

FEATURED ESSAY

Frontlash/Backlash: The Crisis of Solidarity and the Threat to Civil Institutions

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It is fear and loathing time for the left, sociologists prominently among them. Loathing for President Trump, champion of the alt-right forces that, marginalized for decades, are bringing bigotry, patriarchy, nativism, and nationalism back into a visible place in the American civil sphere. Fear that these threatening forces may succeed, that democracy will be destroyed, and that the egalitarian achievements of the last five decades will be lost. Feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, sexual citizenship, ecology, and internationalism—all these precarious achievements have come under vicious, persistent attack.

Fear and loathing can be productive when they are unleashed inside the culture and social structures of a civil sphere that remains vigorous and a vital center (Schlesinger 1949; Alexander 2016; Kivisto 2019) that, even if fragile, continues to hold. In such conditions, a resistance thrives, blocking the victory of Trumpism, dark and brooding as it may be. Trumpism challenges not just the moral and political commitments of the left, but the cultural and social structures of the civil sphere; and it is these that provide the sociological underpinning of political democracy (Alexander 2006, 2018).

No matter how horrifying in normative terms, we must understand the polarizing and excluding forces of Trumpism as sociologically “normal”—to the ongoing dynamics of civil spheres. Only when such an anti-leftist force challenges the cultural premises and the structural foundations of civil solidarity does it constitute a truly fundamental danger to democracy. Trumpism may yet do so, yet it seems at this point unlikely. To understand why, we must see the big picture: What are the culture and social structures of a civil sphere, and what are the kinds of social dynamics it involves?

The first thing to recognize is that Trumpism and the alt-right are nothing new, not here, not anywhere where civil spheres have been simultaneously enabled and constrained. The depredations of Trumpism are not unique, first-time-in-American-history things. What they constitute, instead, are backlash movements (Alexander 2013).

Sociologists have had a bad habit of thinking of social change as linear, a secular trend that is broadly progressive, rooted in the enlightening habits of modernity, education, economic expansion, and the shared social interests of humankind (Marshall 1965; Parsons 1967; Habermas [1984, 1987] 1981; Giddens 1990). From such a perspective, conservative movements appear as deviations, reflecting anomie and isolation (Putnam 2000), unreason (Lipset and Raab 1970), social backwardness and “empathy walls” (Hochschild 2016).

But modern society never has actually worked in this way. Progress isn’t a secular unfolding; it is triggered by “frontlash” movements, by *avant-gardes* whose vision is way ahead of their time, whose actions can be likened to provocative and destabilizing breaching experiments (Garfinkel 1967; Tognato 2019), and whose victories, even when they are small and quiet but especially when they are big and loud, are experienced as profoundly threatening to vested interests, both ideal and material, not just at the bottom but in the middle and even at the very top of society. Frontlash always produces backlash: movements of cultural, social, and political un-doing that aim to unwind cosmopolitan widening and civil incorporation. Backlash does not occur because conservative cadres and followers are anti-modern, irrational, or

even unusually bigoted. Backlash is triggered, rather, because ideal and material structures of the status quo have been abruptly displaced, and those who occupied those structures wish to return to the time before displacement, when they were sitting and standing in what was obviously, and not just in retrospect, a better place.

In the United States, frontlash seared the decade of the 1930s and marked the Second World War years as well. Backlash against labor incorporation, challenges to anti-Semitism and ethnic and racial bigotry, and Randian outrage over Keynesian economic controls exploded with extraordinary force in the late 1940s and dominated the decade after: Taft-Hartley, McCarthyism, stay-at-home mothers, separate-but-equal races, cold war conformity, and sexual repression. Frontlash exploded again in the 1960s (Isserman and Kazin 2000; Kazin 1995:165–268), terrifying vested interests, mobilizing counter-elites and long-standing civil society groups alike. In 1968, Richard Nixon rode a backlash crusade into the White House, vowing not only to lower the gates of the civil sphere but to reverse civil rights, feminism, ecology, and peace. Facing imminent failure, Nixon tried to effectuate backlash with extra-constitutional efforts to spy and blackmail political and electoral opponents—efforts that the Watergate crisis eventually exposed and punished. After a brief post-Watergate period, the backlash movement against civil incorporation resumed, seizing national political power for a dozen years, using the levers of central government and the soapbox of the presidency, trying in every which way to undermine what frontlash movements had achieved. If Reaganism, too, failed to block civil progression, conservative paranoia turned ever more cancerous during the eight years of Clinton centrism, and backlash came roaring back to national power during the administration of Bush the Second: Affirmative action was sharply challenged, feminist policies undermined, environmentalism muted, nationalistic patriotism revived; and militaristic responses to international relations flourished.

The drama of frontlash and backlash continues. Critical sociologists have tended to write off the Obama years as centrist,

neoliberal, even neoconservative. Not from the point of view of the white and wounded, the status quo masses and elites! Obama gestured to a post-imperial foreign policy, a post-white, multicultural American ethnicity; and he created a massive new social entitlement financed by taxation (Alexander and Jaworsky 2014). And he was black! The Obama years were experienced as frighteningly frontlash by the status quo ante. The experience of laceration triggered another backlash frenzy, this time in Trumpian form. Not new, but still dangerous, spreading fear and loathing on the left.

What threatens democracy is not backlash. Backlash is inevitable as long as frontlash movements destabilize established interests, introducing once-inconceivable reforms in the name of justice. The question is not whether conservative movements will push back—for they do, and often successfully—but whether, when they do, the civil sphere can survive.

Democracy depends on feelings of mutual regard, on experiencing a shared solidarity despite deep antipathies of interest and ideology. There must be some historically specific vision of a shared universalism that transcends the particularisms of class, race, gender, sex, region, religion, and nationality. Frontlash and backlash are highly polarizing; their phenomenological effect is to induce high anxiety that civil solidarity is breaking apart. What once seemed civil—affirmative action, for example—now seems particularistic. Groups and ideas once honored—Confederate heroes, for example—are now trashed. Can the sense of a vital center survive (Luengo and Ihlebæk 2019)? Only if civil solidarity can regulate ideal and material conflict in such a manner that enemies become frenemies, that sharp antagonism is moderated and agonism thrives (Mouffe 2000). Frontlash must be so civil-ized that it eschews revolution for social democracy (Marshall 1965). Backlash always unfolds under an anti-left, conservative ideology, but such conservatism can take civil or anti-civil form.

Burke ([1790] 2009) and Oakeshott (1975) are backlash philosophers of civil moderation: don't hurry so fast, they warn the left; don't be so arrogant as to see yourself as

the master of rationality; do be more concerned with maintaining trust and incremental ties. When backlash takes more extreme form, however, conservative ideology becomes not moderately anti-radical but revolutionary: from agonism to antagonism, from persuasion to violence, from civil sphere to civil war, and from democracy to authoritarianism. If backlash had boiled over in the 1960s, you would have had Malcolm X and the Black Panthers as the decade's dominant political figures and organizations, not Martin Luther King and the NAACP. If backlash boils over today, we will have Steve Bannon as the nation's dominant public intellectual (Alexander 2019), Fox as the most influential media site, and white racism as the platform of the Republican Party.

Trump flirted with Bannon but won power and continues to wield it not because of his rhetorical radicalism but, counterintuitively, because he has been willing to represent conservative backlash sentiments. Civil conservatives have sustained Trump because they have been able to use his presidency to push back against the frontline achievements of decades before. Trump has "done more to deregulate than any president in history," the president of Freedom Works explained (Peters 2018:16). The regressive tax bill, the sleazy whittling down of affirmative action, the broad attacks on gender equality, sexual freedom, and voting rights—each undermines what citizens on the left and in the center have come to understand as our contemporary American civil sphere. Yet even if such pushbacks undermine the progressive version of the American civil sphere, they do not aim at destroying the civil sphere as such; they do not abrogate the electoral game of agonistic conflict, nor do they undermine the legal-rational principles of civil regulation.

Trump's rhetoric is inflammatory in tone and demagogic in style; but are such rhetoric, tone, and style actually anti-democratic, as leading social theories of populism (Arditi 2005; Mouffe 2005; Panizza 2005; Müller 2017) would suggest? Trump rails against false news and those who hide the truth, describing his own side as rational and honest. He calls his enemies liars and presents

himself as the ultimate truth-teller. He attacks selfishness and brags about his own generosity. He claims to expose secret shenanigans and portrays his administration as open for all to see. He attacks elites and privilege, setting himself on the people's side and vowing to enlarge the rules of the game.

But there is nothing new here. What we see and hear is the tried and true binary discourse that has, from the beginning, dynamized and polarized, enabled and constrained actually existing civil spheres (Kivisto 2017, 2019; Mast 2019a, 2019b; Enroth 2018). Every powerful democratic leader, on both right and left (see, e.g., Kazin 2006), has evoked the same binaries to suggest that their opponents are civilly incapable and that only they and their friends are willing and able to act on behalf of the civil side and to be rational, autonomous, open, cooperative, people-oriented, solidaristic.

Our clear and present danger does not emerge from the simplifying, binary rhetoric of civil versus uncivil, however distasteful such right-wing performances may be. It comes, rather, from how such inveterate binarism relates to the civil-sphere institutions that sustain democratic life. It is certainly a frustrating paradox that civil solidarity cannot be instantiated in real time and place without resorting to what the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein ([1957] 1975) called "splitting" or what Strong Program cultural sociology calls the sacred-versus-profane discursive structures that make meaning in everyday social life (Alexander and Smith 2019). Even as binarism incorporates and upgrades, it also excludes and degrades. The binary structure of civil discourse means that the specification of civil solidarity at any particular historical time, and in any particular social and physical place, is inherently precarious. But the flexibility of splitting and the precariousness of specification are precisely what allow actually existing civilities to be continuously breached, and actually existing civil spheres to be continuously remade by avant-gardes, sometimes in startlingly progressive and emancipatory ways. They are also what allow the frontiers of newly expanded civil spheres to be unmade by backlash.

The making and unmaking of civil solidarity, its upgrading and downgrading, depend on specifying its idealistic discourse in relation to ongoing events and struggles in particular times and places. This is the work of civil institutions. The communicative and regulative institutions of the civil sphere mediate between broad and abstract binary discourses and here and now. Public opinion polls, civil associations, and, most importantly, journalism are media of communication. They specify democratic values and discourses on behalf of civil solidarity, issuing highly public judgments about the civil and uncivil character of interests, groups, movements, and events, judgments that are independent of popular leaders and parties, whether frontlash or backlash, who claim to speak for the people directly, in unmediated fashion, in and of and for themselves. The other filtering mechanisms of civil spheres are regulative: the institutions of voting and electoral competition, the impersonal structure of office, and, most of all, the precedent-bound and rights-based rule of law.

The elites who organize and represent these communicative and regulative institutions are civil sphere agents (Alexander 2018). Their ideal and material interests are at one with the defense of the civil sphere's autonomy. Civil sphere agents mediate the charismatic claims of demagogues, intertwining interpretation and coercion, producing universalizing, quasi-factual evidence that allows them to pollute, arrest, and sometimes even incarcerate the civil sphere's enemies. Investigative journalists and crusading attorneys are ambitious for glory. Their hopes to become civil heroes can be stymied by populist demagogues, on right and left, who believe that only they themselves can speak for the people—in immediate rather than mediate ways, as vessels rather than instruments of civil power, as the only true representative of the people's will.

What is dangerous about Trumpism is not that it speaks the polarizing and binary language of civil backlash, but that it often seems hell-bent on destroying the autonomy of civil-sphere institutions along the way. Bannon ideology whispers in the right-wing businessman's ear: You are the sole

arbiter of where and to whom the discourse of civil society is applied; You are the cock of the walk; You are the king's mystical and his administrative body; You are not a civil conservative wimp but an anti-civil revolutionary.

Trump-whispering can move backlash from civil conservative to populist. When the representational process comes to be centered in a single man rather than in relatively independent communicative institutions, you have Caesarism (Weber 1978). Symbolic power suddenly seems merely plebiscitarian, and it is the modern Prince (Gramsci 1959) who crystallizes the voice of the people, via his media, his associations, his own constructions of polls, his judges and courts, his party. Buoyed by such presumption of people power, the populist demagogue not only monopolizes the power of symbolic representation (Moffitt 2016) but also destroys the organizational autonomy of regulative institutions. Populists cannot tolerate independent courts interpreting and applying civil discourse. They cannot allow other powerful media elites to decide who and what is more rational, more honest, more true, more secretive, more hidden, or more dangerous and threatening. As the regulation of impersonal office is destroyed, power becomes personal and familial, and corruption reigns. Patrimonialism, deference, and the king's mystical body are the alternatives to civil power, to constitutionally regulated office and critical, independent mediation. With office and journalism destroyed, elections become empty showcases for staging dramaturgic demagoguery instead of occasions for engaging in contingent, agonistic, aesthetic-cum-moral deployments of binary discourse.

Under such conditions of discursive restriction and institutional fusion, the presuppositions of a universalizing solidarity become severely constrained. Civil spheres shrink, reflecting primordial qualities of the leader and party who have grabbed representational power, the ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, and national identity of the new presidential king. Backlash and frontlash then cease to be dynamic processes. Instead of moments in the pendulum swing of social and cultural history, they become

puncta: points that halt the movement and threaten to break the marvelously subtle, powerful but flexible, finely tuned but precarious democratic “machine.”

Yet, if civil spheres can be populized into anti-democracies, such destruction does not usually happen in the blink of an eye. As conservative forces push backward to demagoguery, the cultural and institutional bases of civil spheres react sharply. Protecting their ideal and material interests, civil elites defend the autonomy of critical discourse, the right of independent journalism to make interpretations regardless of personal power, the claim for such judgments to be practically applied only by judges who are independent and by courts that rest on legal rights.

Substantively, the contemporary resistance is a fight to maintain what frontlash has gained, allowing more humane and solidaristic representations of gender, sex, ethnicity, and race to become more widely distributed and more fully institutionalized. Formally, however, resistance proceeds by defending the structure and culture of the civil sphere, the independence of civil associations, the objective measurement of public opinion, the professionalism of journalism, the authority of judges, fair voting rules, and impersonal standards of justice. It is not (*contra* Laclau 2005) rhetorical representatives of “the people” who lead the resistance, much less the people themselves, but civil sphere elites and their supporters, groups whose ideal and material interests are bound to the civil and mediated construction of national solidarity.

It is not just unfortunate but potentially dangerous that sociologists have so rarely been interested in theorizing democracy, and that when they have done so they have failed to comprehend the cultural and institutional complexities that sustain it (e.g., Bourdieu 1996). Like the populists who are the civil sphere’s enemies, sociologists too often have reduced democracy to material interests (Lipset [1960] 1981), to the masses against the power elites (Michels [1911] 1962; Schumpeter 1942; Mills 1956; Moore 1966), to the triumph of privileged over more privileged classes (Wright 2015), to grassroots civic activism against institutions

and states (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003), to public action against private greed (Habermas [1963] 1989). Such misunderstandings have the unintended effect of conflating democracy and populism (e.g., Laclau 2005), thus ceding the intellectual if not the moral ground to democracy’s enemies. Sociology becomes part of the polarization between frontlash and backlash rather than standing back from both with critical understanding. The heart of democracy is not serving this or that particular interest but having a sense of a broader interest. It is to cherish a faith that solidarity can be defined in a civil rather than a primordial manner, as that manner is defined, and delimited, in any particular historical time and place.

Trying to make things more civil always involves defining some others as less, thus evoking the binary discourse over which Trump is a rhetorical master. The challenge is this: The imaginative and inspiring rhetoric that exposes the putative lack of civility of those on the right and left cannot be allowed to become concentrated in the representational capacities of a leader and party. The representation of civil capacity must be disbursed among the communicative and regulative institutions that filter, pluralize, and agonistically specify the principles that allow incorporation and exclusion. As John Dewey argued a century ago, “more than a form of government,” democracy is “primarily a mode of associational living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey [1916] 1966:87).

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