

# Perspectives

*Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section*

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### DO YOU WANT TO BE FEATURED IN PERSPECTIVES?

We are looking for short essays, interviews, book reviews, and spotlights on emerging scholars. We are especially interested in featuring work on global social theory, public sociology, and decolonial theory. If you'd like to be featured, please email the *Perspectives* editor team at [theory.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:theory.newsletter@gmail.com)

# LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



## "The US, Latin America, and the Global South"

Claudio E. Benzecry  
*Northwestern University*

Whether on dissertation committees, scholarly panels, or when conducting peer review, we have all been confronted by what to make of cases that do not happen in the United States. Are they generalizable? Exceptional? And what do we call these cases if they're not in Western Europe: "third world", "peripheral," "developing"? A vocable has come to be preferred: "Global South."

This letter addresses this nominal issue, and cautions us against the facile and automatic use of a concept that has become devoid of the critical and relational character it was born with. As used in common sociological parlance, it is mobilized to make immediate sense of phenomena happening in non-US and non-Western European contexts, and transformed – to paraphrase Brazilian sociologist Gianpaolo Baiocchi – into a kind of orientalism in the name of diversity. The metaphor, when well used, refers not to an actual place but rather to a relational quality with respect to the metropole,

which actually illuminates the same postcolonial and peripheral dynamics within, for instance, the US itself (see note 1).

The US incarnates a powerful paradox in North American social sciences. On the one hand, it is the unacknowledged, de facto unit of analysis for generalization; on the other hand, much has been made of American exceptionalism, and how much the US does not resemble other Western industrial powers when it comes to electoral politics, labor organization, welfare rights, imperial rule, and racial classifications. This fact, and how it has been conceptualized, has been a puzzle for foreigners working in American sociology, or for scholars belonging to other national fields. Recent work by comparative-historical scholars, critical race theorists, sociologists of gender, political sociologists, and others have emphasized how much the US is a unique historical formation, of which, nevertheless,

much can be learned in comparison. The question is what kind of comparison, and with which theoretical tools we do it.

We dedicate this year's ASA Theory section panels to dissect this, to examine how knowledge of the US has been constituted and to how much recent calls to globalize theory end up, to a certain extent, reproducing some of the ethnocentric binaries behind the powerful formulation of the US as the de facto unit of analysis for producing generalizable knowledge. The latter is particularly poignant when thinking of how theories of/from Latin America are disseminated in our current sociological conversations. I'll use most of this letter to discuss this point, anticipating what will be a far more elaborate conversation, thanks to a series of short newsletter articles that will be published in the Spring 2021 issue of *Perspectives* about how certain key discussions on terms like state, development, and environmental justice, among others, are operationalized in Latin America. The contributors are all Latin American sociologists working in the US and in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Bolivia.

I do not mean to isolate the region as something separate from the rest of the world, but rather to recognize how the facile use of literatures from other regions – thanks to how much English has become an academic lingua franca – have occluded the visibility of similar dynamics in knowledge

production coming in Spanish from Latin America, as well as our understanding of the historical dynamics and specificity of a region. While this might also be true for other regions, having done research on cosmopolitan practices in Argentina and Brazil, I'll draw my examples from the place and scholarly traditions I know best.

One recent strategy for illuminating how the US is and is not like other historical experiences has been built after exploring what the global scale is. Be it Commodity Chains, Empires, Transnational Networks, the global from below, the Global City, or world-systems theory, among many others, these theories have competed in sociology for the right to call a parcel of the world only by the name they have coined. More recently sociology has embraced a turn to use the term “Global South” to refer to countries that had been historically called “peripheral,” “underdeveloped,” or “Third world.” There are many valid reasons to do so, including the racialized character of the non-metropolitan countries, the legacies of the colonial pasts, the extra-activist character of the economic relationship between center and periphery, the possibilities for an alternative epistemology to the disciplinary legacies that have ignored the gender and racial biases of the canon, and the possibility of comparing what look like a priori divergent historical trajectories, but with a relatively common matrix. And yet, as recently signaled by Latin Americanist Pablo Palomino (2019),

theories of the Global North and the Global South hide a remarkable heterogeneity of historical experiences. Moreover, the overreliance in American sociology of scholarship in English has, paradoxically, resulted in the erasure of Latin America, captured by the moniker “Global South,” without observing the variation in ideological, racial, sociological, and institutional features with respect to the regions that engendered most of the “Global South” conversation. The postcolonial liberation movement in India and in Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent Africa, has been a powerful frame with which to rethink our discipline and how we think of what exists “out there,” but when it comes to the divergent relationship to colonialism, nationhood and knowledge production, being apart of the “Global South” has turned Latin America into something invisible, without historical specificity, which ends up somehow paradoxically reproducing the ethnocentric gaze in which “everything that is far from us looks the same.”

It has also – again not in the work of scholars who have engaged with this tradition in detail, but in its automatic deployment – made itself blind to the “Global South” dynamics of the US itself. We end up reproducing concepts for comparison, without establishing what kind of comparison we are vying for, or actually comparing them. As problematic as the Global South label is when used without much reflection, let me argue that it’s

particularly problematic in the case of Latin America.

Though this global and comparative impetus – which existed already in writings from the Dependency school theorists, as I thematize later in the letter – is a necessary step to see what these non-center countries share beyond the specific contexts, it eludes the questions about the historical specificity, the temporality of the entrance to modernity, the multiple ways in which colonial and non-colonial relationships have evolved in the *longue durée*, as well as how much its study help us to see a decentered relationship to the metropolis. Latin America contains dramatically diverse experiences. It has combined “developed” and “underdeveloped” regions, it contains nation states that have been independent for, in some cases, almost two centuries; more recently, Argentina, Uruguay and Mexico State expanded abortion rights, as several US states began to roll them back.

The binary “global south-global north” when lightly used – and I’m discussing here how the latter has become a quick stand in for any country other than the US, UK, Germany and France in US sociology – risks (see note 2), then, the reification rather than the illumination of their mutual intertwining and the multiple experiences of modernity. Of course, there are many scholars who have worked on this with much more detail, seriousness, and depth, but my fear as a Latin American scholar in

the US is that the quick use of the moniker “Global South” has, in its easy use, done the opposite of what those scholars wanted: to illuminate the historical specificities of countries in the peripheries as well as at the center.

This has powerful consequences for the internationalization of social sciences. There is an impetus to extend themes and theories of the US into new contexts, without reading much local scholarship, or when done, using them as “input” in what is not an intellectual dialogue but rather viewed as stepping stones to build away from (on this see the work of Fernanda Beigel). There is also the related tendency to discard all theories by peripheral scholars that don’t conform to the established geographical division of labor, or to always expect the pairing of what happens in Latin America with issues of inequality. To quote council member Monika Krause (2021: 112): “Some of these scholars may see their work rejected by some prestigious Western journals as not enough of “general interest” and then see their work rejected by other prestigious Western journals “as not critical enough.””

This letter is of course not an invitation to stop using categories that posit the situated historical character of knowledge and power. Rather, it seeks to reflect even further about them, and their historicity. Relatedly, ASA Distinguished Book Award winner Hector Carrillo (2017) has invited us to discuss how globalization is a patterned and unequal

process, but that it does not happen unidirectionally.

One could paraphrase current theory council member Julian Go (2015: 94) – one of the central scholars in advocating for the incorporation of postcolonial theories into the sociological canon both in his scholarship and in the work he does as the editor of the journal *Political Power and Social Theory* (see note 3) – and push further into his formulation that “post-colonial theories involved the transposition of narratives, concepts or theories derived from the standpoint of one location to the rest of the world,” and ask what would entail to apply the same “provincializing” toolkit to the theories of the Global South when applied to Latin America. The push of the section panels for ASA 2022 is to start thinking about how the current set of perspectives constitute themselves, a yet incomplete exercise that does not fully capture the divergent attempts to conceptualize the globalized character of the Latin American experience(s).

As I mentioned, the next issue of the newsletter will invite Latin American scholars working in Latin America and in the US to discuss what are the main issues in their agenda, and how they make sense of them. In the meantime, I’ll mention some key authors that have historical significance, and who make valiant attempts to promote a better understanding of the interrelationship between phenomena in/of Latin America and our current toolkit for making sense of

them, thereby turning the issue back onto the question of why knowledge generated in the US is the one always being transposed. We could posit that some of the best traits of the Global South frame existed in nuce, already there. Of course, like every list, it reflects collective and personal preferences; it is incomplete, polemical and, much like this letter, the starting point of a conversation, not a point of arrival.

Theories of populism – which became of central importance to the study of US politics after Trump – have existed since the 1970s, with vigorous debates between Emilio De Ipola and Ernesto Laclau, among others, trying to make sense of foundational populist experiences in Perú, México, Brazil and Argentina. Theories of dependency (by scholars Celso Furtado, Enzo Faletto, Fernando Cardoso and Andre Gunder-Frank, all nucleated at the CEPAL) have underscored from the 1960s already the relational, unequal, extractivist, and neo-colonial character of the exchange terms between Latin America and Europe and the US. More recently, Maristella Svampa and Verónica Gago have emphasized the ethnic and gendered character of this. Studies of urban informality – which became important in American Urban Sociology in the 2000s once the urban, Fordist matrix of the US welfare state disintegrated to a great degree – flourished in the study of precarious urban settlements in the 1970s and on, with scholarship by Janice Perlman, Gino Germani, José Nun, or Elizabeth Jelin.

Scholars such as Rodolfo Stavenhagen in Mexico, or Florestan Fernandes in Brazil have produced avant-la-lettre yet failed explanations of the intertwined character of capitalist exploitation and the fate of indigenous and afro populations. Relatedly, the study of gender and care work has fabulous antecedents – partially because domestic work is far more extended in this context – in the scholarship of Brazilian sociologist Heleieth Saffioti, and was further developed in the 1970s by Cuban-based activists and theorists Isabel Larguía and John Dumoulin (see note 4).

For people like me, educated until their PhD below the tropic of Cancer, issues of hybridity come from Brazilian theories of antropofagia (coined in the later 1920s by Oswald de Andrade), or the inspired prose of Argen-Mex García Canclini in the late 1980s and the debate that it fostered about the incomplete character of the relationship between center and periphery, the futility to search for “pure and authentic” cultural forms, and the political relationship between elite, popular and mass culture. Scholars advocating for more empathetic and collaborative methods to qualitatively study subaltern population would be well served in checking the work of Colombian urbanist Osvaldo Fals Borda, who in the 1970s and on established, with numerous colleagues, a program for what he called “participatory action research.”

It’s not capriciously that I end this short piece here, with García Canclini and

Fals Borda who engage the work of Antonio Gramsci – central to thought on “the Southern question” at the core of the “Global South” framework, and with Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who has become a beacon in advocating for more horizontal and collaborative linkages in the production of knowledge. Let’s be inspired by them, and hope our next ASA is a great opportunity to keep building theory together.

Claudio Benzecry

*Northwestern University*

**Note 1:** Something currently advanced by scholars of race, many of them part of The Du Boisian Scholars Network.

**Note 2:** On this see the excellent book by Monika Krause. 2021. *Model Cases On Canonical Research Objects and Sites*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Note 3:** From this journal, for instance, these articles are great attempts to transpose postcolonial theories to a Latin American context. Bohr, Marcelo, 2021. “Race and the Diplomatic Bureaucracy: State-Building in Nineteenth-Century Bolivia as a Response to Transnational Racialization Threats;” as well as Jose Bortolucci and Robert Jansen. 2013. *Toward a Postcolonial Sociology: The View from Latin America*.

**Note 4:** On this consult the recent work by Latin American pioneer Elizabeth Jelin. 2021. “Género, etnicidad/raza y ciudadanía en las sociedades de clases.” *Nueva Sociedad* 293.

# An Interview with Emily Erikson

by Vasfiye Toprak

*PhD Candidate, Sociology  
University of Virginia*

**Vasfiye Toprak (VT):** Dr. Erikson, thank you for speaking with us today about your new book, *Trade and Nation: How Companies and Politics Reshaped Economic Thought*.

Can you tell us about how the idea for the book emerged? Did you always have a sense that the marginality of the merchants amidst the increase in chartered companies, had something to do with the rise of economic and political thought?

**Emily Erikson (EE):** Doing research for my previous book on the English East India Company, I noticed something that I thought was really interesting: most of the major works on economic thought, or those that you would classify as being about economic thought in that mercantilist era, were written by people that were very closely associated with the chartered companies. It was, to me, a striking thing. It's unusual now by comparison. I mean I hope we never have to suffer through an economic tract written by Elon Musk or something like that. So it seemed to me to be a strange idea that these people would be writing works that were taken seriously, on several occasions as major scientific or theoretical contributions.



*Dr. Emily Erikson is Associate Professor of Sociology and, by courtesy, School of Management at Yale University in New Haven, CT. She also serves as the Joseph C. Fox Academic Director of the Fox International Fellowship at Yale.*

But it happened pretty regularly in the 17th century, and I thought that was an intriguing phenomenon. My first hypothesis was that it had to do with the logistics of overseas trade and that it was a result of learning from expanding, interacting with other cultures, managing all of the difficult logistical

difficulties that arise when you have a multinational enterprise. But I almost immediately found that that couldn't have been the driving force just because all the other European nations were also in the middle of expanding their commercial Empires through various means, and they weren't experiencing the same thing and didn't have the same efflorescence of new texts. I had to write that one off and figure out what it actually was.

**VT:** The book is also almost a new theory of the public sphere, or a new account of its emergence. You discuss the ways in which merchants were led to articulating their grievances and concerns to gain public support, because they lacked the representative institutions that would allow them to be heard. But in cloaking their own self-interest they had to rely on data, empirics, and new modes of scientific knowledge, because, you say, the public sphere imposed its own discipline. At first, this seems like a Habermasian notion of the public sphere, where the main actors are merchants seeking to influence state policy, in a realm that is distinct from the state and the market. But you do point out that what seems to be public interests was really the personal interests of the merchants cloaked in interest-free arguments, which then seems to be a critique of the Habermasian public sphere. Would you agree with this? Or did you have other theorists of the public sphere in mind in theorizing this dimension of your argument?

**EE:** Well, I think, the influences of Habermas and Arendt and their conceptions of public life and activity are certainly present, but I see my conception of the public as somewhat distinct from Habermas. First, I should say that what I

wrote about in *Trade and Nation* is just one area of what was a much larger public discourse. Public discourse was growing, and economics is just one thread – kind of a unique thread that really only expanded in England in this era. So I can't say the book is a theory of the origin of the public sphere, because it deals only with the economic literature, although it does perhaps suggest some sort of friendly amendments to existing theories. The difference that I would emphasize in terms of how I'm thinking about the development and emergence of the literature that is different from the Habermasian story, is that he is all about the private sphere and the state, and it's the reaching out, bridging across between the two. But for the economic literature it isn't the private sphere, these aren't individuals operating out of their households. The important actors are large commercial organizations, and they create a kind of a space or discourse within the organizations that seems to have contributed to the articulation of this new mode of communication, i.e. new style of economics. What I am suggesting is that there is an organizational component to the story of the development of the public sphere that played some kind of role in providing a kind of infrastructure or foundation that undergirded and supported, at least in some partial sense, the development and growth of the public sphere over time.

**VT:** You mentioned Arendt's theory of the public sphere. Can you say a bit more about how that played into your theory?

**EE:** Well, I think that Habermas was influenced by Arendt, and I always mention it because female scholars aren't often given the attention or credit that they deserve for the important ideas they've introduced into the literature over time. But I didn't start with a theory of the public sphere and look to go test that idea. I tried to solve an empirical problem that had what I think of as important implications for theories of the public sphere. If anything I think that the spatial component of Arendt's conceptualization influenced my thinking about how the space of debate within companies was important to the development of the public sphere, as the debates took place in the chambers of the buildings, but I think of this as more interactional or relational than truly spatial.

**VT:** Another major argument I saw in the book was one that almost seemed to confirm Weber's notion of disenchantment and secularization. We do observe, in the way you present the data, a transition from the medieval scholastic period where economic thought mainly relied on the notions of fair exchange, and just prices – to one in 17th century where new moral frameworks emerged based on growth, and prosperity of the nation etc. Would you agree with this observation? Do you think that this is an argument of disenchantment and secularization? Or would you propose a different account of disenchantment?

**EE:** It's an interesting question. I would say it is a Weberian argument, especially in the sense that if you take Weber as the central theorist of unintended consequences, then this is

definitely a story in that model. The outcome, i.e. shift in economic thought, is an unintended consequence of people seeking to pursue their own self-interest. They just happened to produce a flourishing literature that becomes a foundation for a really valuable scientific enterprise over time. They clearly didn't see that coming on the horizon or intended it in any meaningful way. It wouldn't even have occurred to them. So it was an unintended consequence.

Disenchantment is interesting. One aspect of Weber's work that I never fully believed is the inevitability of disenchantment and rationalization. So, the work is definitely not written in the spirit of another demonstration of the inevitability of modern rationality. It's much more in the spirit of, there were these interesting unpredictable occurrences, a structural conjuncture that produced this kind of change in a trajectory of a certain mode of thought that didn't have to happen in this way. It didn't really happen that way in other settings. It happened this way because of the particularities of the kind of political setting in England at that time. So, in that sense, I see it as a more of a contingent outcome than an inevitability.

**VT:** Maybe this was happening in the economic sphere, if we are thinking of different spheres? That it's not like a general theory of secularization that was happening in all spheres?

**EE:** That's very true. It's certainly not about, for example, about the religious literature that dealt with economic behavior. That literature didn't change much. It continued on over

time. It just was dwarfed by the work that took a new, more secular approach. So, the existence of the companies and the position of merchants in society weren't necessarily transforming all areas of social life and public discourse, but they were changing the economic mode of thinking that was taken to approach economic behavior, i.e., what's problematic, what's beneficial, whether people believe that something like economic growth was possible, all of those things.

**VT:** Even though you are explicitly tracing the transformation of economic and political thought, you are also doing an in-depth cultural analysis in really going deeper into the public sphere discussions and debates, and tracing the shifting notions of the good, of society, of the nation. Can you tell us a bit about whether and how you see your work contributing to cultural sociology?

**EE:** I do think of this as a cultural transformation, so I would hope then, that the cultural sociologists would also be interested in the work. I suppose there's probably two ways of thinking about the possible contribution. One is the methods, the methodological possibilities of using these different techniques and text analysis, such as natural language processing, computational methods in analyzing these texts. All these things are getting a lot of traction across sociology and across social sciences, but maybe they are being adopted at a lower rate in cultural sociology. I hope the book helps to demonstrate that it can be very useful to use these methods. I would also say that, if we are thinking about cultural transformation,

another thing I hope the book demonstrates is that history offers a rich landscape for exploration of ideas, their transformation over time, and the relationship between social structural elements and cultural processes. And the documents are much more readily available than before. So many archives are online, and you can access them fairly easily. I hope cultural sociologists read the book and that it encourages people to think more about the possibilities inherent in doing historical work, which I find to be such incredible resource for thinking through social and cultural change over time.

**VT:** A question about Adam Smith. At first reading, it seemed like you were bringing him down from his pedestal, almost, in demonstrating that his contribution was actually not what we thought it was but elsewhere, reframing his contribution from the notion of free market to a notion of moral economy. Is that the right way of characterizing your argument? Or not? And how did Smith come into the major arguments of this book, did you always have that in mind?

**EE:** Well, I wouldn't say that it's bringing Smith down from his pedestal. I actually think Smith is incredibly brilliant, and amazing and rewarding to read -- perhaps and even more rewarding over time. I think that people should maybe spend more time reading Smith. It's true that not everything he is credited with was entirely his own invention. He did systematize knowledge and information, which you know, is also a contribution. I actually think that is an

underrated part of theory -- the systematization of knowledge and linking what is known and conceptualized into a coherent whole. But, Smith also added a moral dimension to what he was systematizing. He reframed the way that relationships between nations were thought of in such a positive way. He provided this lens that embraced cooperation in between nations for the benefit of all. It's just such a powerful lesson and one that has the potential to produce so much good in the world. So the book is definitely not meant to bring him down, but it is meant to correct what I think is more and more commonly recognized as a mischaracterization of Smith. It's so egregious and hard to understand why it entered into mainstream thought the way that it did. But the idea that Smith embraces unfettered free market expansion and competition was in many ways the opposite of what he was trying to do. I do try to make that point in the book. In that, I'm joining a chorus of different authors, from Martha Nussbaum to Amartya Sen, that are trying to make that point at this moment in time.

**VT:** Do you think these intellectual debates also influenced the ways in which the authority of the Crown was conceptualized. What do you see as the relation between these debates and the emergence of the new economic thought and the stability or instability of the authority of the Crown? You track the unintended consequence that the voicing of grievances has on the emergence of economic and political thinking, were there other consequences in terms of the kingdom, the authority of the Crown. To what extent were these debates

influential in the broader realm of the Empire?

**EE:** It is a tough question. I have to say. In some sense the influence of these individuals was more limited than they hoped it could be. That's part of the reason why they wrote these books. They weren't the most influential people and felt that they weren't getting the voice that they deserve, and they couldn't effectively pressure the government to take the actions that they hoped it would. So, I would say the effect that they had on conceptions of royal authority or authority was limited. But it is also true that the common will and the idea of the commonwealth is picked up and further developed in these works. You could trace the way in which they at first focus on how their actions are to the good of the king or the queen in earlier works and then later the actions are for the good of the commonwealth. The body that is supposed to be benefitting from whatever practice they are engaging in changes but what the causal arrow there is...whether it's because of the changing conceptions of political authority or changing the kind of mode in which these people make their argument or whether they are also contributing to the changing conception of political authority. It is probably a little bit of both. Maybe it's contributing but I can't now make an argument that it was a causal force. I don't have enough evidence.

**VT:** You theorize through the use of computational methods. I'm excited to learn more about how you were able to theorize

using these methods and the possibilities that this kind of methodology opened up for you? What did your analysis provide that you would not have had with other kinds of qualitative or other methods?

**EE:** I'm a structuralist. In the end, I think that major cultural transformations and major social changes are things that are not really the produce of the actions of just one individual. If they are major historical transformations, they almost always have to emerge from the actions of the many. Therefore, I think it is important to think about the way that not just all people take one action, but the way sometimes people take different actions, but those actions interact to produce possibly unintended but still very important outcomes. These kinds of things take place over populations of people, and that's what these methods allow me to observe. It is easy as a person to think about one or two other people and their actions. But to think about the complex interactions that occur between a hundred people – or a thousand – gets to be very hard. Computational methods are tools that help us to think about populations of people and their actions. So in the case of the book, using topic modeling allow me to move beyond a Schumpeterian analysis of just the major works in a field and base my interpretation on the entire set of authors that are writing on these topics. No matter how famous you are, the culture in which your book is received can absolutely change the meaning that it has. Indeed, Adam Smith is a good example of that – how interpretations of his work have changed over time. Thus it is important to look across the entire body of works that are

produced to really understand what's going on and when and where change occurs. On their own, one person is hard pressed to read all of the books, and it's also very hard to be very precise about your analysis when you are getting into thousands and thousands of tracts. We need assistance, our brains have limited capacity, unfortunately. These methods enhance our brain power, so that we can think about not just a couple of people but whole populations.

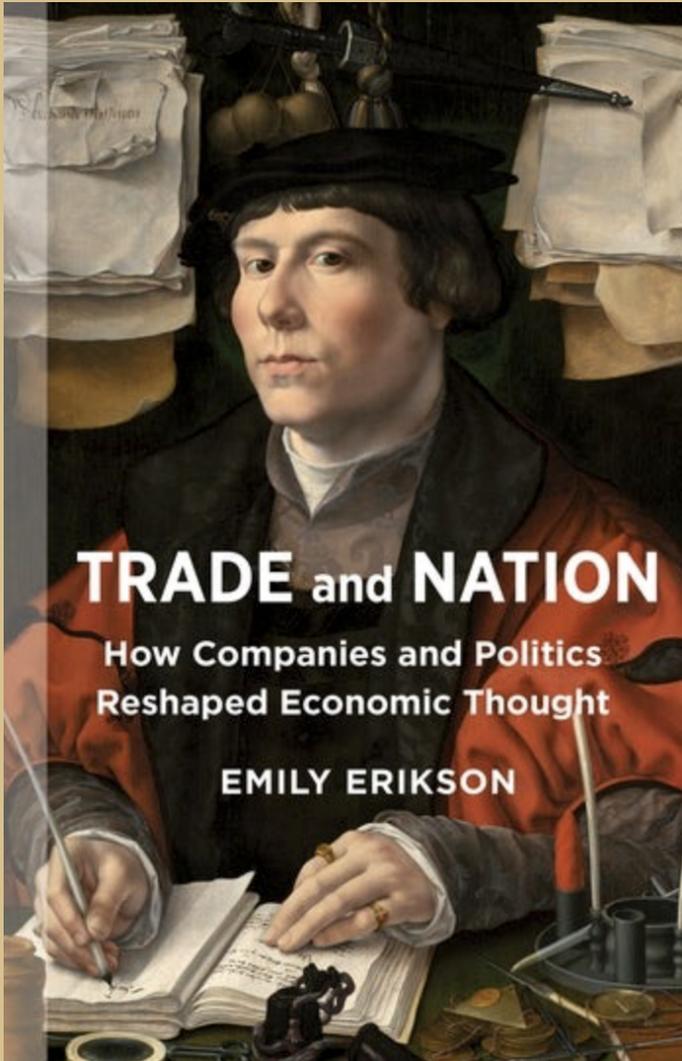
**VT:** Did you have to train yourself in new methods to write this book?

**EE:** I used a couple of different methods, and I've always been a quantitative researcher, although I've always done it in a somewhat unusual context. Social networks is something I was trained in during graduate school. The topic modelling, I hadn't used before, and I suppose I learned it for this project – although I expect it will continue to be useful.

**VT:** What do you see as the future directions in your work? Were there any new theoretical arguments that emerged writing this book that you are thinking of, that are left to investigate?

**EE:** Actually, I do kind of hope to escape the early modern era at some point and get closer to the present. Something that I think is interesting that came out in this book, or that I started to think more about in writing this book, is the relationship of these commercial organizations, the chartered companies, and the nascent democratic state in Britain. The companies and democracy co-evolve in the

context of England and I think this is an interesting and somewhat unexplored relationship. There is some contemporary work that's mostly critical of companies in modern democracies, but I think the relationship might be a little bit more complex, especially in the early modern context, so I'm excited about working in that area.



## ***TRADE AND NATION***

For more information about Dr. Erikson's new book, check out *Trade and Nation* (2021) on [the Columbia University Press website](#).

# Civil Sphere Theory Today

## "Hugs, Handshakes, and Theory: The Civil Sphere Working Group First Meeting"

by Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky  
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On October 18-19, 2021, forty-one scholars came together at the University of Trento in Italy to hold the inaugural meeting of the Civil Sphere Working Group. They marveled at the ability to meet and conference in person – after nearly two years of Zoom conferences – and to exchange a handshake, or even a hug. The excitement in the meeting auditorium was palpable, even if at times we were apprehensive about how to actually greet each other. The unifying factor was a desire to spend time together further developing and revising Civil Sphere Theory (CST), fifteen years after its seminal formulation in Jeffrey C. Alexander’s *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford UP, 2006).

The premises of CST are relatively straightforward, created to characterize the social spaces often referred to as “civil societies.” The “civil sphere” is a “real” social location, encompassing autonomous individuals that strive in solidarity for justice and inclusiveness. Notwithstanding this normative and utopian ideal, an actually existing civil sphere is an ongoing project, contradictory and fragmented, a “restless aspiration that lies deep in the soul of democratic life” (Alexander 2006, p. 551). The civil sphere is sustained by complex cultural coding of

liberty and repression: its binary discourse manifests at three levels: motives, relations, and institutions. The sacred-democratic side of the discourse represents qualities such as honesty, rationality, openness, independence, cooperation, participation, and equality, while the profane-antidemocratic side is polluted with deceit, hysteria, dependence, secrecy, aggression, hierarchy, and inequality. The civil sphere materializes in communicative institutions such as factual and fictional mass media, voluntary associations and public opinion polling, as well as regulative institutions such as law, office, and elections. With regard to other noncivil, particularistic spheres, such as the market, the state, the family, and religion, to name just a few, interinstitutional boundary relations are always in flux, never settled. In short, there is always something to explore and theorize with regard to how civil spheres operate in reality.

The complexities and paradoxes of the civil sphere vis-à-vis the other spheres of social life continue to be unpacked by scholars around the globe. The application of CST in

different contexts has yielded a number of volumes:

- *Solidarity, Justice and Incorporation: Thinking Through the Civil Sphere* (edited by Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino, Oxford UP, 2015),
- *The Civil Sphere in Latin America* (edited by Carlo Tognato and J.C. Alexander, Cambridge UP, 2018),
- *The Civil Sphere in East Asia* (edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, David A. Palmer, Sunwoong Park and Agnes Shuk-mei Ku, Cambridge UP, 2019),
- *Breaching the Civil Order* (edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Trevor Stack and Farhad Khosrokhavar, Cambridge UP, 2019),
- *The Nordic Civil Sphere* (edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Anna Lund and Andrea Voyer, Polity, 2020), and
- *Populism and the Civil Sphere*, (edited by J. C. Alexander, Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino, Polity, 2021).

Further volumes on India, Canada, and cultural trauma are in the works.

Giuseppe Sciortino opened the meeting in Trento with a light-hearted talk about “lessons” he had learned in his engagement with Alexander and CST, including the dangers of theorizing while drinking. Alexander offered a brief historical journey through the evolution of CST, from his Marxist musings about civil society in the 1960s, to the lack of suitable existing theories to explain Watergate in the 1970s, and his time teaching in China just before the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989. After reading the considerable work coming out in the early 1990s on civil society, Alexander felt that something crucial was missing. It would be almost 15 years and nearly 800 pages later that CST came together in a systematic and comprehensive opus published in 2006.

The conceptual and geographical scope of the 22 presentations at the meeting in Trento was exceptionally broad. Fiona Greenland talked about “satellite semiotics” in relation to a case in the International Criminal Court, while Nelson Arteaga Botello illuminated the “semantics of violence” in Mexico and Jessie Dong examined the “performative power” of cinema as a communicative institution. The civil sphere in Serbia was the topic for Ivana Spasic to explore the threshold of a “breaking point” in the country’s fragile democracy, and Elisabeth Becker Topkara spoke of an “uncivil sphere.” The workings of phenomena such as social class, hip-hop, cultural trauma, journalism, and visuality were brought into conversation with CST, building institutional and disciplinary bridges.

Notwithstanding the range and breadth of the individual presentations, the panels were unified by thematic concerns: Past, Memories and Myths in Civil Repair; Violence and Cultural Failures in Unstable Civil Spheres; Making Bridges: Extending Civil Sphere Theory; The Power of Images;

Civil Performance and Social Interaction;  
Communication and Media in the Civil Sphere;  
and Pains of Incorporation and Pleasures of  
Exclusion. The shared intellectual concerns of  
those present made for a rapt audience, with  
hardly anyone stepping out of their seats.

The capstone experience of the meeting was a  
magnificent, five-course meal at the restaurant, Cà  
dei Gobi, sponsored by Alexander. The buoyancy  
and satisfaction with the entire conference  
experience was evident, and, ultimately, there  
were no farewells, just promises to meet in two  
years to again share hugs, handshakes, and theory.  
The Second Meeting will be organized by  
Elisabeth Becker Topkara in Heidelberg, Germany  
in 2023.

The Civil Sphere Working Group has also  
announced its Coordinating Committee: Jeffrey  
Alexander, Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky, Giuseppe  
Sciortino, Peter Kivisto, Anna Lund, Maria Luengo  
Cruz, and Celso Villegas.

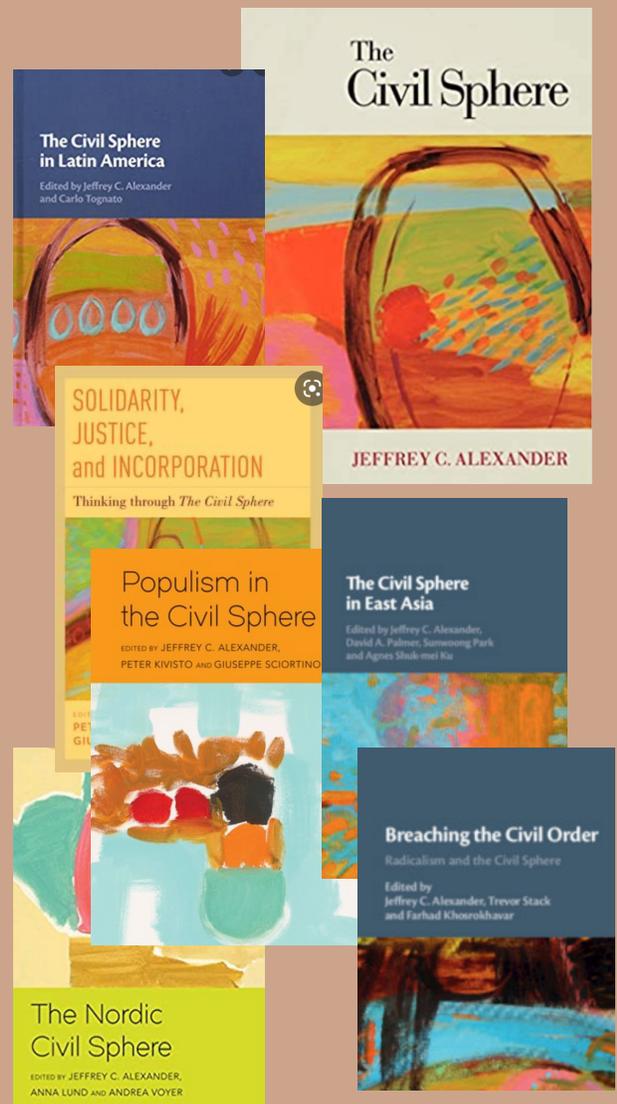
*NOTE: The first meeting of the Civil Sphere Working  
Group was supported by a generous gift from the John  
Templeton Foundation, and by academic partners in the  
Department of Sociology & Social Research at the  
University of Trento (Action, Culture, Meaning and  
Experience Research Unit, (<https://acme.soc.unitn.it/>))  
and the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University  
(<https://ccs.yale.edu/>).*

## JOIN THE GROUP

The Civil Sphere Theory  
Working Group has just  
unveiled its brand-new  
website:

<https://www.cstnetwork.org>.  
Please visit the website to  
become a member.

Dues, which pay for the site  
hosting and maintenance,  
are just \$19 annually, and \$9  
for students.



# Radicalism and the Civil Sphere

## A Symposium on *Breaching the Civil Order*

*The Author-Meets-Critic Symposium on Breaching the Civil Order: Radicalism and the Civil Sphere (2020) took place at the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association in November 2021. The session organizer, Anne Kane, opened with an Introduction and was followed by comments from Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Chad Goldberg, and Aliza Luft, and a response from Jeffrey C. Alexander.*

### INTRODUCTION

Anne Kane

Last year, 2020, saw the publication of the volume *Breaching the Civil Order: Radicalism and the Civil Sphere*, edited by Jeffrey Alexander, Trevor Stack and Farad Khosrokhavar. It appeared at a time when many “radical” movements were, and are, breaching global civil spheres, the latter conceptualized as “. . . a solidary sphere, in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced...it is exhibited and sustained by public opinion, deep cultural codes, distinctive organizations . . . and such historically specific interactional practices as civility, criticism, and mutual respect” (Alexander 2006:31).

Within the framework of Alexander’s Civil Sphere Theory (CST), and working to refine it, the diverse chapters in this volume address the issues of radicalism as political action and how

radical movements may expand or threaten the civil sphere. At a session held at the Social Science History Association annual meeting in Philadelphia on November 11, 2021, three critics – Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Chad Goldberg, and Aliza Luft – offered their assessment of the volume, followed by Jeffrey Alexander’s response and discussion.

Presented here are the highlights.

### BREACHING THE CIVIL SPHERE

Robin Wagner-Pacifici

*New School for Social Research*

As I read this book on radicalism and the civil sphere in the immediate aftermath of the January 6th insurrection, it was easy to see the breaches rather than the solidarity of the civil sphere. Civil sphere theory’s (CST) “optimistic bias” (Heins and Unrau, Chapter 6), combined with specificity of positive norms and valences such as civility and mutual respect, crash into

such breaching, violent actions in the service of retrogressive and regressive causes and aspirations – the uncivil sphere. How to make sense of it?

In contrast to the definition of the civil sphere from Alexander's paradigm setting book (above and 2006: 31), in this collection we find rioters, rebels, revolutionaries, looters, and insurrectionists engaging in "modes of political action usually condemned" including both violent and ludic action. By historically and culturally situating and contextualizing the many groups and individual actors under examination, the authors make progress on the very question of what constitutes the political and what are its relations with the civil sphere. They argue that breaches and wedges can open the civil sphere up or constrict it. How do we judge? Certain themes loom large.

First, the issue of violence – how to account for it and how to judge it? Violence can be tolerated, even understandable, argue some authors - but is it justified? There are mixed reports: Mexican cartels are a legitimate target of violence, notes Stack in chapter 1, finding "violent disobedience" such as the self-defense movement in Michoacan, 2013-14. But violence has definite limits. Khosrokhavar (Chapter 4) writes: "radical Islamist movement[s]...strength has always been limited to their heroic capacity to die for their ideas rather than opening up new vistas for togetherness..." (p. 109). Finally, violence can sometimes seem to not really be violence. Tanaka-Gutiez (Chapter 8) poses a counter-narrative: the 2011 English riots were an "act of solidarity by the socially marginalized who lacked access to structures of civil inclusion" (p. 211).

Another theme is of action or inaction on the part of governments and other authorities: There is exercise of power versus non-exercise of power, refusals and banning, lack of journalistic coverage, lack of intervention, printing or not printing controversial images or texts. On the responsiveness side of the binary, Stack notes that the San Andres Peace Accords in Mexico provide an example of the government's "Performance of openness, making violence harder to justify" (Chapter 1: 33)." On the side of withholding a response, Tognato writes about how the university Chancellor Mockus in Colombia "short circuited such performative response by...contending with the militant camp in the dramatis persona of the weak" (Chapter 2: 53). Tanaka-Gutiez describes state authorities doing nothing: "Two police cars are now on fire and the police have just stood there and not done a thing" (Chapter 8: 219). In Chapter 5, Luengo and Ihlebaek discuss the role of the media in reporting and framing actions and reproducing, or not, texts and images, such as those of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons.

A third theme develops consequentially diverse ways of hearkening back to the past, with different implications about expanding or contracting civility. On expansion, Stack suggests that the "Zapatistas appealed to the Mexican Constitution in justifying their rebellion – drawing on a long tradition of Latin American constitutionalist rebels – including the article empowering the people to take power against tyranny" (p. 35). On civil sphere contraction, the editors note that "Regressive radical movements push back against such wedging efforts in order to more tightly bind civil sphere ideals to both the qualities of the

founders and already existing or, often previously existing arrangements in noncivil spheres, such as politics and the market” (Introduction: 6).

The final theme I’ve identified is that of the ability and/or tendency of radical groups to change tactics, assumptions, and practices. Khosrokhavar in his chapter on the Arab Revolutions and Jihadism in Europe writes that the mutation over time of the Neo-secularist group, Tamarrod, from the uncivil sphere to the ambivalent civil sphere and back again suggests that groups can change in expansive or retractive directions.

So, forms and practices are important but they are not determinative. Context, situational parameters, and judgment matters. If CST has an optimistic bias, it means that we need to be explicit about our criteria for what political practices can be deemed civil or anti-civil, and self-conscious about our methods of judging whether they are met in any given case before including them in the realm of the civil sphere. Cooke’s characterization of civil disobedience strikes me as singularly relevant: civil disobedience has a “commitment to the normativity of the democratic project – to the general norms of equality, inclusion, interconnectedness, and self-determining agency that defines it” (Chapter 9: 235)

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE RADICAL?

Chad Alan Goldberg

*University of Wisconsin - Madison*

The “main question” that *Breaching the Civil Order* poses “concerns what it means for actions to be considered radical or revolutionary, as opposed ... to reformist or restorative” (p. 271). Yet what may be most useful in Civil Sphere Theory (CST) is how it helps us to think beyond this dichotomy.

One way to conceptualize radicalism is in terms of the means used to effect social change. *Breaching the Civil Order* focuses on “modes of political action” that “disrupt, confront, and subvert political order” (p. 1). However, CST suggests that disruption alone cannot force the civil incorporation of out-groups. Favorable discursive representation and effective civil translation are needed to generate solidarity with out-groups, which is necessary for regulatory intervention and civil repair. This outcome is never guaranteed. But Anne Kane (Chapter 7) shows the importance of interpretive struggles, even in a hard case like Northern Ireland where—because of a highly distorted civil sphere and deadly violence—CST seems least likely to apply.

Alternatively, we can define radicalism in terms of ends. Does radicalism aim to achieve the most inclusive civil sphere possible? That definition leaves out the radical right and its “complex relationship with the civil sphere” (p. 146). Perhaps the most radical challenge to the civil sphere comes from rejectionist movements to withdraw from it. *Breaching the Civil Order* usefully clarifies different varieties of

rejectionism (pp. 4-5, 274-75). As several contributors suggest, rejectionism may lead to the fracturing of the civil sphere or the creation of counterpublic spheres, but this is not sufficient for civil repair (Alexander 2006: 277).

Maeve Cooke (Chapter 9) thinks the term civil repair has “reformist connotations”; she prefers the term civil regeneration (pp. 235, 239). I demur because *régénération* was used in connection with the civil emancipation of Jews; it implied that Jews (and, by extension, other out-groups) needed to be remade and improved. Surely this is not what Cooke has in mind, though she does argue that ethical self-transformation or conversion (a term laden with Christian connotations) is a prerequisite for “radical transformations in the civil sphere” (pp. 240, 242-43, 246, 253). This linkage of social change to individual conversion has deep historical roots in evangelical Protestantism (Young 2007).

In contrast to Cooke’s language, it seems to me that the term civil repair has affinities with the Jewish messianic tradition. “Jewish messianism embodies two tendencies that are at once intimately linked and contradictory: a restorative current focusing on the reestablishment of a past ideal state, ... and a utopian current which aspires תיקון to a radically new future.” The concept of repair of the world) is “the supreme) עולם expression of this duality” (Löwy [1988] 2017: 16). The concept of civil repair captures and expresses an analogous duality in CST, which pursues the utopian aspirations of civil society through immanent critique. In this way, it points beyond the rigid dichotomy of reform and .revolution

## RADICAL ACCORDING TO WHOM?

Aliza Luft

University of California - Los Angeles

*Breaching the Civil Order* is a welcome collection that advances civil sphere theory by looking to the people and powers that challenge it and the circumstances under which change is welcomed, tolerated, or besmirched and violently rejected. I was particularly taken with Heins and Unrau’s chapter on Pegida, a far-right anti-Islam movement in Germany. These authors issue a much-needed corrective to the idea of radicals as external “breachers” of civility: radicalism does not only target the civil sphere from outside, it can contaminate the civil sphere from *within*. Internal breachers who manipulate existing cultural codes of civility may be uniquely threatening, by my logic, because their positions within the civil sphere endow them with the legitimacy and resources to make their claims heard. Even minority factions can, when powerfully positioned inside the civil sphere, garner outsized attention and spur debate rather than dismissal. They simply need credible connections to others with power to *not* ostracize but engage them.

With this fruitful adaptation, the authors have sparked the reader’s idea of radicalism. Today, in the U.S., the far-right is promoting a civil society based on “mutual values and feelings of universalism, justice, and equity” (Kane 173, this volume) specific to the cultural codes of White Christian Nationalists (cf. [Whitehead & Perry 2020](#)) rhetorically presented as under threat from a “woke mob” that has revealed themselves as internal radicals. Importantly, the majority

of Americans do not actually support views associated with Christian Nationalism, yet its preachers' continued access to communicative and regulatory institutions—a result of their status within the civil sphere—allows them to powerfully shape conversations about civility.

This has real, material consequences, reinforcing the practical power of White Christian Nationalists by leading people to think their views are acceptable and at least minimally *civil*, deserving of a place at the political decision-making table.

Compare this to the swift reprisals of the powerful toward social movements representing the values and interests of those less privileged in the civil sphere—for instance, the accusations of “incivility” and “disruption” of the Black Lives Matter movement and its claims to greater recognition, material resources, and political access. To be clear, 2020's protests constituted the largest and broadest movement in American history. But the backlash has been quick, and support for BLM continues to decline. Coupled with the recent acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse, this says a great deal about the orientation of the civil sphere—about its inherent and uncivil inequalities. It also makes it clear that activists kept from their own seat at the table continue to face difficult choices about how to use their limited resources: Should they aim for greater recognition in the civil sphere using the rules and tools of the dominant in order to make change from within, or attempt to organize toward its next iteration by pushing for radical change from without? The question itself is divisive, a breach among potential breachers, that protects the power structures in place.

In this thought-provoking volume, I see a challenge to my discipline to work through old assumptions by incorporating new perspectives. To sit with the concept of radicalism—of what is necessary to breach the civil order—is to inevitably question the fundamental “we” inherent in forming, bounding, and defining civility. This is a question for theory and practice alike, and by engaging the chapters in this volume, we gain a clearer view of the obstacles, cultural and structural, to civil equality in our discipline and beyond.

## TO BE TRULY RADICAL IS TO MAKE HOPE POSSIBLE

Jeffrey C. Alexander

*Yale University*

The subtitle of *Breaching the Civil Order*, “Radicalism and the Civil Sphere,” is a provocation. Are radicalism and the civil sphere meant to be antithetical, as Robin Wagner-Pacifici seems subtly to suggest in her reference to my original statement of civil sphere theory (CST) in 2006? The subtitle unsubtly shouts back, “no, not at all!”

Radicalism is, not the exception, but the rule for societies with relatively independent civil spheres. Why? Because criticism -- via continuous discursive judgment, erupting social movement, or episodic societalization -- is immanent to the civil sphere's very construction. Extant norms and institutions declare what the “actually existing civil sphere” is in a particular time and place. But the civil sphere is not only a social fact; it is a utopian ideal of solidarity, one that tightly intertwines

hopes for individual autonomy and mutual obligation.

Such universalizing ideals can never be fully realized when they are institutionalized as practices in real civil societies.

Institutionalization brings the abstract discourse of civil society down to earth, allowing some freedoms to some actors and encouraging some mutual obligations to some others. Yet, in the very process of making the universal concrete, institutionalization compromises the heady promises of the civil sphere, narrowing and restricting practices that comprise it in the here and now. Institutionalizing the civil sphere creates, in other words, painful strains and endemic dissatisfactions, which is what makes radical efforts to breach (existing) civil order, not only legitimate, but obligatory.

CST is neither order nor conflict theory. The civil sphere is always restless. The relative autonomy of its idealizing discourse means that extant social arrangements are never more than conditionally legitimate, which means, as Aliza Luft rightly suggests, that CST conceptualizes conflict, not as *outré*, but as part of the civil sphere's DNA. As Robin and Chad Goldberg both observe, radicalism is not a matter of the means of conflict being violent instead of discursive or the ends of conflict being communist or conservative. Radicalism is a mirror that seeks to compel civil core groups to look at themselves, to dislodge the ideal from the currently existing, to wedge open the compromise formations of actually existing civil spheres to allow civil repair.

A radical movement wins if it can garner performative power, convincing citizen-

audiences that it embodies civil ideals more felicitously than its opposition. As both Goldberg and Luft appreciate, Anne Kane (Chapter 7) counter-intuitively demonstrates how the Provisional IRA achieved fusion by framing its violence as civil. Militant but not violent, Black Lives Matter was also powerfully affecting, “construct[ing] public opinion and collective mobilizations around cultural codes of blackness as civil and the police as anticivil” (Ostertag Chapter 3: 72); in contrast, and here I must disagree with Luft, the violence on January 6th, 2021, generated appreciably more civil backlash than identification.

CST is not optimistic, theorizing the dark side of civil sphere dynamics, not only the light (Alexander 2013). But it is hopeful. In contrast with the despairing discourse that animates most modern social theory, CST insists also on conceptualizing civil repair. As Raymond Williams once remarked, “To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.” This is the epigraph to our volume.

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# Emerging Social Theorists

In each issue of *Perspectives*, the co-editors feature the work of early career social theorists.

This winter, we will feature three theorists:



Luis Flores, Jr.  
*University of Michigan*



Sam Hobson  
*University of Michigan*



Mo Torres  
*Harvard University*

## Nominate a theorist to be featured!

If you would like to nominate yourself or someone you know to be featured in future issues, please email the co-editors at [theory.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:theory.newsletter@gmail.com).

# Emerging Social Theorists

Luis Flores, Jr.

*University of Michigan*

"I am a historical sociologist engaged in economic, urban/regional, and stratification research. I study how labor markets, wealth, and social inequality are shaped by changes to the political and regulatory boundary between home and market in the United States."

Visit [Luis' website](#)



I am a historical sociologist engaged in economic, urban/regional, and inequality research. My research examines how the shifting regulatory boundary between home and market in the United States shapes labor markets, wealth, and social inequality.

Today, every home is a potential business or a speculative asset, every person an entrepreneur, and every relationship a potential economic opportunity (buy my essential oils!). How did we get here? Why do these practices seem both an antidote to labor alienation and disguised precarity? How did these practices go from the stigmatized margins of the economy to its center? And what do these trends suggest for debates over the "future of work"?

My dissertation, *The Informal Oeconomy: Home-Based Moneymaking After the Family Wage, 1970-2008*, examines intersections between labor restructuring and contested household efforts to monetize excess time, space, illiquid assets, and

social networks. I trace the origins, regulatory conflict, and contested incorporation of modes of household economic informality in the United States. I develop my study through four case studies on diverse efforts to monetize the home: the 1970s spread of network "direct selling" (often known as MLMs); 1980s efforts by the Reagan administration to lift a ban on "industrial homework;" contests during the 1980s and 1990s over the rental of "illegal garage conversions," (what are now known Accessory Dwelling Units) in Los Angeles; and finally, efforts during the 1980s and 1990s by neighborhood organizations and advocacy groups to expand access to illiquid home wealth, or "liberating home equity for all."

*The Informal Oeconomy* argues that as labor markets were restructured after the 1970s, so too were households and home refashioned as sites of market activity. The origins of contemporary informality can be found in pockets of household experimentation among groups

excluded from or unaccounted for by what historian Robert Self calls postwar “breadwinner liberalism:” housewives, immigrants, workers of color, and the elderly. As labor market restructuring broadened experiences of precarity, the appeal of once-marginal moneymaking practices spread. These practices quickly came into conflict with regulatory boundaries, in land-use zoning, tax codes, labor law, and mortgage law, that enforced the postwar separation between home and market. Their contested incorporation remade gendered divisions between home and market, and racialized constructions of economic informality.

Other research examines the origins of American land-use zoning in early 20th-century Los Angeles. This research speaks to debates about the growing importance of home wealth in managing economic insecurity and theorizes the ways that land-use zoning structures not only housing but also labor markets.

# Emerging Social Theorists

Sam Hobson

*University of Michigan*

Sam Hobson is a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan who lives in New Haven, Connecticut. Their areas of research interests include race, power, intersectionality, and social change, and they expect to graduate in the Fall of 2023.



My dissertation is about the ways in which structural power and oppression are replicated through acts of social justice and what that means for our attempts at social change. My work is with the food justice movement in NYC. Practices of food justice include urban agriculture, food education, and farmers' markets. Although food justice is grounded in a structural analysis of race, class, and food, and incorporates an antiracist framework, my ethnographic research unveiled instances of structural oppression being created through food justice practices. These instances were the result of movement action of both white activists and non-white activists of high SES. So, my dissertation asks, how are the intentionally anti-racist movement practices of structurally powerful food justice activists reproducing structural oppression?

I argue that, despite our best intentions, social justice has the ability to operate as a mechanism of structural domination. This is because, in its

current formulation, it tends to be a social practice that allows structurally powerful people to replicate not only their relationship to structural power but also that of the marginalized population they're impacting by allowing the former to affect the choices, experiences, and life chances of the latter (Einspahr 2010; Young 1990). My dissertation is a deconstruction of this phenomenon through a multi-level analysis of the relationship between the structural, behavioral, and schematic processes behind it. I am currently triangulating the ethnographic observation I've conducted with interviews of activists in my study, developing a comparative analysis that examines how this relationship between the structural, behavioral, and schematic varies by the intersectional identities of movement activists. Scholarship that asks how social movements backfire tend to offer organizational explanations. However, I argue that our theoretical focus needs to be towards activists' social positions and cultural frameworks,

requiring an incorporation of intersectionality and critical race theory into social movement scholarship. Such a marriage will illuminate the overlooked the heterogeneity that is implicated in seemingly homogenous movement actions. It will also unveil the complexity with which structural power operates through social movement action and affects the formation, dynamics, and outcomes of social movements.

I use structural domination scholarship and Black Feminist Thought to explicate this. This project will contribute an intersectional analytic of power to social movement scholarship and a focus towards social movements as a site of knowledge production to critical scholarship. My ultimate goal for this project is to develop a power analysis that can be applied to myriad situations of justice, reform, and anti-racism. I believe that such an analysis is essential for public policy, nonprofits, DEI initiatives, social movement activism, and social justice so that justice and reform work isn't just another way to obfuscate the perpetuation of oppression.

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# Emerging Social Theorists

Mo Torres

*Harvard University*

Mo Torres is a PhD candidate in sociology at Harvard, Stone Fellow in the Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, and a doctoral fellow at the Harvard Mellon Urban Initiative. He is interested in questions of political economy, power, cities, race, and racism.



Michigan cities were considered "arsenals of democracy" in the mid-twentieth century, prosperous and productive places that spawned the American middle class. Today, Detroit, Flint, and other race-class subjugated (Soss & Weaver 2017) Michigan cities have become laboratories of urban austerity. Detroit is the largest U. S. city to have ever filed for bankruptcy, while Flint gained recent international attention for its deadly water crisis, and cities like Highland Park and Benton Harbor are among the most economically depressed in the country. While the "Rust Belt city" narrative has been endlessly rehearsed - all of these cities bled tax revenue as the result of industrial decline, white flight, and suburbanization - that these places would come to be governed by the logics of austerity was not a foregone conclusion. My dissertation asks how Michigan cities came to be governed by the logics and politics of austerity. What actions taken by what actors shaped the state's urban agenda? What logics were at play in this process, and how did these logics function discursively?

The dissertation draws on four decades of data spanning five gubernatorial administrations (three Republican and two Democrat), including state archives, legislative recordings and transcripts, judicial hearings, print and television media, think tank reports and policy memos, surveys, and original interviews with elected officials and state bureaucrats. The project begins in the aftermath of New York City's fiscal crisis in the 1970s that set the terms for an urban agenda friendly to finance and hostile to social spending, a moment scholars have identified as a critical point in the history of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Phillips-Fein 2017). It traces the implementation of Michigan's system of municipal receivership which replaced elected mayors, city councilors, and school district leaders with unelected 'emergency financial managers' - a system that overwhelmingly impacted cities with Black majorities. It ends in the wake of the Flint Water Crisis - itself a result of state takeover - as receivership became a political liability.

Empirically, I show how federalist divisions of authority posed a considerable challenge to the austerity agenda, as many local officials resisted privatization and cuts to social spending. When austerity could not be implemented solely through typical democratic channels, both Republican and Democratic officials responded with cuts to local democracy. To explain the case and its significance, I draw on theoretical work on political ideas and the formation of hegemony (in the tradition of Gramsci and Hall); materialist approaches to the study of race and racism (in the tradition of Du Bois); scholarship on neoliberal rationality (Foucault, Brown) and the politics of fiscal crisis (Phillips-Fein 2017); and sociological work on territorial stigma (Wacquant 2007), particularly at the level of the municipality (Kornberg 2016), to offer a brief list.

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# Recent Publications

## ARTICLES

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