



Civil Sphere and Transitions to Peace: Cultural Trauma and Civil Repair

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Published online: 18 August 2020

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Abstract

What are the conditions for establishing solidarity after a period of intensive and divisive social conflict—what Kant called a cosmopolitan constitution? In this essay, I argue that such a widened solidarity depends on establishing a relatively independent civil sphere, the effective functioning of whose institutions depend, in turn, on a shared sacred discourse of civility. To speak such a shared language, however, requires much more than engaging in speech acts. It depends upon a deeply emotional and highly symbolic process, one in which public performances of reconciliation create new structures of feeling and identification. This theoretical argument is elaborated empirically with reference to post-Holocaust Germany, post-Franco Spain, and post-Apartheid South Africa.

Keywords Civil sphere · Post-conflict societies · Cultural trauma · Post-Apartheid South Africa · Post-Franco Spain

What are the conditions for civil comity and peaceful conflict inside of nation-states? To begin with, we might conceptualize peace simply as the absence of violence. Making the transition to peace means rejecting physical force as a legitimate means of conducting—expressing, mediating, and resolving—social and cultural conflicts and, more broadly, of struggling for power. This minimalist definition of peace requires the civil regulation of conflict, such that persuasion replaces coercion. The integrity of one's opponents must be recognized, however opposed their material and ideal interests appear to our own. They must be attributed sincerity in their motives and honesty in their relations. If their right to have rights (Arendt 1951) is so honored, then threatening one's opponents with physical force is out of bounds. Violence

An earlier version of this paper was presented in December 2015, at a conference organized by Carlo Tognato at the National University of Bogota to discuss the termination of Colombia's decades-long civil war. Later, in revised form, it was presented to the forum "The May 18 Democratization Movement and Postmemory," co-hosted by Seoul Metropolitan City and Gwangju Metropolitan City, to mark the 40th anniversary commemoration of the Gwangju uprising in South Korea.

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negates the other, defining an opponent as a thing that must be obliterated in order to be changed. For a society to be peaceful, persuasion must become the only legitimate mode for changing other minds: armament replaced by argument.

Such a minimalist definition of peace is the empirical bottom line for a civil society to exist. Certainly, Max Weber (1946) was right to insist that monopolization of the means of violence by nation-states was a major civilizational advance. For Weber, modernity is a rational-legal order that provides more predictability and more fairness than the arbitrary power of patrimonial authority. If anybody other than representatives of the state has access to the means of violence, legal-rational legitimacy is destroyed and laws cannot be carried out.

To say that peace is the absence of violence, however, is not to say peace is only that. There is much more to peace than simply the absence of extra-legal violence. Even if governments can succeed in monopolizing violence, what would prevent violent struggle from soon breaking out once again? With this question, we reach the limits of Weberian sociology. Essaying the limits on violence exceeds the theory of modernity as a rationalized society. We need a more cultural sociology, one that can theorize feelings, symbols, morality, and metaphysical belief (Alexander et al. 2012). Violence is physical, but it has its roots in cultural processes of shaming, polluting, and objectifying. Peace requires moving in the other direction, toward a powerful vision of a social solidarity that can anchor and limit the state, and not the state alone: an independent civil sphere also sets limits on the economy, church, university, family, ethnic and racial communities, and voluntary associations.

The civil sphere (Alexander 2006) is an idealized utopian community that is partially, but never fully, institutionalized in such communicative organizations as journalism and civil associations and such regulative organizations as the law and voting. The civil sphere posits a society of self-regulating individuals, who see not only themselves but also others as honest, independent, open, cooperative, and rational, as fellow members of a horizontally organized community who merit their trust. Most of the persons inhabiting large territorial communities will never know one another face-to-face. We can encounter one another only via symbolic representations. Only insofar as we symbolize distant others in terms of shared civil qualities can we experience solidarity and expansive community. Others then become, in fact and not only in name, our fellow citizens. Kant (1999: 329) linked the conditions of peace to the expansion of hospitality, insisting that the “use of the right to the earth’s surface belongs to the human race in common,” declaring that this idea of common belonging would “bring the human race ever closer to a cosmopolitan constitution.” Common belonging under a cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson 2011) is exactly what civil sphere theory has in mind.

But the cultural codes of the civil sphere are not only about belonging and hospitality. They are also, paradoxically, about exclusion, rudeness, and downright aggression. The discourse of civil society is binary. Not only in high philosophy but also in the everyday language of the street, we find idealized civil qualities emphatically contrasted with their opposites—rational with irrational, honesty with deceit, independence with dependence, open with secretive, cooperative with aggressive, trust by distrust. For every individual and group represented as possessing the sacred qualities that merit membership in the civil sphere, core groups represent others in terms of the polluted qualities (Douglas 1966) that demand exclusion for the fragile stability of democratic civil societies to be maintained.

Path dependence and institutional structures create ideal and material interests that make it easier to code some individuals and groups in anti-civil terms. Colonialism treated indigenous peoples and their societies as means to imperial ends, representing native religions, social practices, and skin colors as the anti-civil quintessence—dependent, animalistic, deceitful,

irrational, and aggressive. But interests are never dispositive: Relatively autonomous ideas—cultural systems (Geertz 1973)—powerfully affect the tracks along which ideal and material interests run. In the sixteenth century, some influential Spanish church leaders insisted that the conquered Indians were also human beings, urging Spanish occupiers to offer some hospitality to these other members of the human race, so that someday there could be, under God, a cosmopolitan constitution (Stamatov 2013). In the centuries that followed, more secular republican ideas from the European Renaissance (Skinner 1978) infiltrated the institutional structures of the new world, creating community patterns that were anti-patrimonial, establishing relatively democratic conditions for domestic peace (Forment 2003).

When economic combined with racial power to create the western slave system, religious and secular commitments to broader human obligation inspired abolitionist movements (Stamatov 2013), and eventually civil wars between enslavers and liberators, which after a century of struggle wiped economic slavery off the face of the earth. Western civil spheres expanded, and new possibilities for domestic peace emerged. A century later, the civil rights movement challenged the legacy of racism in the Southern United States. Martin Luther King evoked the dream of a more multiracial American creed and a less fragmented, more solidary American civil sphere. In post-colonial South Africa, where black masses were dominated and exploited for Afrikaners' ideological and economic interests, it was not only the African National Congress but also white middle class reformers connected with global secular and religious partners who launched the anti-apartheid movement that restructured the South African civil sphere in a less racist, more multicultural, more solidary way (Thorn 2006).

In the early and mid-twentieth century, social polarization produced barbaric political and ideological movements that spread worldwide. Fascist and Bolshevik dictatorships came to power, and the future of liberal democracy looked dim. But the utopian dream of an independent and inclusive civil sphere could never be entirely suppressed. A world war was waged for freedom and dignity, the Holocaust was exposed, massive trials against war crimes were publicly staged, and a new global civil organization, the United Nations, issued the International Declaration of Human Rights. Democratic governments took root in Germany and Japan, and expansive foundations for civil peace were laid. In the 1970s, after the death of the Fascist Generalissimo Franco, Spain undertook an extraordinary process of peaceful, if still deeply fraught, democratic transition (Edles 1998). Soon after, religious and secular idealism inspired the Solidarity movement that brought Poland's Communist dictatorship to its knees. By the end of that decade, Bolshevik dictatorships advocating state violence were broadly displaced and civil society movements challenged military dictatorships in Latin America's Southern Cone. Non-violent transitions to more democratic regulation of conflict unfolded in East Asia as well, in post-Chiang Kai Shek Taiwan, in post-UK Hong Kong, and, perhaps most spectacularly, in Korea, in the series of uprisings that stretched from the 1980 Gwangju Uprising to the June Democratic Uprising of 1987 (Alexander et al. 2019). In region after region across the globe, democratic states, whose power was legitimated by discourses of civil society, established the cultural basis for domestic peace.

Domestic peace depends on taking violence out of politics, creating a state regulated by an independent judiciary and directed by civil sphere representatives elected to office after publicly agonistic struggles for state power. For such a conflictual public to be stabilized, to be agonistic rather than antagonistic (Mouffe 2000), the audience of citizens must experience themselves as members of a solidary community sharing mutual obligations.

When narrow and particularistic institutional structures undermine and restrict possibilities for expansive mutual obligation, massive reform movements and even civil and revolutionary

wars may result. In such conditions of social polarization, establishing respect for the autonomy, honesty, and trustworthiness of fellow citizens is severely challenging (Alexander et al. 2021). How can counter-veiling forces expand the signifying references of the sacred side of the binary discourse of civil society? How can groups that have been stigmatized and excluded—classes, indigenous peoples, ethnic, religious, and regional groups—be symbolized by core groups and third parties in more respectful, more sympathetic ways?

The agency of the dominated is crucial, and it can be triggered by stubbornly utopian visions of an alternative, more civil society. When social solidarity has broken down and social peace becomes merely a hegemonic slogan, social movements representing subaltern groups resort to violence. But they also can project civil performances to third party audiences, whatever their material interests. They can engage not only in a battle of arms but also in what Gramsci called a battle of position.

Transitions to cosmopolitan peace depend on symbolic performances that lay the cultural foundations for expanded civil solidarity. If such social performances are successful, they connect the experience of structural deficits with dreams for civil repair (Kane 2019). If both sides of the social conflict are symbolically and emotionally engaged, performances weave cultural structures of intertextuality that expand the reach of civil signification. The circulation of distorting, anti-civil representation diminishes. Objectifying representations that divide citizens, framing not only excluded but core groups as fit subjects for violence and obliteration, are pushed further to the margins.

How can the civil sphere be repaired, its fissures sewn up in such a way that solidarity expands and sources of social suffering diminished? Painful social injuries must be lifted out of the symbolic frames that earlier had justified their imposition. New, more civil narratives must be created, stories that allow the weak and the powerful, the victims and their persecutors, to switch moral places. The groups and individuals who had triggered and justified traumatic injuries now become profaned and punished; those who earlier were represented in terms of the dark, anti-civil underside of social discourse can now be purified, re-signified in a manner connecting them with the civil sacred. When victims become humanized, they are transmogrified, from being degraded symbols of anti-civil objectification to being personified as shining figures of edifying civil identification (Tognato 2011). Once venerated heroes now become denigrated perpetrators, their identities soiled and their divisive ideologies and movements removed from the newly emerging social frame.

In the remainder of this essay, I will bring this theoretical argument down to earth, examining transitions to peace after wars between nations and within them. I will suggest that such transitions involve a cultural trauma process (Alexander et al. 2011) that allows the victims of violence to be re-signified and communities to be reconstructed in more civil ways.

Democracy had defeated fascist dictatorship during the Second World War, but the internal ideologies of the defeated nations did not automatically change. Only if they were transformed, however, would Germans and Japanese be allowed to rejoin the common territory of the human race. Those who had directed fascist dictatorships would have to be polluted as anti-civil, not only outside of Germany but within. Those who had organized fascist projections of violent power would have to be condemned as anti-patriotic, for undermining peace and endangering the nation-state. Not only fascist leaders but their followers would have to accept their re-signification as perpetrators, assuming moral responsibility and exhibiting sympathy for those they had oppressed (Eyerman 2019).

One step in such a trauma process is the personalization of victims (Alexander 2012a, 2012b). In reflecting upon Germany's transition from war to peace, intellectual observers have

usually focused on such immediate postwar events as the postwar Nuremberg trials. These were powerful political performances of civil justice, and decades of trials, exposures, recantations, and reconciliations followed in their wake. But deeper cultural transformations were required for the German civil sphere to be expanded and repaired.

Throughout European history, Jews had been depicted as insidious, distrustful strangers to whom the gates of the civil sphere must be barred. The gates had only begun to swing open when Nazi Germany initiated its anti-Semitic mass murder campaign. Christian people who fought Germany did not do so on behalf of the Jews, a stigmatized and subordinated group for whom most Europeans and Americans felt scarce emotional identification and experienced little cultural connection. In the decade after the war, however, as the Jewish mass murder moved from its representation as a war-related “atrocity” to a *weltgesichte* “Holocaust,” this interpretive situation markedly changed. Rather than portraying murdered Jews as a pathetic and objective mass, and mess, Western fictional and factual media began to portray them as individual human beings. The story of the life and death of Anne Frank, the Dutch every girl who had hidden from the Nazis with her family in an Amsterdam attic, became a heart-wrenching parable, a legend of tragic suffering, exemplary pluck, and extraordinary courage. Anne’s *Diary* became required reading for millions of school children. Novels, movies, and television melodramas, thousands of them, followed in Anne Frank’s wake. Holocaust fiction and testimonies became bestsellers inside Germany and outside of it as well.

For a trauma process to be successful, another step is necessary: the role of perpetrator must be generalized. In the early days after World War II, Germans conceived responsibility genocidal war narrowly, blaming Hitler and his loyal band of Nazi fanatics. Over the ensuing decades, however, as the war crime became transformed into Holocaust, the sense of moral responsibility for the mass murder broadened, to the millions of ordinary Germans who supported Hitler, to the German soldiers who fought for Nazi conquest, and to generations of Germans who were born after Hitler’s death (Giesen 2004). Eventually, the perpetrator role extended well beyond Germany, to occupied nations who had secretly cooperated with Nazi extermination policies and even to the Allied nations, who had refrained from bombing death camps and who came to be accused, in their colonial wars in the 1950s and 1960s, of committing genocide themselves.

What postwar Germany accomplished—moving from violent state aggression to a more inclusive and tolerant civil sphere controlling the state—provided a pivotal reference point to measure the success and failure of other efforts. In her examination of the process that unfolded in postwar Japan, Akiko Hashimoto (2015) demonstrates the staying power of the militarist narrative that triggered Japan’s 20-year-long Pacific war. Nationalistic leaders continued to see themselves as the putative victims of Western imperialism, glorifying their earlier military conquests as redemptive and refusing to extend sympathy to their Korean, Chinese, and American victims. While this militarist narrative has been challenged by a powerful peace movement, even such an anti-militarist story represents Japan, not as perpetrator, but as passive victim, citing US firebombing of major Japanese cities, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan’s military alliance with the USA today. Neither of the principal narratives that have emerged from Japan’s postwar trauma process assumes the kind of moral responsibility for violence that is necessary to lay down cultural foundations for peace (Wang 2019).

Post-Franco Spain provides a striking contrast. Civil wars may end bitterly, with violence abated but polarization continuing beneath a thin veneer of peace. How such a dangerous, and

temporary, denouement can be avoided is explained by Edles in *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain* (Edles 1998). Certainly, institutional changes were significant in Spain's peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy (pp. 32–33). It had been a poor, agricultural country before the Civil War, and Franco's postwar policies of economic autarchy and protectionism drastically undermined per capita income. Beginning in the 1950s, however, Spain entered UNESCO and the International Labor Organization, instituted technocratic market capitalism, and opened up the country to foreign investment and tourism, policies that allowed the nation to participate in the massive economic boom of the 1960s. Similar openings were initiated inside Spain's religious and political institutions. Still, when Franco died in 1975, nothing was guaranteed. To the contrary, pessimistic predictions about continuing authoritarianism were the order of the day.

These expectations were upended by a series of public performances, some carefully coordinated, others spontaneous, that broadcast unprecedented appeals for national solidarity and articulated new respect for once vilified others. Franco's death, Edles suggests, "evoked a transcendent understanding of temporal separation" that opened up symbolic space for moving from the past to the future, for a more civil narrative to be put into place. Both regime and opposition elites shared in fervent incantations about a sacred "new beginning," evoking not only the right to vote but a utopian spirit the Spanish called *convivencia*, a term that denotes living together with others but more broadly connotes tolerance and peace (Edles 1998: 43). When the communist poet and electoral candidate Rafael Alberti returned from exile, he avowed, "I left with my fist closed because it was a time of war, and I return with my hand open for fraternity" (ibid.). A right-wing Catalan coalition named itself *convivencia Catala*. Such rhetorical performances of a newly embracing solidarity implied, as well, the purifying re-signification of polluted others. The influential philosopher Julian Marias declared, "Spain is being returned to herself, she moves with considerable liberty, [we] are erasing the differences between two Spanish classes, and many of us are beginning to feel that we are not going to be alien to our collective life" (Edles 1998: 45). Contemporary social actors, whose forebears had been implacable enemies fighting a violent civil war, "came to define democracy as their most important goal" and "violence as an inappropriate means to achieve it" (Edles 1998: 15). In the face of national strikes, organized performances of worker-capital solidarity offered grand financial bargains. When fascist violence did erupt, it triggered mass marches against extremism. When coup plotters occupied parliament in the name of the King, Juan Carlos publicly rebuffed them; calling for "serenity and prudence" (Edles 1998: 145), the King became a hero in the performance of democracy. Rather than maximizing ideal and material interests in a zero sum manner, groups created self-binding rules allowing compromise.

Twenty years later, when South Africa made a similar transition from civil war to democratic peace, public performances were once again central, providing a liminal space in which a more inclusive solidarity could be performed and imagined before it had become operational in any institutional way. A major organizational innovation in this transition was the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Reconstructing this symbolizing project in her study *Staging Solidarity*, Tanya Goodman (2015: 27) shows how the years-long, nationally publicized inquiry created a powerful *mis-en-scene* that dramatized testimonies offering "examples of the evils of the past" while juxtaposing them "with the ideal of an imagined community, coded as the new South Africa." As the new South Africa was symbolized, the meaning of national belonging was reconstructed. The TRC performed "the new contours of a

basic moral universe” (Goodman 2015: 27–8), the post-Apartheid “rainbow nation” envisioned by Bishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the TRC.

“To move between the past and future,” Goodman observes, “required a change in the way in which people viewed each other and a reconstitution of the boundaries of who belonged” (Goodman 2015: 16). In a manner that echoed the civil reconstruction of Holocaust, individual testimonies of tragedy personalized Apartheid’s once nameless black victims. Instead of a “depersonalized other,” victims become “individuals with faces, families, [and] feelings ... with whom others could identify across class and color lines” (Goodman 2015: 16). In April 1996, the TRC heard testimony from Nomonde Alata, the widow of a black activist who had been brutally murdered by state security officers in 1984. A commissioner who participated in the hearing described the scene:

In the middle of her evidence, she broke down, and the primeval and spontaneous wail from the depths of her soul was carried live on radio and television. [It] caught up in a single howl all the darkness and horror of the apartheid years. It was as if she enshrined in the throwing back of her body and letting out the cry the collective horror of the thousands of people who had been trapped in racism and oppression for so long. (Goodman 2015: 46)

The sympathetic chords struck by such performances were palpable. As third party observers experienced such expressions of human suffering, solidary feelings were extended.

Witnesses, onlookers, commission gofers, [and] journalists all broke down at one time or another as the widows and mothers of apartheid activists laid bare their personal pain and loss to the world ... Sometimes the tears seemed to be contagious. A witness would sob and then a member of the audience would begin to cry. Soon the tears would spread like a bush fire... One foreign observer was overhead to remark: “This country is so traumatized. If one person is hurt then so is everybody.” (Goodman 2015: 48).

In this solidarity-expanding performance, the positions of victims and their torturers were reversed. Representing black victims as heroes, TRC interlocutors framed “stories that told of suffering [as] an honorable sacrifice in anticipation of freedom from oppression” (Goodman 2015: 16). A mother whose son had been murdered by security forces implored the TRC to find his bones and make sure that “the world knew he was a hero” (Goodman 2015: 50). Those who had once been proud and disdainful torturers accepted the shaming status perpetrator, humbly asking forgiveness. Facing his former victim, an Apartheid agent notorious for cruel techniques of torture and assassination offered apology, explaining “[we] lived in a different era, we were enemies then.” But no longer: “My motivation [was] patriotic in the *then* South Africa of the day, as much as I *now* realize that you gentlemen must have been just as patriotic to your country of birth” (Goodman 2015: 60, original italics). Facing the family of another victim, the same Army captain tried to make amends “for the death of their son and brother,” extending mutual identification: “Once again, I apologize to the family for his death and thank God that I, who also have children ... was not the person who was killed on that day” (61).

Trauma processes can deepen the transition to peace, extending cultural meaning and emotional identification among groups whose earlier enmity triggered violence, among nations and within them. Between dominator and subjugated, perpetrator and victim, there exists none of the brotherly and sisterly feelings that bind people together in peaceful ways. To create such a structure of feeling in modern societies, face-to-face interactions are insufficient. Powerful

symbols must be projected and dramas of civil integration performed. The discourse of civil society provides cultural foundations for peace. Speaking this language allows democratic recognition, transforming aggression into agonism and providing opportunities for signification that can transform enemies into friends.

Learning to speak the language of civil solidarity after intense periods of social strife and polarization requires much more than engaging in speech acts. It depends on deeply emotional and highly symbolic social performances of reconciliation. Only via such cultural performances can experiences of collective trauma become occasions for reconstructing collective identity, one in which antipathy gives way to mutual identification. If a new structure of feeling is constructed, then there can be civil comity a more cosmopolitan constitution.

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