize their own particularism, and they must go beyond making use of it to legitimate other ethics of an equally noncivil kind. They must also make their public case vis-à-vis the overarching binary discourse of civil society. In a democratic society, public success cannot be finally assured unless a narrative is also found to interpolate particularist ethics with the universalizing discourse of civil society. For this reason, it is sociologically very probable, even if normatively very undesirable, for positions, arguments, rhetorics, and movements practicing antidemocratic politics and asserting antiuniversal principles to achieve great popularity on the public stage. Via this public popularity, the discourse and institutions of the independent civil sphere can be employed, and often have been, to gain organizational power in a democratic state. Being publicly popular—ably displaying and dramatizing one's wares on the public stage—does not ensure the democratic nature of one's claims; nor does it mean that the bearer of these claims either promotes, or will be successful in attaining, incorporation into the civil sphere.

Yet this is exactly what Rabinovitch's argument does assume, as do other accounts that emphasize the civil and democratic contributions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century m/otherhood movements. Rabinovitch equates women's simple presence on the public stage, even when it functions to dramatize an essentialist and restrictive equation of women and m/otherhood, with the incorporation of women into the civil sphere. Because the movements inspired by Republican Motherhood represented "examples of voluntary public agency," he argues, they should be seen as "democratic modes of expression." In fact,

of course, there are many different kinds of voluntary public associations. While their mode of expression—uncoerced communication—may be democratic, the content of their message, and the kind of society they envision, may very well not be. Nor does the fact that they are allowed, or compelled, to publicly dramatize their message mean that they have gained empirically, or even should gain normatively, political or cultural inclusion. According to Rabinovitch, because “women were able to translate the strong popular emphasis on the importance of motherhood onto the national stage,” they were able to gain significant “incorporation.” As I have suggested above, and have made central to my theory of social movements (Alexander 1996), civil translation is indeed vital. Yet, as I have also tried to make clear, engaging in such translation does not represent an expression of, or even a commitment to, much less the incorporation within, the civil sphere that marks democracy. This mediation is a necessary, but far from a sufficient, requirement for the successful expansion of civil solidarity.

While Rabinovitch enthuses that “a marginalized public [gained] integration into the general public sphere and did so without any loss of its own particularized identity,” it is precisely such particularized identities that must be symbolically purified, and thus fundamentally transformed, if a movement actually is to increase democracy and expand civil incorporation. It is by no means an indication of their democratic success that, as Rabinovitch suggests, “the ‘primordial’ qualities of woman were left largely intact” by the m/otherhood movements of the nineteenth century. This was an indication, rather, of their inability to step more confidently into the universal categories of civil society. Instead, limited by their hypothesized difference and their separate sphere, they could provide only facilitating inputs to it. That women could enter the public sphere, but only as “woman,” is not the fulfillment of the civil promise but a paradox that reflects a debilitating social and cultural contradiction. The all-important difference between civil and public was deftly articulated by Mrs. J. B. Gilfillan, president of the Minnesota Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage. Representing the powerful if ultimately unsuccessful “Anti” movement, Gilfillan dramatized “difference” as the basis for opposing women’s right to vote, and she did so by embracing for women a very public role.

Anti-Suffragists are opposed to women in political life, opposed to women in politics. This is often interpreted to mean opposition to women in public life, which is a profound mistake. We believe in women in all the usual phases of public life, except political life. Wherever woman’s influence, counsel or work is needed by the community, there you will find her, so far with little thought of political beliefs. . . . The pedestals they are said to stand upon move them into all the demands of the community. (quoted in Thurner 1993:40; italics added)

Only by theoretically distinguishing between public and democratic, in fact, can we recognize the hegemonic and regulatory role played by civil discourse vis-à-vis women’s movements of every kind. Women’s movements in the public sphere, no matter what their ideologies, felt compelled to legitimate themselves by translating their interests and rhetorics into the broader and more encompassing categories of the civil sphere. This was as true for those who rode into the public sphere wearing the hat of m/otherhood as for those who had aspirations for a more independent and equal role. In the preceding discussion, we have already seen how such a reference informed both sides of nineteenth-century women’s history. It also informed the early years of the twentieth century.

It is perhaps not so surprising that, in the struggle over women’s right to vote, supporters of female suffrage, themselves carriers of the more universalist position, would pollute their female opponents, the well-organized “Antis,” as incompetent interlocutors in civil

terms. Nonetheless, to document that they did so serves to highlight the regulating role that the discourse of civil society played vis-à-vis the conflicting currents of the women's movement. Anna Howard Shaw, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association from 1904 to 1915, contemptuously compared the Antis to "vultures looking for carrion," who "revel in the dark and seamy side of human nature" and "are always emphasizing the small and mean in women" (quoted in *ibid.*:34). Questioning their sincerity and autonomy, Shaw described the Antis as dependent, as mere puppets of powerful male forces, human shields for "liquor interests, food-dopers, child-labor exploiters, white slavers and political bosses." According to her, it was because the Antis were selfish, cynical, and irrational, and thus incapable of honest civil behavior—not because of their sincere loyalty to the values of motherhood—that they emphasized the inherent difference of women and opposed the voting right.

Its members were mainly well-to-do, carefully protected, and entertained the feeling of distrust of the people usual in their economic class. Their speeches indicated at times an anxious disturbance of the mind lest the privileges they enjoyed might be lost in the rights to be gained. . . . Their uniform arguments were that the majority of women did not want to have the vote, therefore none should have it; that "woman's place was in the home," and that women were incompetent to vote. (quoted in *ibid.*:34)

What is perhaps even more revealing is that leaders of the "Anti" side also felt compelled to justify their exclusionary and essentialist arguments vis-à-vis the civil discourse. When Mrs. Henry Preston (Sarah C.) White addressed the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1914, she defended the Antis, not as faithful mothers and loyal wives, but as "disinterested, public-spirited citizens who give their time and service to questions of public service without the hope of political reward or preference" (quoted in *ibid.*:38). In fact, alongside their well-publicized commitments to husband, hearth, and home, the Antis consistently framed their opposition to voting rights, as Manuela Thurner has so insightfully shown, as a way of keeping female partisanship at bay. Women would remain more impartial and universalistic, the argument went, if they could stand "apart from and beyond party politics" (quoted in *ibid.*:41). Another prominent antisuffragist, Mrs. Barclay Hazard, provided a similar frame in her address to the New York State Federation of Women's Clubs, in 1907.

We must accept partisanship, political trickery and office-seeking as necessary evils inseparable from modern conditions, and the question arises what can be done to palliate the situation. To our minds, the solution has been found by the entrance of women into public life. Standing in an absolutely independent position, freed from all party affiliations, untrammelled by any political obligations, the intelligent, self-sacrificing women of to-day are serving the State (though many of them hardly realize it) as a third party whose disinterestedness none can doubt. (quoted in *ibid.*:48)

UNIVERSALISM VERSUS DIFFERENCE: FEMINIST FORTUNES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In her pathbreaking synthetic work, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Nancy Cott recounts the state of affairs for American women at the beginning of the twentieth century. The woman movement of the preceding century had, indeed, brought women into the inlets, nooks, and crannies of public life. However, because these movements had been conducted under the framework of m/otherhood, "the effort to find release from the 'fam-

ily claim,' which Jane Addams had eloquently described in the 1880s, was being painfully repeated decade after decade" (Cott 1987:40).

Despite the economic changes that had brought women into the paid labor force, despite the improving rates of women's entry into higher education and the professions, and despite the collective and political strengths women had shown through voluntary organizations, the vast majority of the population understood women not as existential subjects, but as dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers. (ibid.)

By the second decade of the twentieth century, girls and women "swarmed" into what had once safely been male-only arenas—"the street, the factory, store, office, even the barber-shop." Yet the interpretive understanding of these places continued to be framed according to the ideology of separate spheres: They remained "terrain culturally understood as male" (ibid.:7). The boundary relations between the intimate and civil spheres, in other words, were still conceptualized in terms of "facilitating input," even as the behavioral walls separating these spheres were being challenged on the ground. Changing boundary relations required breaking from an image of complementarity. Male-female relations in the intimate sphere would have to be seen as destructive intrusions into the ideal of civil solidarity, a reconceptualization that would usher in the project of civil repair.

The time was ripe for a new ideology, one that would cast women's public participation in an entirely different frame. This new perspective was feminism, the ideology of gender's civil repair. Steering sharply away from the shoals of difference and otherhood, "feminists offered," according to Cott (ibid.:8), "no sure definition of who woman was." What they sought, rather, was "to end the classification woman" as such. The first explicitly "feminist" mass meetings took place in New York City in February 1914, at the People's Institute of the Cooper Union. The handbill publicizing the meetings made the following announcement: "Subject: "BREAKING INTO THE HUMAN RACE" (ibid.:12).

With feminism in full gear, and the suffrage amendment passed in 1920, this universalizing ethic led to a fight for an Equal Rights Amendment, the first ERA. Feminists viewed the ERA as a "civic innovation" (Cott 1995:356) that would give legal teeth to gender repair. Building on the Nineteenth Amendment and an emerging consciousness of women's equality with men, an amendment mandating equality in every aspect of women's lives would have the potential to restructure noncivil spheres in a dramatic way. The noncivil sphere of particular concern was the economic. "By the 1910s," Cott writes (ibid.), "suffragists linked political and economic rights, and connected the vote with economic leverage." Reformers "emphasized that women, as human individuals no less than men, had the right and need to use their talents to serve society and themselves and to gain fair compensation" (ibid.). As members of the civil sphere, women workers shared a common human status with male workers, and it was this common humanity that would provide leverage for repairing gender-triggered economic inequality.

While this effort at civic repair certainly had significantly ameliorating effects in the long run, it not only failed miserably in the political arena but had the cultural effect of igniting an "intra-feminist controversy" (Cott 1995:362) that polarized publicly active women and created a fateful backlash against feminism. As Cott sees it, the demand for an ERA pitted the traditional arguments for women's difference against the more radical argument for gender universalism "as never before." After the success of suffragism and the advent of the category feminism, the compromise formation of public m/otherhood could no longer camouflage the contradictions between civil and intimate spheres. More accurately: The sense that there actually was a contradiction, not a complementarity, became much more widely believed. Difference and equality "were seen as competing, even mutu-

ally exclusive, alternatives." The result was that "the ERA battle of the 1920s seared into memory the fact of warring outlooks among women" (ibid.).

The ERA's purpose was to allow women to have the same opportunities and situations as men. It was triggered by the conviction that women could not continue to emphasize their differences without the adverse consequence, usually unintended and often unwished for, of reinforcing civil inequality. The problem was that, while antidifference arguments were becoming widely accepted among America's cultural and political avant-garde, they remained "extraordinarily iconoclastic" among America's mainstream (Cott 1987:179). Difference entered the ERA debate in the pivotal argument over the wisdom of abolishing sex-based protective legislation. Opponents of ERA became outspoken advocates of such protection, "echo[ing] customary public opinion in proposing that motherhood and wage-earning should be mutually exclusive" (Cott 1995:362). The outcry showed the vast distance between arguments for public m/otherhood and arguments for genuine civil equality.

Opponents of the ERA believed that sex-based legislation was necessary because of women's biological and social roles as mothers. They claimed that "the inherent differences are permanent. Women will always need many laws different from those needed by men"; "women as such, whether or not they are mothers present or prospective, will always need protective legislation"; "the working mother is handicapped by her own nature." Their approach stressed maternal nature and inclination as well as conditioning, and implied that the sexual division of labor was eternal. (ibid.:361)

Despite their deep resonance with the traditional values of the intimate sphere, such particularistic arguments for maintaining separate spheres could be fully justified only if they were also vouchsafed in civil-discursive terms. ERA activists were polluted as civil incompetents, as "pernicious" women who "discard[ed] all ethics and fair play," as an "insane crowd" who espoused "a kind of hysterical feminism with a slogan for a program" (quoted in ibid.). The effect of this equation of feminism with anticivil was fateful. As the ERA went down to crushing defeat in the 1920s, the victorious difference discourse had the effect of making feminism a dirty word for decades to come. Without the universalizing ideology of feminism, it remained impossible to conceive of how women could be fully incorporated into the civil sphere. Even during World War II, when the most dire objective exigencies propelled women into the very public world of factory production, their participation was framed as a facilitating input that preserved difference, not as civil incorporation. This, of course, was one of Ruth Milkman's core findings in her revisionist study *Women at Work*.

Accompanying the characterization of women's work as "light" was an emphasis on cleanliness. "Women can satisfactorily fill all or most jobs performed by men, subject only to the limitations of strength and physical requirements," a meeting of the National Association of Manufacturers concluded in March 1942. "However . . . jobs of a particularly 'dirty' character, jobs that subject women to heat process or are of a 'wet' nature should not be filled by women . . . despite the fact that women could, if required, perform them." (Milkman 1995:448)

In fact, this framework was but another version of public m/otherhood, the compromise formation that had the effect of preserving the gender contradictions between civil and noncivil spheres, not of repairing them.

There was a contradiction in the management literature on women's war work. It simultaneously stressed the fact that "women are being trained in skills that were considered exclusively in man's domain" and their special suitability for "delicate war jobs." These two seemingly conflicting kinds of statements were reconciled through analogies between "women's work" at home and in the war plants. "Note the similarity between squeezing orange juice and the operation of a small drill press," the Sperry Gyroscope company urged in a recruitment pamphlet. "Any one can peel potatoes," it went on. Burring and filing are almost as easy." (ibid.:449)

Even in the 1950s, amid the boasting about modernity and the theorizing about modernization, the equation of feminist demands for universalism with anticivil pollution remained widely accepted. "Most women as well as men," Jane Sherron de Hart (1995:540) writes, "still accepted as one of the few unchanging facts of life the conviction that woman's primary duty was to be 'helpmate, housewife, and mother.'"

Feminism could not be revived, nor could the civic repair of gender relations become a realistic political possibility, until universalist arguments about gender relations were much more widely accepted. This happened with the creation of feminism's "second wave," which was stimulated by the effervescence of demands for equalizing the status of African Americans, another group whose inequality had been legitimated by the construction of an essentializing difference. Betty Friedan, whose enormously influential writings earned her the title of "mother" to this second wave, equated arguments for difference with the "feminine mystique." Her argument should be taken less as an empirical description of women's status in the 1950s—which had, of course, already been partially reconstructed by modern feminism—than as a culturally sensitive polemic against the degree to which difference arguments had managed, nonetheless, to sustain their mainstream viability.

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. . . . She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of. . . . The words written for women, and the words women used when they talked to each other, while their husbands sat on the other side of the room and talked shop or politics or septic tanks, were about problems with their children, or how to keep their husbands happy, or improve their children's school, or cook chicken or make slipcovers. Nobody argued whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different. Words like "emancipation" and "career" sounded strange and embarrassing; no one had used them for years. (Friedan 1995:515)

The women's liberation movement rejected the mystique of difference and demanded the civil repair of gender relations on the basis of universality. "The first step toward becoming feminists," de Hart (1995:545) writes, "demanded a clear statement of women's position in society, one that called attention to the gap between the egalitarian ideal and the actual position of women in American culture." In 1966, on the basis of such sentiments, the National Organization for Women was formed. NOW's statement of purpose, signed by 300 men and women, reached back to the universalizing attack on separate sphere ideology that marked the long ago meeting in Seneca Falls. On behalf of women, it demanded "full participation in the mainstream of American society NOW, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men" (quoted in ibid.:548).

What finally destroyed difference ideology was the persuasive feminist insistence, which became hegemonic in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, that gender was a social construct, not a natural condition. This contextualization allowed male domination to be labeled as a “sexist” condition that marked a destructive intrusion into civil equality, one that demanded energetic civil repair. “Given the pervasiveness of sexism,” de Hart noted, “many feminists saw no possibility for real equality short of transformation not only of individuals but also of social institutions and culture values” (quoted in *ibid.*:552). As with every effort to further institutionalize the idealizing codes of civil society, deepening incorporation and reforming “the system” required deep shifts in boundary relations and fundamental institutional repairs. Thus, “what seemed to be a matter of obtaining equal rights within the existing system, in reality demanded changes that transform the system” (*ibid.*:552). Instead of feminine difference, women would be constructed in terms of civic competence. According to one programmatic statement, published in 1979, feminist transformation involved nothing less than

A reevaluation of women as workers, of women as mothers, of mothers as workers, of work as suitable for one gender and not for the other. The demand implies equal opportunity and thus equal responsibilities. It implies a childhood in which girls are rewarded for competence, risk taking, achievement, competitiveness and independence—just like boys. (quoted in *ibid.*:552)

THE ETHICAL LIMITS OF “CARE”

The ERA may once again have been defeated, but this new belief in gender equality has, nonetheless, increasingly permeated the culture and institutions of contemporary life. Certainly it has been far more widely accepted than at any other time in human history. It is precisely within this context of a less gender-distorting institutionalization of the promises of civil society that we must understand the growing popularity over the last three decades of the movements, within feminism, for emphasizing the separating particularities of “women’s culture” and the possible superiority of a woman-generated ethics of care. These must, in other words, be viewed as developments that have emerged from within feminism itself. They have unfolded, not as an alternative to civil discourse, but within the very rubric of an underlying belief in the equal civil competence of women and men. It is exactly the same for those movements that have restored the vitality of the idiocultures of ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, region, and those relating to different physical abilities. Contra such identity advocates as Iris Marion Young (1990), justice has not become simply a matter of accepting the politics of difference. Different cultures have not become entirely distanced from one another, allowing their particularity to be recognized and separation and self-governance to be fostered. As I suggest in the article on “modes of incorporation” (in this issue of *Sociological Theory*) that is accompanying this response, and in a related essay that develops a detailed criticism of Young (Alexander 1999), difference can be recognized, in a positive manner, only if the particular is viewed as a concrete manifestation of the universal. This is possible only if civil solidarity is expanded to include subaltern communities, an expansion that deessentializes and cleanses once polluted identities, recognizing differences as legitimate by constructing them as variations on the theme of a common humanity (cf. Calhoun 1995; Benhabib 1986:341).

It should not be surprising that many of the radical advocates of “women’s culture” themselves fail to recognize, much less to appreciate, that its growing legitimacy actually depends on an expanding civil frame. As civil ideals become more deeply institutionalized, they become more transparent, less visibly taking on a primordial hue. Feminists

themselves have often worried about the failure of difference theorists to recognize the continuing reach of civil universalism. Twenty years ago, Ellen DuBois warned that any single-minded focus on “women’s culture” risked ignoring “the larger social and historical developments of which it was a part” and thus failed to “address the limitations of the values of women’s culture” itself (quoted in Kerber et al. 1986:308). It was precisely on such grounds that there erupted, in the mid-1980s, a furious debate inside the feminist community over Carol Gilligan’s arguments for a distinctively different female morality in her controversial book *In a Different Voice* (1982). This debate, one part of the broader argument about difference and universalism in the postmodern civil sphere, has not died down to this day.

Against Lawrence Kohlberg’s studies of moral development, Gilligan argues that boys have “a self defined through separation,” whereas girls have “a self delineated through connection.” Women thus feel “a responsibility to discern and alleviate the ‘real and recognizable troubles’ of this world,” while, by contrast, men’s imperative “appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others” (ibid.:100). Feminist critics of these claims attacked Gilligan for drawing her data exclusively from women’s decision-making processes—primarily from decisions about abortion—and for failing to study parallel processes that might be involved in male decision making. If Gilligan had done so, her critics argued, she might have found that, beyond the differences she discovers, there is an underlying human universality.

Do not men also in some circumstances find themselves similarly stretched on the rack between selfishness and responsibility? Were we to listen to men during their process of decision on, say, draft resistance, might we note also their similarly anguished contemplation of their responsibility to their families, to the needs of those who depend on them for care? (Kerber 1986:305–5)

Gilligan has been attacking a straw man (*sic*). . . . In childhood and adolescence, there is no trend whatever for males to score at higher levels than females on Kohlberg’s scales. . . . There is no indication whatever that the two sexes take different developmental paths with respect to moral thought about abstract, hypothetical issues. (Greeno and Maccoby 1986:312)

What disturbed Gilligan’s feminist critics was the possibility that her argument for difference—despite her own heated denials (e.g., Gilligan 1986) that it was essentializing, or even gendered—might obscure the difference between then and now, between the days of public m/otherhood and the contemporary period of relatively universalist morality. Linda Kerber (1986:306) wrote that “this historian, at least, is haunted by the sense that we have had this argument before, vested in different language [about] the ascription of reason to men and feeling to women.” The psychologist Zella Luria (1986:320) asked, “Do we truly gain by returning to a modern cult of true womanhood?”

Modern women will need *not* to be always caring and interrelated, if indeed they ever were constantly so. And they are also in situations where being abstract and rights oriented is a necessity. My purpose as a feminist is to train women to choose their actions sensibly and flexibly depending on the situation they confront. (ibid.; original italics)

Such concerns point to broader moral issues. The argument for the desirability of a new ethics of care is not simply sociological and empirical. It is also normative and philosoph-

ical. Rooted in the anti-Kantian, Aristotelian tradition (e.g., Tronto 1993), the care argument inserts itself into the highly charged dichotomy between what John Rawls famously called “justice as fairness,” an ethic involving rights and rules, and the denial, by such communitarian thinkers as Michael Walzer and Michael Sandel, that justice can ever be anything other than context bound, that it must always remain particularist in its essential part. Whether or not an “ethics of care” were tied to the social condition of gender subordination—and, in principle at least, it certainly need not be—this broader philosophical question remains.

Can an ethic of care sustain the kinds of commitments to impartiality, fairness, self-criticism, and inclusion that must sustain the civil sphere in a truly democratic society? One influential feminist philosopher, Susan James, has criticized the notion that “the activities typically undertaken by women can be described, without strain, as partial, personal or particular.” What she fears is that, if “the affections and concerns that go into them are usually directed to particular people and set within specific relationships such as those of mother to child, nurse to patient, secretary to boss, wife to husband,” then women may be portrayed as if they “think and behave in ways that are antithetical to the norm of impartiality” that is so essential in constructing a tolerant and democratic world (James 1992:55). She points out that, if an ethics of care bases itself on ties of love, there is no theoretical role for rules, “for one another’s well-being is enough to ensure that differences are resolved and that feelings of resentment, frustration or anger are contained” (ibid.:58). Such an ethic is well and good for the intimate sphere, but can it actually be extended to the civil one?

To extend these practices (or something like them) beyond the private sphere would be to extend them into a territory where people are not bound by emotional ties and may perceive themselves as having little more in common than the fact they happen to be living under the same political jurisdiction. (ibid.)

Another feminist philosopher, Mary Dietz, wonders whether the motives that bind mother and child, the ties that sustain friendship, and such quintessentially care-giving institutions as families actually provide the appropriate normative standards. Should they be used as models for the kinds of motives, relationships, and institutions that must inform a democratic society? She suggests, to the contrary, that such relationships and institutions might, at least in certain fundamental respects, be anticivil in form.

Who would not argue that the growth and preservation of children are vital social imperatives, or that the protection of vulnerable human life is important. But surely a movement or a political consciousness committed simply to caring . . . offers no standards . . . when it comes to judging between political alternatives. . . . The mother and the child are in radically different positions in terms of power and control. The child is subordinate to the mother. . . . In other words, the special and distinctive aspects of mothering emerge out of a decidedly unequal relationship, even if benign or loving. . . . This is an intimate, exclusive, and particular activity. [Because] democratic citizenship, on the other hand, is collective, inclusive, and generalized, [b]ecause it is a condition [in] which individuals aim at being equal, the mother-child relationship is a particularly inappropriate model. . . . Furthermore, the bond among citizens is not like the love between a mother and child, for citizens are, not intimately, but politically involved with each other. . . . Citizens do not, because they cannot, relate to one another as brother does to brother, or mother does to child. . . . Intimacy, love, and attentiveness are precious things in part because they are exclu-

sive and so cannot be experienced just anywhere or by just anyone with just any other. That is why love and intimacy . . . must not be made the basis of political action and discourse. (Dietz 1998:57–58)

Even when she first began to develop her arguments for the superiority of an ethics of care, Joan Tronto, one of the most influential thinkers in this philosophical movement, acknowledged that “we do not care for everyone equally,” indeed, that “we care more for those who are emotionally, physically, and even culturally closer to us.” Not only are the particularism and exclusiveness of such a standard plain to see, but Tronto also admits that the ethics of care has an implicitly conservative quality, for “in focusing on the preservation of existing relationships,” there is “little basis for critical reflection on whether these relationships are good, healthy, or worthy of preservation” (1987:659–60). In her most ambitious statement of this position, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Tronto writes that, while paternalism and parochialism are unwelcome, they are inevitable “dangers of care” (1993:170), going so far as to identify “particularity” as the ethic’s central “moral dilemma” (ibid.:141). By way of solution, Tronto recommends that the care ethic be “connected to a theory of justice” (ibid.:171), which would provide a “transformed context” (ibid.:158) for its application. Yet Tronto originally presented the ethics of care as an alternative to just such universalizing theories of justice.

The discourse of civil society is not, as Rabinovitch suggests, concerned only with individualism; nor does it represent an instrumental and strategic colonization by instrumental, strategic, and abstract rationality. It codes altruism and trust, emphasizes honor and truthfulness over selfishness and deception, demands friendliness and openness, and suggests that social relations should be inclusive, egalitarian, and cooperative. Yet however positive and socially oriented, these qualities do not suggest love, and for this reason they do not denote the lifeworld centered “ethics of care.” The question is not whether love, care, emotional feeling, loyalty, and a relativizing contextualism are good things in themselves. Certainly they are. Plural societies need ethics that are informed by these qualities. Nor is the question whether women’s culture, as distinct from men’s, is important to preserve and sustain, often in a separated place. Certainly it is. The question, rather, is whether such qualities can define the sphere of civil justice, indeed, whether identifying moral ethics by such qualities would make it possible to mark out a relatively autonomous civil sphere at all.

SEXUALITY, DIFFERENCE, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Keeping these considerations about plurality and the openness of the civil sphere in mind, I would like to return, in conclusion, to Meeks’s discussion of sexuality. According to that argument, to emphasize incorporation into civil society is to embrace normalization, which in the special vocabulary of Foucault connotes not only social conformity but an acceptance of the necessity to divide sexuality into normal and abnormal. As Meeks sees it, identity politics, understood in its conventional sense of an essentializing equation of sexual choice with selfhood, is the focal point of sexual normalization. He claims that the growing acceptance of homosexuality has merely reinforced essentialism by equating homosexuality with a new, and barely expanded, kind of civil conformity.

To think about recent developments in sexuality is to think about the relation, once again, between civil and noncivil spheres. During modernity, sexuality was tightly bound to the family, part of the package of reproduction, socialization, love and marriage, and sharply delimited age sequencing that made the intimate sphere a world of strict asceticism and the repression of pleasure. All sorts of “differences” were bundled into this straitjack-

eted modern package—between men and women, youth and age, work and pleasure, and hetero- and homosexuality. Each difference was entered into the binary discursive grid of civil society, and in this way various behaviors were sequestered and various possibilities cast aside. Among these, homosexuality received perhaps the most strongly polluting stain, for it threatened the asceticizing package in all sorts of ways. Homosexuality was conceived as the consummately anticivil activity, emphasizing pleasure over control, perversion over honesty, secrecy over openness, domination over cooperation, irrationality over common sense.

In the course of the twentieth century (Seidman 1991), the tightly bound package that defined the intimate sphere began to come apart. Marriage became separated from sexuality; sexuality from love; procreation from marriage, love, and sexuality; and socialization from all of the above. One result was the creation of the free-floating “erotic complex” that has so roiled the intimate relationships of postmodern societies (Bauman 1998). It has now become possible, indeed even normative, to value sexuality for its own sake. With this postmodern sexual turn, the choice of sexual objects opened up as well. It was pleasure that mattered, and pleasure had come to be viewed as a medium that should be available to all. Indeed, each of the once disreputable “differences” once bundled and sequestered in the privacy of the intimate sphere was now brought into the light of day. To one degree or another, they were purified of their most polluting anticivil traits. Divorce, single parenting, unmarried motherhood and out-of-wedlock births, singlehood, female sexuality, and public eroticism—each of these has, subject to the usual sociological variations, been rendered in the liberating discourse of civil society. Insofar as they were so rendered, they became “respectable.”

In terms of sexuality, “identity politics” can be understood as referring to the social movements that have succeeded in translating these polluted differences into civil terms, thereby giving their proponents power and space. According to this perspective, identity politics has not, in other words, fortified and essentialized differences, nor has it had the effect of keeping them bundled together. Rather, by allowing once polluted, and still precarious, identities the free air of the newly multicultural civil sphere, so-called identity politics has actually undermined the fusion of intimate roles.

It was the closet, not the civil sphere, that made homosexuality the all-defining, all-consuming identity of an individual’s life (Seidman 2001). In contemporary society, homosexuality is less significant and less all-consuming, though it is valorized all the same, for it is conceived as a choice and a construction, not as an essence and a necessity. Choosing to be homosexual, and choosing also to leave the closet, are increasingly constructed as ultimately civil acts. They suggest courage, independence, openness, and honesty. Men and women, whether teenagers or adults, who exhibit such qualities are “allowed” to assume other, equally civil roles, such as teacher, rabbi, parent, movie star, athletic star, and role model. Yes, homosexuality has been normalized, but in the civil and democratic sense, not in the Foucaultian one. It is increasingly accepted as a form of civil behavior, one governed, like other sorts of relationships, by what Seidman (1999) has called, following Habermas, a “communicative ethic.” With these changes in the social construction of homosexuality and other intimate behaviors, postmodern civil society has been expanded to include what Jeffrey Weeks (1999) has called “sexual citizenship.”

This “civil-izing” of once polluted forms of sexuality has not met with universal enthusiasm among sexual activists. Meeks articulates this decided unhappiness, and the distortions of his argument are partly the result. To understand the source of his objections, we must remember that the gay liberation movement began not only as a movement for civil incorporation, and not only as an identity movement, but also as a movement for the reeroticization of intimate life. As one part of the sexual revolution that broke apart the

restrictive package of asceticism, early gay activism helped make the erotic complex free floating. In one part, the activities that compose this complex have come to be translated as worthy of civil respect, of being civil in themselves—hence the communicative ethic I referred to above. In another part, however, it is intrinsic to the world of free-floating eroticism that its practices must also be transgressive (Bataille 1985; cf. Alexander 2001). It is for this reason that contemporary sexual politics are divided. As homosexuality becomes constructed as a choice, and tolerated if not respected as a civil act, queer theorists and Act Up activists challenge the very notion that the civil-sacred should be, or perhaps even can be, differentiated from the anticivil-profane.

The categorical divisions of the civil sphere have been stable for centuries, but the signifieds of these civil and anticivil signifiers certainly have not. At different historical time, differences of gender, class, race, religion, and sexuality are condemned as deviant vis-à-vis the “natural,” so-called primordial qualities of the groups that organize and represent the civil core. At other historical times, however, the earlier embodiments of these qualities are seen as having been merely “constructed.” What was the transgressive, forbidden fruit of one period can become the meat and potatoes of another. This has affected class and race, gender and homosexuality. There is every possibility that shifts in signification will continue to occur as postmodern societies continue to change. Such civil semi-osis must be continuous if democracy is to survive. Reflexivity is not about changing the categories that define the civil sphere, it is about learning how they can be applied in new ways.⁸ What seems natural today will surely be constructed tomorrow.

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⁸“The requirement that needs and their interpretations become the focus of discursive argumentation has the consequence that those traditions and practices, the semantic content of which defines the good life and happiness, are thematized. In practical discourses, a certain conception of justice is revealed to rest on a certain understanding of our needs, the cultural traditions which justify them, and the socialization patterns which shape them. . . . If the subject matter of discourses is not artificially restricted, if the process of self-reflection reaches these presuppositions, then issues of justice and the good life flow into one another. . . . It is ultimately the process of discourse . . . that establishes the truth and falsehood of our needs. . . . A genuinely fluid and unrepressed relation to inner nature consists in the capacity for constant critical reevaluation and reconsideration of our most cherished needs” (Benhabib 1986:36, 38).

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