

# SECTIONCULTURE



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## Letter from the Chair



Photo 1: Ann Mische, University of Notre Dame

### Wrestling with talk and action in crisis times

Hello to all as we round the corner towards spring! In this Chair's letter, I would like to update you on the work of our section committees, with a focus on how we have been trying to expand our attention to diversity, inclusion and racial justice in all areas of the section's social and intellectual life. I would also like to continue diving into the sociological and self-reflective work of considering why this change is so difficult.

In my last [letter](#), I invited your thoughts on a theme I've been wrestling with all year – what I

called “the obstinacy of a transformative moment.” The disruption and distress of 2020-21 – due to Covid-19, police and citizen killings of BIPOC people, racial justice uprisings, surging hate crimes and electoral turmoil – also generated a discourse of transformative possibility. Sometimes it takes a crisis to expose how deep systemic problems are and how urgently they need changing. Could crisis produce the disruption necessary to unleash more radical imaginaries?

Yet as we have moved into 2021-22, those imaginaries have seemed stalled. Politically opportunistic attacks on “Critical Race Theory” have sought to discredit and dismantle the wave of anti-racism initiatives percolating in schools, universities and corporations. Pundits and political leaders have denounced these as the manifestations of “cancel culture” or “wokeness” run amok, while voting rights are under attack in many states. Meanwhile, sociologists studying the deep intertwining of racialization, social inequality, political exclusion and global economic injustice are on the defensive in public debate and (sometimes) within their home institutions.

This is somewhat ironic since many of those institutions never took the move towards “anti-racism” very far in the first place. In a brilliant recent talk in my department colloquium, culture section member Corey D. Fields described his work-in-progress on individual and institutional response to the summer of 2020. His preliminary analysis of data from the [American Voices Project](#) (a nationwide qualitative interview sample) suggests a racial divide in how people experienced the interconnected crises. White people, in general, took a more distanced response to both the pandemic and the BLM protests, with the latter serving at best as a provocation to “talk” about race, but much less frequently as the basis for action. In contrast, Black

and Latinx people talked about both the pandemic and the protests in more immediate and painful terms. They described risks to life and livelihood, lived experiences of inequality and discrimination, and the urgency of action for change.

Fields’s preliminary results suggest a similar pattern in institutional responses. While many corporations issued statements in response to both Covid-19 and the racial justice protests, these were much more detailed and action-focused in response to the pandemic. Corporate statements about the police killing of George Floyd referred to “systemic racism” and “implicit bias,” but rarely accepted institutional responsibility for racial exclusion or suggested concrete measures to address it. They expressed a distanced concern with racism “out there,” without bringing it home to their own institutional practices.

While his analysis is still in the early stages, Fields hinted that university statements were even vaguer and more distanced than those of corporations. This suggests one set of answers to why we feel so stalled. His research highlights the hesitancy of those with the most power and privilege to move from talk to action, resulting in superficial acknowledgments (where the talk is the action, in Fields’s depiction) rather than deeper institutional changes. Keep your eyes posted for more on this important work as he takes it forward!

As cultural sociologists, how can we use our insights to address the forces that block deeper transformations? And how can we self-reflectively challenge our own silences and complicity? We heard important suggestions from four outstanding scholars during this year’s first [Culture and Contemporary Life](#) webinar on January 29, on the topic “Revisiting Culture Methods to Address Racism.” This panel (moderated by Yan Long) featured a discussion among Derron Wallace, Mario

Small, Marcus Hunter and Ellen Berry on the use of cultural methods to understand systemic racism as well as to contribute to processes of social change. (You can read about this panel in this issue of the newsletter, and listen to the complete recording [here](#).)

I'll spotlight one insight from each speaker that speaks directly to the question of why we may be stalled. Marcus Hunter reminded us that race is not just something we "bring to the party" (i.e., of cultural sociology); we need to see race as the foundation of culture, rather than a category to be checked or pigeonholed. Derron Wallace argued that we need to unmask culture as not being "race-neutral," and turn our attention to the deeper challenges of changing institutions, such as schools. Ellen Berry shared her findings that incremental institutional changes in the name of "diversity" often have modest effects, sometimes preventing deeper transformations. And Mario Small challenged us to move beyond Eurocentrism in cultural analysis, as well as to reject the prevailing "deficit model" of African American culture.

Taken together, these interventions provide a probing critique of the limitations of cultural sociology, while also affirming the possibility of using cultural analysis to critique racism, explore institutional change processes, and push back on recent political attacks on anti-racism initiatives.

We see another demonstration of how cultural analysis can address urgent contemporary problems in this newsletter's symposium on the recent volume *Populism in the Civil Sphere* (edited by Jeffery Alexander, Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino). Discussants Mabel Berezin, Robert Jansen, Paul Lichterman and Ming-Chen Lo assess the book's analysis of how the internal contradictions of civil discourse have contributed both to the rise of right-

wing populist movements and to social movements and institutional practices that push back on these anti-democratic and exclusionary forces.

Jeffrey Alexander gives a spirited response, arguing that the "strong program" in cultural sociology allows us to conceptualize extremist populism not as an "anomalous anti-democratic deviation," but rather as "generated from the strains and contradictions at the core of every real existing public sphere." Civil discourse, he argues, can contribute to historical forces that undermine democracy, as well as to citizen actions that defend it. That is, talk as action can have both negative and positive repercussions for democracy, inclusion and social justice.

### **What the Culture Section is doing:**

So what is the Culture Section doing to respond to these important critiques? How are we trying to move beyond "talk as action" in the superficial sense toward deeper actions with regard to racial justice and institutional inclusion? We have begun taking a number of steps – some modest, some more ambitious – to center the work of BIPOC scholars as well as studies of race and ethnicity within the social and intellectual life of the Culture Section.

These efforts have been growing over the past few years and were amplified under the chairships of Allison Pugh and Terry McDonnell. Like many sections, we responded to the crises of 2020 by redirecting funds from canceled in-person section events toward support for the ASA Minority Fellowship program. The Culture Section also made explicit efforts to recruit scholars of color to run for section offices and participate in section committees.

In 2020-21, Terry launched our first Diversity and Inclusion Committee (chaired by Nino Bariola and

Anya Degenshein), charged with proposing ways to make the section more welcoming to scholars from racially minoritized and historically underrepresented groups. The committee came up with an extensive and exciting list of suggestions. Under the leadership of Jean Beaman, this year's D&I committee has been helping the section move forward with several of these suggestions, while also proposing initiatives of its own. These include the following:

1. A **demographic and climate survey** on experiences with diversity and inclusion in Culture Section activities, circulated earlier this month (watch your inboxes for reminders and please respond!) This will be accompanied by a diversity audit of section awards, nominations, and offices.
2. The launching of the [John Mohr Dissertation Improvement Grant](#), which funds a racially or ethnically underrepresented graduate student at a public institution.
3. The prioritization of a discussion of racial justice in our first [Culture and Contemporary Life webinar](#) on "Revising Cultural Methods to Address Racism" in January (described in this issue).
4. An **ASA programming focus** that incorporates attention to race and ethnicity as well as to international scholarship on culture. This includes a two-year commitment to joint panels with the section on Race, Gender and Class. We are co-hosting a 2022 panel on "The Racial Politics of Culture? Critical Perspectives from Cultural Sociology" (organized by Derron Wallace). We will also sponsor a panel on "International Perspectives in Cultural Sociology" (organized by Vanina Leschziner).
5. The initiation of a "**BIPOC Resource Sharing Network**" as part of the Culture Section's Mentorship Program (more information on that will be coming soon).
6. Preliminary discussion of the formation of a **Research Network on Race and Ethnicity**. We are looking for more culture section members interested in participating! (Please contact Jean Beaman and me if interested.)

You'll be hearing more about each of these initiatives (and a few more!) over the course of the coming year. We know that we have a long way to go, and we embrace these steps with humility and a collaborative spirit. Taken together, we hope that they will help us to move from easy talk towards deeper action and institutional change. We welcome the participation of all of you in those efforts.



# Book Symposium

## *Populism in the Civil Sphere* (2021)

Alexander, Jeffrey C., Peter Kivisto, and Giuseppe Sciortino, eds. 2020. *Populism in the Civil Sphere*. 1st edition. Cambridge: Polity.

*(This symposium is based on an Author Meets Critic Session at the Social Science History Association meetings in November 2021, with contributions from Mabel Berezin, Robert Janson, Paul Lichterman and Ming-Cheng Lo. There is a response from Jeffrey Alexander after these commentaries.)*

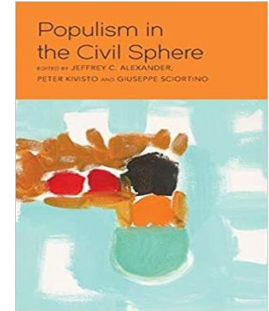


Photo 1. *Populism in the Civil Sphere* Book Cover

### Comments for Alexander *Populism in the Civil Sphere*

Mabel Berezin (Cornell University)

Contemporary political discourse is noisy. Civil in the ordinary sense of the term is the last word that we would associate with its benign and less benign forms. By exploring populist politics in terms of civil sphere theory [CST], Jeffrey C. Alexander, Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino loosen the boundaries of the now overcrowded area of populism studies.

I can only highlight in this short comment the issues that are most salient to me as I approach *Populism in the Civil Sphere*. I focus on first, the analytic context of the book; second, my understanding of the theoretical framework; and third, I try to think about some of the cases with the theory. The book is a collection of timely essays that elaborate how Alexander's theory of the civil sphere plays out in different national contexts. A real strength of this collection is that the cases span the globe. It is truly comparative and goes beyond the usual either Eurocentric or American focus of contemporary

populism studies. As a collection of essays, the volume is extraordinarily cohesive.

*Populism in the Civil Sphere* fits into the broad context of Alexander's intellectual mission to bring culture and communication to the center of theories of democracy and democratic practice. Alexander's civil sphere owes much to Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. Yet, there are important differences between the two theorists. Alexander's civil sphere is messier and allows for more discordance than its Habermasian predecessor. Its messiness allows for a certain plasticity that permits a range of political discourses from left to right to emerge. The historical moment influences whether the left or right discourses achieve public salience.

Challenges to democracy are manifest on a global level. Populism, and in some instances fascism, have become the descriptors of choice. Populist politics or what is being labelled populist politics in Europe and the United States have been constitutive of modern

politics for a long time. Historian Michael Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion* (1995 [2017]) locates the roots of American populism in 19th century America. Daniel Bell's 1967 essay "The Dispossessed" describes the radical right in America in terms of the John Birch society. Bell was prescient as he saw many of the tendencies in American politics that analysts today are invoking as they confront the political ascendance of Donald Trump. In Europe, the history and trajectory of populist parties varies from national context to national context as some of the essays in this book demonstrate.

In 2016 after Brexit in the Spring and Trump's election in the fall, populism took off as subject of interest to scholars and the media becoming a catch all term for malignant political tendencies in the United States and Europe. The political and analytic landscape where *Populism in the Civil Sphere* stakes a claim bears some scrutiny even in a brief comment. Kivisto and Sciortino cover some of this terrain in their excellent concluding essay.

Political scientists dominate populism studies. Cas Mudde's describes populism a war of little people against political elites. Political theorist Jan Werner Muller argued that populism was an inherent fault line of democracy. Both scholars are inevitably cited in virtually any article on populism. With few exceptions such as Rob Jensen (a contributor to this panel), sociologists have stayed away from theorizing or even working on populism. In contrast to political scientists, Jensen argues that situations evoke populist preferences not the other way around. Jensen's approach bears a kinship relation to the approach that Alexander and his collaborators put forth in this volume. In addition, there is an emerging body of sociological research exemplified by such authors as Bart Bonikowski that

takes on the social origins of those attracted to populism.

I have been writing about populism and fascism long before Donald Trump emerged—and I have argued that both terms present problems of nomenclature that generate more heat than light. To think about fascism is to think about history. In contrast, I argue that populism is a purely analytic category. Populism defies definition because it typically represents a shifting aggregate of popular preferences without a clear ideology that unites them. In today's political milieu, populism operates as a residual category that unites a range of disparate persons and ideas from Donald Trump to Bernie Sanders to Marine Le Pen.

If one begins from my position that populism is a weak analytic category then how might I engage with the arguments presented in *Populism in the Civil Sphere*? My first question when I approach a work such as this is: what would I want to know about populism that other theorists do not tell me. I want to be clear that I do think that Civil Sphere Theory is analytically useful. It does offer something fundamentally different from other available theories. It gives us as cultural and political sociologists tools to think about the current political moment that help us better understand the inchoate nature of this moment. I see convergence between it and my approach to populism.

The strength of CST theory lies in its dynamism. This means that it does not lead to a static definitional account of populism rather it provides just the opposite. CST borrows from public sphere theory and moves it in a new direction. CST looks at discourse and communication as a contested terrain. In this view, constant recalibration is constitutive of democracy as theory and practice. Democracy becomes a continually changing public conversation.

The analytic advantages in approaching populism through the lens of CST is that it allows for us to theorize the left and right variants of populism. A theory that can incorporate left and right and that takes voice into account moves the analysis of populism in new directions. Most scholars who write on populism elide or ignore the difference between its right and left variants. In today's political context it is particularly important to look at the way that left and right feed into each other. For example, during the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US capital the extreme right protestors claimed to be defending the Constitution and democracy. This was clearly also the position of the political center. In CST theory, collective symbols are important because they can slide to either side of the political spectrum. The integrity of the US Constitution and its defense was claimed by all sides on January 6.

This fluidity of symbols leads to the concept of the Vital Center--the point where democratic civil repair becomes possible. What makes for civil repair? What makes for conflict? Where does the language of contestation and cohesion come from? This is the point in CST argument where culture comes in--thick culture--culture in both the anthropological or ethnographic sense and the material world of practice, performance and symbols. CST is a pragmatic approach owing as much to John Dewey as to Clifford Geertz.

The theory of the book is best illustrated in the chapters comparative case studies that span the globe. This is a contrast to most studies of populism that focus on European cases. My one quibble is that the book did not commission a chapter on France where the former National Front provides a long history of a national populist party that permits analysts to look at change over time.

The two cases that I know best in the book Werner Binder's chapter on Germany and Henrik Enroth's chapter on Sweden provide apt illustrations of the key points of CST. Germany and Sweden were considered outliers when speaking of current European right-wing politics. The memory of Nazism in Germany and the strength of Social Democracy in Sweden were supposed to have insulated both nation-states against the populist tendencies that began to manifest themselves in the mid-1990s in France, the Netherlands, Austria.

What both essays show is that readily available national rhetorics could be invoked in either a left or right direction. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AFD) began in 2013 as an anti-Europe party focused on economic protectionism. The AFD had a nationalist core but due to post-war legislation any references to the Nazi past were outlawed in public discourse. In 2015, Angela Merkel's decision to allow Syrian refugees into Germany without much thought as to what to do with them became a catalyst for the AFD to shift from purely economic grievances to a more aggressive form of cultural nationalism. The AFD soared in the polls and reached as high as 16% until it dropped to 11% in the recent German elections. But the national numbers tell little. The international press touted the "defeat" of the AFD. Yet in the former East Germany where the memory of Communism runs deep and the prohibition against the Nazi past is weak, the AFD scored 30%--suggesting the pliability of discourse and the flexibility of political meaning.

Sweden is a similar instance of the mutability of established left/right discourse. In 2012 when the nationalist Sweden Democrats began to move the national political needle in a rightward direction there was a kind of national shock. An "even in Sweden" public narrative emerged in the international public sphere. But that overlooks the

fact that Swedish Social Democracy was nationalist in inception. Sweden is the People's House and there is no guarantee that the house is socialist. Sweden's social welfare regime was aimed at ethnic Swedes. One has only to read prominent Social Democrat Alva Myrdal's *State and Nation*. Written in the 1930s and translated into English in 1941, the translation conveniently eliminates the chapters on eugenics that focus on the sterilization of biologically inferior Swedes. This is not a far cry from Sweden's controversial and *laissez faire* Covid policy.

The cases clearly illustrate the basic parameters of CST theory. A central question remains. CST theory aims at exploring how a vital democratic discourse and political space emerges. Its principal interest is civic repair in the face of extremist threat from left and right. While this is not a book on political

practice *per se*, it does reflect recent social science work such as Daniel Ziblatt's book on *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* whose main point is that centrist parties are more important to the development and sustaining of a democracy than parties of either the left or the right. This brings me to my core question. The idea of a Vital Center is crucial to democratic political space as I read CST theory. The concept for me evokes equilibrium theories that are both Durkheimian and Parsonian. My question would then be how does CST theory and the Vital Center enable us both in theory and in practice to be both centrally democratic and to give voice to excluded others. But I am picking here. In the end, *Populism in the Civil Sphere* is a "vital" analytic and theoretical contribution to our current political moment whatever you wish to call it.

## SSHA "Author Meets Critics" Comments

Robert S. Jansen (University of Michigan)

I came to this book considerably more familiar with the populism literature than with Civil Sphere Theory (henceforth, CST); and so, it was a genuine pleasure to take this opportunity to consider what the latter might stand to contribute to the former. While I will forego a general summary, I want to begin by flagging two common themes that are particularly relevant to my comments here today. First, all of the essays share a deep sensitivity to and engagement with questions of culture. This, in itself, is a major contribution to the populism literature. As Bernadette Jaworsky notes in her chapter on the 2018 Czech presidential election, most populism scholars operate with a very thin—some might even be tempted to say impoverished—understanding of culture (p.155). The present volume, in contrast, begins from a worked-out theory of the civil sphere

that is grounded in an explicitly cultural sociology. The second throughline that I want to highlight from the outset is the fact that most of these essays see populism not as a departure from or a distortion of democracy, but as emerging out of, responding to, and ultimately revealing itself to be deeply intertwined with it. This idea—that populism is not anathema to democracy, but more like one of its many shadow sides—is by no means new; yet it stands in stark contrast with the prevailing tendency (especially in political science, but also at times in sociology) to treat populism as always necessarily and essentially anti-democratic. As will become apparent, I am not yet entirely convinced of this position. But I can say with confidence that anyone interested in reflecting in a fresh way on the relationship between populism and democracy



would do well to read this book. In what follows, I will first identify a significant contribution that was not particularly emphasized in the introduction or conclusion; I will then lay out what is for me the most vexing point of mismatch between CST and the current populism literature.

### The Social Consequences of Populism

The contribution that I want to elevate for appreciation is the fact that Civil Sphere Theory directs our attention to the social and cultural *consequences* of populism and provides us with valuable tools for understanding these. For decades (and for good reason), the populism literature has focused overwhelmingly on its *causes*. But this has often come at the cost of careful attention to what actually-acting populists *do*, and of failing to investigate systematically the consequences of these actions. By “consequences,” I mean more than just the formal policy agendas that any given populist might succeed at implementing while in office (which one might map relatively easily onto a left-right axis). I mean, instead, the sometimes less direct or obvious (although, in the contemporary political moment, distressingly apparent) social and cultural consequences of politicians relying heavily on populist rhetoric, performances, and mobilizing practices to achieve their aims—regardless of what these aims might be (That is, as I have argued elsewhere: if populism is a practical means that can be used to accomplish any number of substantive ends, it raises the question of whether the practice itself has patterned consequences that are independent of the ends toward which it is directed (Jansen 2017:213)). For example, how does the *practice* of populism *itself* (i.e., whatever its content) contribute to social polarization, the erosion of civic norms, and the destabilization of social (and not just political) institutions? Are there other social and cultural consequences to which the literature’s preoccupation with the *causes* and (insofar as it

attends to the consequences at all) the *political* consequences of populism have blinded us? Overall, the authors here recognize that when populists take to the stage, they are not only doing *political* work, they are doing *cultural* work as well—and thus their actions have broader social consequences that we are only now beginning to recognize and unpack.

Further, not only does this volume direct us to the *question* of the consequences of populism, but it supplies us with a theoretical framework that might point the way to some answers. As Celso Villegas explains in his chapter on Duterte’s populism, in the context of lamenting the “lack of depth and integration” of the existing populism literature: “what hamstrings populism studies is a lack of an integrative theoretical perspective” (p.45). Civil sphere theory promises to provide such a framework. To state, as plainly as possible, the implicit proposition that emerges from these essays: *if you want to understand the social consequences of populism, you have to start from a theory of how the civil sphere works*. Ateş Altinordu argues something along these lines in his chapter on Erdoğan’s populism:

A distinctive strength of civil sphere theory (CST) is its understanding of the culture and institutions of liberal democracy in relationship to each other: the regulatory (elections, courts, office) and communicative institutions (journalism, civil associations, public opinion polls) of the civil sphere ultimately refer to the same “code of civil society” that serves to symbolically articulate civil solidarity in the wider society. This complementary understanding of the culture and institutions of liberal democracy based on a shared normative logic allows a

parsimonious analysis of the simultaneous threat that many populisms pose to the culture of civil solidarity and the organizational autonomy of democratic institutions (p.76).

In this quotation, Altinordu makes the case that CST can facilitate a clearer understanding of the *threat* that populism poses to democratic institutions and civil society. At the same time, other authors lean in to the provocative suggestion—as Marcus Morgan does in his chapter on “populism’s cultural and civil dynamics”—that populism can also (under the right conditions) be a force for civil *repair*. Indeed, given the various forms that populism can take, it may be that it is only “fatal to democracy” when it comes from the extremes of the political spectrum (as Jeffrey Alexander suggests in his introductory chapter, p.1). Regardless, it is the authors’ engagement with CST that enables them to venture into this largely unexplored territory of populism’s social consequences.

### The Universe of Cases

My main reservation about the overall agenda that this book sets out, however, follows directly from this point of greatest enthusiasm. In short: if what CST offers populism scholars is a robust theory of the social, what are we to do about the many cases that have been studied under the rubric of “populism” that have lacked modern, institutionalized civil spheres? Another way of putting this would be to say that CST’s scope conditions seem to be considerably narrower than those of the currently fashionable populism theories. If so, this would leave many putatively populist cases twisting in the wind (Either that, or it would require that we understand these cases as being of a fundamentally different kind—a position that comes with its own risks).

In my reading, the authors remain somewhat divided on this critical point. In his chapter on the leftist populism of China’s Bo Xilai, Andrew Junker makes a valiant (and, in my view, quite compelling) attempt to adapt the insights of CST to a non-democratic society. But Junker appears to be in the minority on this point. As already suggested above, more than one chapter explicitly references Margaret Canovan’s argument that, “instead of being a symptom of ‘backwardness’ that might be outgrown, populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself” (Canovan 1999, p.3). This is evocative language. It also strongly implies the formulation, *no democracy, no populism*. And in their conclusion, Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino seem to double down on this stance, making what I take to be an even stronger argument that populism is “a shadow cast by the *civil itself*” (p.291, my emphasis). It would certainly be possible to read such statements as implying that CST has something to offer populism scholars only insofar as they are studying contemporary Western democracies.

If this is indeed the consensus position, it limits the usefulness of this volume (and of CST more generally) to populism scholars (many of whom—especially those who view it as a “thin ideology”—take a quite expansive view of the phenomenon). It also grates a bit against my experience as a Latin Americanist. The study of Latin American populism attunes one to the fact that not only are populist rhetoric and mobilizing practices quite flexible in terms of who might use them (a point on which I take the contributors here to be largely in agreement), but they are also quite flexible in terms of the settings in which they might be successfully deployed (or, at least, in which they might be seriously attempted)—*including* countries where democracy is weak, poorly institutionalized, or even non-existent. So, while I am sympathetic to the insight that populism is the shadow side of democracy, I am also concerned that

this view leads us to assume that it is exclusive to fully democratic societies (and, thus, that CST has nothing to offer those of us studying it under other social and political conditions).

I would tentatively propose an alternative understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy (which, I believe, resonates most with Junker's position). What if it is not the soil of democracy *per se* that germinates the seeds of populism, but something more general—like any form of political authority that is at least nominally premised on popular legitimacy? I suggest that wherever a leader's ability to hold and exercise power is (at least potentially) *premised on, buoyed by, or constrained by a lack of* popular support, populism is possible. Another way of putting this would be to

suggest that just because populism might be a quite natural response to tensions emerging within the civil spheres of contemporary Western democracies, this does not mean that these are the only conditions under which we might expect savvy political actors to attempt it—or the only cases of populism upon which CST might be in a position to shed meaningful new light.

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## The Study of Populism as a Challenging Case of Theory Meets Object

Comments on *Populism in the Civil Sphere*, eds. Alexander, Kivisto and Sciortino

Paul Lichterman (University of Southern California)

In ethnographic research, we talk a lot about constructing or "casing" our object of study. There are always choices to make about how we conceptualize what we are studying, and we want our theories and the actors' meanings to articulate well together. Comparative-historical research invites similar efforts (Isaac Reed and Paul Lichterman, forthcoming. "Pragmatist comparative-historical sociology." In *The New*

*Pragmatist Sociology: Inquiry, Agency and Democracy*, edited by Isaac Reed, Christopher Winship and Neil Gross.

New York: Columbia University Press). I see this volume as a fruitful case of theory meets object, and I think that is a good way to appreciate the double challenge that the co-authors have taken up.

First there is the challenge of the object itself. Populism is tricky. As Mabel Berezin pointed out recently, sociologists have been struggling for an analytically cogent approach to the topic (Mabel Berezin, 2019. "Fascism and Populism: Are they Useful Categories for Comparative Sociological Analysis?" *Annual Review of Sociology* 45: 345-361). Marcus Morgan's essay does a nice review of the many definitions, or usages: Is populism a "discourse"? a performance? both, and more? The object is slippery and that would challenge any theory.

But populism might make special trouble for civil sphere theory (CST). That is because CST is what I will call a theory of the center. It is concerned with certain cultural codes, morally and emotionally

laden performances that are “central” in a society—meaning widely recognized and prominently enacted, albeit valorized in varying ways for varying purposes. I take seriously the volume’s nod (p. 10) to a “vital center.” This allusion to Arthur Schlesinger’s book by that title is a useful metaphor for the theory’s standpoint. CST as I understand it wants to conceive what makes institutionalized, other-regarding communication among diverse citizens possible over time. The theory features the discursive substrates of central, civil institutions that elicit allegiance—whether warm, grudging, routine or instrumental—from members of a complex societal community. In this, CST joins a noble line of social thought that theorizes the center in very different ways, as we see in Tocqueville, Edward Shils or Talcott Parsons; with more space I would argue that Gramsci stands here too.

This all means that CST is a theory seemingly not made for a close-up look at the object at hand. Populism may emerge from tensions at the heart of civil society, as the volume’s introductory essay proposes, but populism shifts shape from political right to left. It ranges inside and outside the central sphere of civil, solidary communication, and occasionally leaps out of the realm many consider “political.” That is why I say this volume takes on a double challenge and I salute the editors and authors for engaging it.

How does a theory, any theory, deal with a slippery object? One strategy is to construct the object completely inside the conceptual language of the theory, evacuating its ambiguities. Constructing the object is a phrase that some of us might associate especially with Bourdieu’s critical-reflexive sociology. Relentless effort to translate the social world into field, habitus and capital is maybe the apotheosis of this strategy. I appreciate that the contributors did not go this route. That is probably

one reason that the title of the volume is not ‘Civil breach and civil repair in global perspective.’ Instead, there remains an interesting, maybe generative, tension between theory and object. The contributors take different approaches to the object, and do not all agree on what “it” is, but in these essays “it” has some autonomous ontological status.

Andrew Junker’s essay on regional populist leader Bo Xilai in China takes the ontological autonomy of the object the furthest. It observes that whether or not China has a civil sphere is debatable. It does suggest we can find modernist aspirations to civil equality even in Communist Party mobilizations like the Cultural revolution. There is a knot of issues here far too large for one essay, but I appreciate that Junker is launching an important question by using a case from China to ask how much we should tie populist phenomena to the fundamental workings of the civil sphere or liberal democracy. The puzzle deserves more work.

One benefit of subjecting populism to a theory of the center is that we get some systematic, conceptual reasons for distinguishing between different species of the object. Some of those species lie inside the civil sphere. Some do not, and the difference really matters. Jeff Alexander’s introductory essay suggests that populists who remain in the center work the binary codes of the civil sphere to align themselves with the sacred democratic side, against the authoritarian side (which includes rationality/irrationality), just as other actors in the center do. This gives us principled theoretical and not just convenient political reasons to talk about how populism relates to inclusion and exclusion. In the US case, we get a sound sociological reason to say that current Republican Party strategies increasingly work outside the center, with an exclusionary understanding of “the people.” The actors are not aligning themselves with rationality against an



irrational opposition. Rather they treat rationality itself as suspect, a mode of will-formation they would dismiss in favor of loyalty to a demagogue.

Another productive consequence of treating populism to a theory of the center is that we get some innovation in the theory. Practitioners of CST incorporate adjunct concepts into the CST constellation to handle this object. I read the chapters on Poland and Germany in this light. Luengo and Kolankowska's essay on the institutionalization of right-wing extremism in Poland introduces the concept of a "pseudocivil sphere." This may be another way to do something like what Junker's essay was suggesting, which is to imagine there can be a dim echo of civil sphere binaries in an increasingly illiberal context. In the Polish case, though, the concept of pseudocivil sphere may be a place-marker for a whole societal type—one that combines cultural exclusivism with a ceremonial shell of civil binary discourse. It is not clear yet whether this conceptual move produces explanation beyond description. The essay says that, at some point, the leading rightwing party went from simply conservative populism to authoritarianism. Still, I am intrigued with the idea of a pseudocivil sphere and look forward to more development. The case of Germany brings the idea of collective memory very effectively into the conversation. I appreciate Werner Binder's bid to identify conceptual tools that we can use to study the particular cultural forms animating and embedded in real civil societies, beyond the abstractions of sacred and profane. Given Germany's 20th century experiences, collective memory is a good conceptual means to understanding cultural "frontlash" and "backlash" and the evolution of the rightwing AfD Party. When CST meets the object of populism, then, some very productive consequences result. We get useful distinctions within the object, while bringing the theory into a larger synthesis that

could help it do the work it wants to do, on more cases.

There are trade-offs, too, along with some open questions. One response to these may be that we can await further comparative-historical work. I raise these open questions now because it is worth the time to ponder what CST's level of analysis can contribute to addressing them that other levels may not.

First, what can CST contribute to explaining when and why populism within the bounds of civil discourse sometimes morphs into radical, anti-civil populism, or authoritarianism? Ates Altinordu's chapter on Erdogan in Turkey makes good headway here, eliciting for me several "aha" experiences regarding populist state leaders. The essay explains the tilt to authoritarianism in terms of populists' continuing need to *sound* populist once in power. It did occur to me that a less elaborate, strategic actor theory might come up with something rather similar, that the populist in power needs to maintain the allegiance of the political base by keeping them high on negative emotions toward out-groups. In that case we might easily conceive the operative force here in terms of old-fashioned political interest, without invoking a cultural logic. But the cultural logic does contribute to explaining why populism has become authoritarianism in Poland. That has to do with the deceptively simple difference between competing in an election and running the state. In an election campaign, populists can align themselves with the sacreds of democracy and cast their competitors as irrational or dangerously "fake," not representatives of "the people." But once the populist construct of "the people" holds the reigns of state power, that same cultural logic plays differently. Speaking from the position of state power, to call an actor "unfair" or "fake" is nearly by definition to call that actor an enemy and not just a competitor,

because the state is not just another competitor in the arena but has exclusive executive authority. Its competitors are treasonous by definition. The logic makes sense. It also makes me wonder if we are ready to say that *any* populist party, right or left, that gains state power will turn authoritarian to some extent and find enemies to persecute. In the essay's very telling terms, the leader will increase the "dose" of populism in their moves to demonize competitors and transform institutions. I ask when, if ever, might populist legislators or executives instead rearticulate the cultural logic that assigns the sacred side to "the people," and assign it instead to "citizens" or some less culturally specific category—what some US observers expect or hope will happen when an incumbent of the Presidency "grows into the office."

Second, can CST tell us when left-populist constituencies become right-populist constituencies? Can it say in some depth how that happens? The question invites intricacies of interpretation as well as theorizing. I raise it because I was struck by the discussion in Kivisto and Sciortino's concluding chapter about former US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. I wondered how CST would interpret people who were attentive to Sanders early in 2016 and then voted for Trump in the general November election.

Here is an instance where theory's encounter with object may be complicated by the interpretive leeway inside the theoretical framework. Is Sanders a left populist? The authors say no, he's a man of the established social democratic left. The chapter introduces its own adjunct concepts to make populism tractable to CST. It offers that populism is among other things a "low-manners" phenomenon, and that this evaluative phrase would not describe Sanders well. At least some observers would agree that he is a person of the responsible democratic left, as the chapter puts it—and is also a left populist in

speech and gesture. He rails against the billionaires. He gives off plainly non-elite cultural signals. It would be hard to characterize Sanders as "low-manners," but his signature winter parka couture apparently concedes little to ceremony. All of this is to say that for some research questions, we may find the encounter between a somewhat malleable theory of the cultural center and the shape-shifting, multipolar world of populism to be risky, if certainly worth the effort.

That leads to my last, open question: Can CST helpfully interpret populist-like collective action that does not stretch, repair or shrink a national civil sphere directly? Should CST aim to address that kind of object? Here I think of a kind of collective action that is extremely widespread in social movement activity, nonprofit advocacy and community service projects in the US. We may think of it as a performance, in which actors relate to each other as members loyally defending a social or political category. They talk and act together as people who expect to *identify* closely with each other. They do not simply coalesce temporarily around an issue. I call this form of civic action a community of identity (Paul Lichterman, 2021. *How Civic Action Works: Fighting for Housing in Los Angeles*. Princeton: Princeton University Press). Participants identify with each other against what they construct as invasive outside forces that threaten the autonomy and authenticity of the collective. We hear and see this form of action when people organize as "the community" fighting property developers or city planners who promote gentrification, for example. "The community" is rather like "the people" writ small. It sounds like a kind of left populism. It shapes the terms and outcomes too of advocacy campaigns across the US on a variety of urban issues. The influence on national, societal community as a whole may be indirect, or slowly cumulative. The claims of numerous communities of identity within one,

national social movement may also ricochet in mass-mediated national debate, and over time these may help broaden or narrow the categories of person who fully enjoy solidarity in the civil sphere. In any event this kind of left populism has oriented a lot of civic action in the US over the past several decades. And I wonder what an encounter between that kind of populist object and CST would be like.

Generative work leaves us with new puzzles. *Populism in the Civil Sphere* is a valuable collection partly because the essays offer excellent, provocative questions. The volume shows too that there are profoundly important questions for scholars and citizens too that civil sphere theory already addresses.

## Can the civil sphere contain populism?

Ming-Cheng M. Lo (University of California-Davis)

American sociologists seem to have a “Bernie Sanders problem.” We are not quite sure if Bernie is a populist. If he is a populist, we are not sure if we can call him a good populist. If he is a good populist, we cannot quite agree on how to distinguish between “good” versus “bad” populisms.

*Populism in the Civil Sphere* presents a conversation that helps us think productively about our Bernie Sanders problem. The Conclusion, written by Kivisto and Sciortino, ends with an explicit verdict: Sanders is not a populist, because, despite his strong anti-establishment position and rhetoric, Sanders embraces pluralism and respects constitutional democracy. After all, Sanders did not instigate a riot on Capitol Hill in the name of the “people.”

Kivisto and Sciortino’s conceptualization of populism resonates with that of Mudde’s in his frequently referenced studies. Mudde defines populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that (1) focuses on the antagonism between the people and the elite; (2) assumes the existence of a homogeneous “will” of the people; and (3) elevates direct expression of the popular will above institutional checks-and-balances (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). The over-moralization of a

presumably homogeneous “will of the people” suggests that populism is inherently anti-pluralist and suspicious of the democratic institutions that mediate direct expressions of the popular will.

However, not all scholars agree with this definition. Mudde and Kaltwasser observe that many researchers focus on the moral distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” as the key feature of populism, whereas in their argument, an equally important but frequently overlooked feature is the assumption of a homogeneous will of the people. Populism is “about the very idea that all individuals of a given community are able to unify their wills with the aim of proclaiming popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power.... Oddly enough, this aspect is often overlooked in the scholarly literature” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, p.151). Similar tensions exist in *Populism in the Civil Sphere*. Just as Kivisto and Sciortino’s Conclusion characterizes populism as fundamentally anti-pluralist, Morgan’s chapter accentuates the possibility of a potentially pluralist populism, which recognizes its vision of the “people’s will” as necessarily “a forever unfinished project” (p. 37). At the core of such scholarly contention lies a set of twin questions: Normatively,

can populism ever be good for democracy? Analytically, what is the relationship between inclusiveness and democracy?

As we confront the rising threat of populism around the globe today, these twin questions are particularly important. To this end, *Populism in the Civil Sphere* presents several thoughtful points. First, the volume clarifies that, while there is broad consensus that rightwing populism tends to be exclusive, left-wing populism is generally inclusive. Second, because inclusive populism typically broadens civil solidarity, it is conceptualized as a path to progressive civil repairs. Third, once in power, populists, leftwing or rightwing, almost always turn their vision of “the people’s will” into a moral basis to repress their perceived “enemies of the people.” In these instances, even inclusive populism becomes anti-democratic. As Botello’s and Altinordu’s chapters show, after winning major elections, populist leaders in Mexico and Turkey, who had advocated for the poor, proceeded to repress the media and rewrite institutional regulations, resulting in *anti-democratic* rather than *democratic* transformations.

But here is the remaining question: Even if there are many empirical cases of inclusive populism that ultimately became anti-democratic, is it theoretically possible to conceptualize a democratic populism? While it does not provide a definitive answer, the volume offers an important conceptual tool. Adopting the framework of civil sphere theory (CST), the volume shows that populism is both rooted in healthy tensions within the civil sphere yet differs from “politics as usual.” Most chapters emphasize that the antagonism between the people and the elite in and of itself is not anti-pluralist. Indeed, fierce competition between different interpretations of what is rational, just, and virtuous is seen as foundational to the very operation of the civil sphere. Instead, what pushes *civil* competitions

to become *uncivil* populism is the repeated attempts to delegitimize one’s opponents, e.g., spreading misinformation about them, or to undermine communicative and regulatory institutions in civil society, e.g., launching baseless attacks on the media or electoral processes. Luengo and Kolankowska’s and Enroth’s chapters demonstrate how populists in Poland and Sweden engaged in such practices, which Tognoto in this volume aptly terms “civil mimicry.” Furthermore, CST highlights a temporal understanding of the pluralist potential of the civil sphere – real civil societies approach, but never *fully achieve*, its ideal of universal solidarity (Alexander 2006).

However, adamant they are about their vision, agents of the civil sphere can only remain true to their democratic aspiration if they allow their vision to be challenged and amended, implicitly or explicitly acknowledging their inevitable partiality. From this perspective, populists, who singularize the will of the people in the moment, can potentially be pluralist if they admit that their vision is in need of future revisions. Can populists maintain such discursive reflexivity and protect its necessary institutional space? In theory, Morgan believes yes. In practice, Kivisto and Sciortino’s observation is no.

As the volume crystalizes this tension between the theoretical and the empirical appraisals of populism, it gestures towards a key direction for future research. Empirically, it invites scholars to analyze *how* progressive populists concretely pursue the people’s will as a “forever unfinished project.” If such cases can be well documented and understood, it will reformulate our perspectives on how populism contributes to as well as compromises democracy. Accordingly, such insights can reshape our discussions about how to contain the dark side of populism from within.



Furthermore, expanding the book's rich studies of how populism triumphed, future research should address how *counter-populism* prevails. Junker in this volume credits the downfall of Bo Xilai to the CCP's willingness to use repression. We can ask: are there democratic mechanisms that can similarly rein in populism? Binder's chapter suggests one answer. Focusing on how binary codes structure and are structured by trauma narratives, Binder shows that the memory culture of "never Auschwitz again!" dampened the resonance of rightwing rhetoric in the former West Germany. Elsewhere, commentators have discussed why Tsai Ing-wen, labeled by some as the "Angela Merkel of Asia," defeated her opponent Han Kuo-Yu, widely known as "Taiwan's Trump," in Taiwan's 2020 presidential election. Many argue that Han successfully performed the commoner who understood real people's problems. However, Tsai outperformed Han when she managed to transform her image from a boring technocrat to the "iron cat lady" who combined coolness, cuteness, and wisdom. From a CST perspective, the triumph of "the Angela Merkel of Asia" over "Taiwan's Trump" can be interpreted as the voters expressing greater trust in democratic institutions than populist promises. More research is needed to identify the performative, emotional, and contextual factors accounting for similar *counter-populist* successes.

Finally, while several chapters treat electoral outcomes as a key indicator for the success of populism, others indicate that electoral outcomes do not fully capture the patterns of public resonance. Enroth and Tognato both emphasize the processes in which populists appropriate and invert civil codes and, in so doing, make their claims resonant with certain social groups without necessarily winning elections. Elsewhere, Karakaya (2019) argues that,

even among supporters, the appeal of populist performances often varies and is always contingent. Indeed, the diverse cases in this volume reminds us that populism does not only, or always, appeal to "white men without college degrees." Future research should further analyze these varied and contingent patterns of resonance, not the least because such knowledge would be indispensable to facilitate our attempts at breaking down the multiple "empathy walls" in the civil sphere (Hochschild 2016).

Elaborating on the powerful framework of CST and informed by a truly global selection of cases, *Populism in the Civil Sphere* has laid an important foundation upon which we can continue to wrestle with these timely questions about how to mobilize civil sphere structures, narratives, and performances to contain the dark side of populism.

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## Populism and Democracy: A Reply

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It is a singular privilege to have distinguished colleagues, expert in shared intellectual endeavors, devote concerted time to evaluating one's efforts. Deeply appreciating their appreciation of *Populism in the Civil Sphere* (PCS), I note how carefully they have responded to almost every one of its singular contributors, whom I am confident will share my satisfaction with Robert Jansen's statement that "anyone interested in reflecting in a fresh way on the relationship between populism and democracy would do well to read this book." As Mabel Berezin notes, Jansen's own sociological approach to populism – he has authored a strikingly original book on the origins of Latin American populism in 1931 Peru (Jansen 2017) -- "bears a kinship relation" to the one that my collaborators and I take in our book. We, too, offer a culturally focused alternative to reductive structural explanation and to the thinness of repertoire theory (cf., Berezin 1997), focusing, as Jansen did, less on the underlying causes of populism – so variously evoked as to be infinite – than on the processes that actually call it into being. I also note with appreciation that Ming-Cheng Lo and Berezin both praise the volume for highlighting populism from the left, when so often deepens social justice, becoming dangerous to democracy only on its extremes.

This brief note, however, is not an occasion to dwell on the positive. In what follows, I respond to criticisms my colleagues have made. After doing so, I will conclude with some remarks about the battle for democracy being waged against radical rightwing populism today.

The first red flag I would like to consider is Jansen's concern that most chapters in PCS focus on populist challenges inside established democracies rather

than in "countries where democracy is weak, poorly institutionalized, or even non-existent." Jansen worries that, if civil sphere theory (CST) applies only to established democracies, then its "scope conditions" are "considerably narrower" than what is needed to understand contemporary populism.

In response, I would like to note, first, that one of the PCS's distinctive ambitions, as Jansen's and other commentators have observed, is to demonstrate the rootedness of populism inside civil spheres rather than, per most previous accounts, as an anti-democratic threat from without. Second, there is actually a significant emphasis in PCS on weakly institutionalized democracies. Chapters are devoted to the Philippines, Turkey, Mexico, and also to populism in China, where democracy does not exist, a chapter that Jansen discusses but regards as anomalous. My third response looks beyond PCS to the broader research program that has developed since the first "installment" of civil sphere theory in 2006 (Alexander 2006). In the years since, there has, fact, been a concerted effort to conceptualize the civil spheres of less democratic and even anti-democratic societies. A leader of this ongoing effort has been the French sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar, who has suggested that, while "a full-fledged civil sphere does not actually exist in every society," the "capacity to build one is inherent at least to every modernizing society, and can be actualized" (Khosrokhavar 2015: 153). Just as Khosrokhavar (2012, 2015, 2020) has devoted considerable attention to conceptualizing civil-emancipatory and civil-repressive movements in the authoritarian societies of Muslim north Africa, a shared ambition animated contributors to *The Civil Sphere in Latin America* (Alexander and Tognato 2018) and *The Civil Sphere in East Asia* (Alexander, Palmer, Park, and Ku 2020), where theoretically

innovative and deeply researched chapters were devoted Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Korea, China, and Taiwan.

The second issue to which I respond, or in this case amend, is Berezin's discussion of the relationship between CST and Habermas' public sphere theory. While the German philosopher's effort to theorize democracy has, indeed, inspired me from the beginning of my intellectual career, I have also, from those early days, taken strong issue with his understanding of culture and communication (Alexander 1985). Habermas insists that the pragmatic exigencies of making oneself understood to others creates universal truth conditions that provide the cultural underpinnings of democracy. Drawing from the language theories of Saussure and Austin, I have argued for a more aesthetic approach, showing that democratic discourse necessarily draws from extra-individual cultural codes whose system of othering "binarisms" is largely invisible to the speakers who evoke them. While Habermas and other theorists in the republican tradition, like Arendt, idealize publics and their discourse, my cultural-sociological approach is more skeptical, seeing references to rationality, autonomy, and transparency as performative claims than as objective or cognitive realities. Even in discursive terms, moreover, such claims to sacred republican virtues are always accompanied by contrasts with antithetical polluted qualities, such as irrationality, dependence, and dishonesty. These internal contradictions of civil discourse have, from the first democracy in ancient Greece, provided putatively legitimate justification for excluding "others" from the civil public sphere.

These considerations segue nicely into those I would like to raise in my third response. If pollution and exclusion are, indeed, at the very heart of how civil sphere theory had conceptualized the discourse of

civil society, then Paul Lichterman's identification of CST as a "theory of the center" appears tendentious and Berezin's description of CST as an "equilibrium" theory that fails "to give voice to excluded others" seems very wide of the mark. The axial point of CST is neither central powers nor social harmony. To the contrary, its relentless focus is on the *distance* between the utopian promises of civil spheres and the far from ideal deficits of "real civil societies." This distance is created by the systemic contradictions that haunt actually existing civil spheres (Alexander 2006: 193-209). When the utopia ideals of civil spheres are instantiated in space and time, they become compromised by the primordial qualities of founders and crystallized by communicative and regulative institutions that are compelled to engage in continuous efforts to interpret and resolve boundary tensions between civil spheres and the non, often anti-civil spheres that surround them.

The contradictions that compromise the ethical ambitions of civil spheres trigger social movements that challenge the legitimacy of established elites and core groups, creating possibilities for civil repair yet, at the same time, backlash movements against them. Real civil spheres are buffeted between "frontlash" forces that struggle to expand social solidarity and backlash movements that aim to narrow and further primordialize it (Alexander 2019a). I devoted many chapters in *The Civil Sphere* to contentious social upheavals unleashed by struggles for Black civil rights and women's equality and to explaining how backlash against the civil repair of antisemitism exacerbated bigotry, renewed anti-Jewish exclusions, and eventually triggered genocide (Alexander 2006: 213-548). An entire volume of original essays, *Breaching the Civil Order: Radicalism and the Civil Sphere*, brought CST to bear on "modes of political action usually condemned, not only by government, but also by organizations from churches and charities to voluntary associations and social

movements, as well as in the press” (Stack and Alexander 2020: 1), its findings suggesting that “CST offers clues to help understand why actors engage in radical acts and what happens when they do” (Stack and Alexander 2020: 3).

Drawing from the strong program in cultural sociology, CST emphasizes the relative autonomy of cultural codes and narratives, challenging the functionalist premise that sociologists should consider culture narrowly, limiting their focus to the “values” whose institutionalization putatively ensures social harmony. From the perspective of CST, it is quite the other way around. Every effort to institutionalize the civil sphere’s utopian promises underscores the distance between what is and what can be, triggering movements for civil repair like Black Lives Matters (Ostertag 2020) and #MeToo (Alexander 2019b: 73-110).

Ming-Cheng Low is right when she observes that “fierce competition between different interpretations of what is rational, just, and virtuous is seen as foundational to the very operation of the civil sphere.” During The Civil Sphere’s years of gestation, I often considered making the subtitle “A Sociological Theory of Justice,” for I view CST as a cultural-sociological complement to John Rawls’ philosophical work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls argues that a “veil of ignorance” blinds democratic citizens to the moral obligations of “the original position,” a thought experiment that requires citizens to devise equity rules for distributing social goods without knowing what their own social position would be. CST demonstrates that only insofar as citizens experience a civil form of solidarity will the veil of ignorance can be torn away, such that the moral consequences of the original position trigger civil repair. CST is a theory of justice not harmony.

The last response I make is to Lichterman’s suggestion that CST move from macro to micro, from concentrating almost exclusively on struggles over justice at the national level to city and regional protest movements that preoccupy a large part of local political life. “Can CST helpfully interpret populist-like collective actions,” he asks, “that does not stretch, repair, or shrink a national civil sphere directly,” such as forms of “civic action” that emerge when “people organize as ‘the community’ fighting property developers or city planners who promote gentrification”? Observing that “‘the community’ is rather like ‘the people’ writ small,” Lichterman suggests, quite rightly, that community struggles are about civil repair, that “such left populism [has] orient[ed] a lot of ordinary citizen action in the US over the past 40 years” and often “ricochet[s] in mass-mediated national debate” and that, “over time,” such struggles have helped “broaden or narrow the categories of person who fully enjoy solidarity in the civil sphere.” I find these remarks by Lichterman dead on, and plead “guilty as charged.” The debilitating division between micro and macro has prevented CST from engaging with the field of community studies, the distinctively American sociological effort to conceptualize grass roots social reform. Lichterman wonders “what an encounter between that kind of [local] populist object and CST would be like.” I do too. Paul, let’s organize a conference/book project on *Civil Spheres at the Grass Roots* and study this together!

In conclusion, I turn to how this collection – organized with my long-time CST soulmates Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino – can help illuminate, not only how populism sometimes wins out, but how, as Ming-Cheng Lo puts it, “*counter-populism* [often] prevails” (original italics). When scholars conceptualize populism as anomalous anti-democratic deviation, they black-box democracy, separating the analysis of backlash movements from



understandings of structures that allow civil repair. But “if you want to understand the social consequences of populism,” Jansen remarks, then “you have to start from a theory of how the civil sphere works.” If the contributions to PCS demonstrate how contradictions in civil spheres trigger populism, they also show how understanding civil spheres can help explain, in Lo’s words, how “democratic mechanisms” may “reign ... populism” in.

Not only populists but anti-populists can perform the role of the “people’s hero.” Lo points out how Tsai Ing-wen defeated her populist opponent in Taiwan’s 2020 presidential election by “successfully perform[ing] the commoner who understood real people’s problems.” Just so, in the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, Joe Biden played a convincing “everyman” against the rich man’s populist savageries of Donald Trump.

Lo also points out that CST conceptualizes not only civil *discourse*, which crystallizes meanings, but civil *institutions*, which transform such public opinion into forms of persuasive and coercive power via communicative institutions like journalism and regulative institutions like law, elections, and office. To the degree that civil institutions retain their independence – so long as they remain rooted in a relatively differentiated civil sphere – they act as powerful brushes that filter the insidiously far-fetched claims of populist demagoguery (Luengo and Garcia-Marin 2020). Amidst liberal hysteria about Fox News and right wing “network propaganda” (Benkler et al 2018), it is often forgotten how, throughout Trump’s seemingly endless years in office, elite professional journalists in the national media, from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to the *Wall Street Journal*, continuously polluted the president as a liar and a bigot, creating one highly publicized investigative

scoop after another into his nefarious activities. After the November 2020 election, the same core media institutions coolly and accurately debunked frantic Trumpian conspiracies to nullify the vote, reporting that laid the foundations for the massive upswelling of public indignation that exploded after the insurgency on January 6th. Performing a national “vital center” into being, these communicative actions by professional journalism sustained the possibility of civil solidarity (Luengo and Ihlebaek 2020). So did actions of civil sphere “agents” directing regulatory institutions. Local voting officials, like secretaries of state, fulfilled the duties of their civil offices rather than following their partisan interests, ensuring fair and unimpeded voting, conducting fair recounts, and steadfastly resisting the threats and bribes of right-wing populists, from the President on down. Meanwhile, state and federal courts broadly resisted the President’s anti-democratic onslaught, rejecting dozens of incendiary lawsuits that deployed fabricated evidence to claim election fraud (Bowden and Teague 2022).

Populism is not something that threatens democracy from outside. It is generated from strains and contradictions at the core of every real existing civil sphere. But if these threats are endemic, so also are the communicative and regulative institutions that can crystallize outraged public opinion and resist right-wing populism’s anti-democratic advance.

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## Four Questions for Bin Xu

Manning Zhang (Brandeis University) interviews Bin Xu (Emory University) about his academic life.

**Could you tell us a bit about yourself, your research, your future plans, and any other perspectives you want to share with us?**

Sure. I am currently an associate professor at Emory, and I graduated from Northwestern University in 2011. I am interested in cultural sociology but most of the time I use culture as both an independent variable and dependent variable. A week ago, I just submitted my third book to the press. **(Could you tell us what your three books are about?)** Sure. My first book, [\*The Politics of Compassion: the Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China\*](#) (Stanford University Press), was published in 2017, based on my dissertation, in which I talk about how millions of volunteers went to Sichuan and contributed to the rescue and relief efforts, and how they understand the meaning of their actions. I was one of them too. In the book, I also discuss how the volunteers interacted with the authoritarian state and how to confront their ethical and political dilemmas.

My second book, [\*Chairman Mao's Children: Generation and the Politics of Memory in China\*](#) (Cambridge University Press), was just published last year. It is a post-dissertation project, but I have been doing it for more than 10 years. It's about a generation of Chinese who were born in the late 1940s and early 1950s and migrated to the countryside and frontiers through a forcible migration called "sent-down program." They spent 6 to 10 years there. A significant part of this "sent-



down" program overlapped the Cultural Revolution. My book is about how they interpret the meanings of their past suffering which was a result of a large-scale, failed state policy: Has the past suffering been

redeemed into today's success? Or does it still continue? And how this kind of suffering and the understanding of the suffering has been shaped by the political context in China since the Mao years? Theoretically, the book is to theorize generation and memory, a topic that speaks to a central theme in sociology, what C. Wright Mills calls "sociological imagination," that is, the ability to understand intersections between personal biography and history.

The one I just finished last year is [\*The Culture of Democracy: A Sociological Approach to Civil Society\*](#) (Polity). The book is scheduled to come out this summer as part of the Polity Press's cultural sociology series. It is a survey of cultural sociology of civil society. The mainstream approaches to civil society are mostly organizational and institutional, particularly the NGOs and their interactions with the state and the market. In the past two decades, there are many works that took the cultural approach, but

*Photo 2. Bin Xu*

we still need a comprehensive introduction to this field which clarifies some key theoretical and conceptual issues. This book serves this function. It is supposed to be used by graduate students for seminars and also a manual for researchers.

Currently I am starting my fourth major project, which draws on my previous work on disasters. I want to compare how China and the United States culturally respond to disasters, especially the COVID-19, through narratives, rituals, or “performance” in the sociological sense, to address suffering and death

### **How does culture and cultural sociology influence your thinking?**

That’s a good question. I am probably one of those people who really want to know people’s subjective world. I want to go beyond the observable actions, go beyond the numbers, go beyond the structural conditions or the so-called big processes, huge structures. For example, my second book is not about the faction struggles in the Cultural Revolution, a common approach, but how people think, feel, and remember, how they understand their past and present worlds, and how they struggle to negotiate with the worlds. In general, people are always in this constant negotiation process between themselves and the society’s expectations and structural constraints. Such expectations and structures could be social and political. This kind of negotiation and corresponding dilemma have been central to my thinking.

**You have answered the third question about how culture influences your research agenda, such as research topics and methods. I want to reform our third question as: what are the motives for you to start your projects? For example, volunteer work in the earthquake disaster?**

People started projects for various reasons. Sometimes they can be a combination of personal reasons and academic reasons. Some are just random reasons. For me, it’s the combination of all the three. My dissertation topic used to be something else. I did my proposal and got passed. At the same time, the Sichuan earthquake happened (May, 2008). I stopped pretty much all my work and followed the earthquake. Later, when my emotional state resumed to normal, I felt something was missing from my dissertation topic. The old topic seemed okay but not meaningful enough for myself. Later, I went to Sichuan, only two months after the earthquake and served as a volunteer there. After I returned from Sichuan, I decided to write about the earthquake. Changing a dissertation topic was an extremely risky move, but I was determined because I couldn’t turn back on those who I encountered in Sichuan and those children who died in their collapsed schools. The cost of this impulsive decision became evident: I didn’t know what literature I should speak to; I didn’t even know what aspects of the topic I should focus on. It wasn’t until at a very late stage, when I finished the dissertation and in the process of doing follow-up research and writing a book, I figured out all these things. Another thing I eventually figured out, probably after I finished the book, was quite important: how to write what you want to say and how to reconcile it with the norms and conventions of the academic field. It’s a negotiation between the world and me, like I said before, a central theme in my thinking, which also came from my experience in my career.

### **How do you envision the future of cultural sociology and what excites you most?**

I think cultural sociology is at the crossroads now. Cultural sociology has already accomplished its original goal through uphill battles: the advocacy to emphasize that culture is important, that culture has

its independent power, and that culture is a powerful explanation. And now the culture section is one of the biggest sections of ASA. While cultural sociology is widely accepted, the trouble comes up: what is the distinctive field for cultural sociology? It is now limited to a small subfield that focuses on “culture” as the dependent variable. The sociology job market very much is designed according to dependent variables. If you look at every year’s job market, you won’t find many cultural sociology job posts. This does not mean that cultural sociology has been diminishing. On the contrary, it is now part of the mainstream and an essential independent variable. The cost of this success, however, is that junior scholars who want to find a position need to have research focuses on something else as the dependent variable and frame culture as your “approach,” for instance, culture approach to economic transactions.

Another issue is, a lot of people use culture while not specifying what they mean by culture. This is also a

cost of success: when it is widely accepted, it becomes an empty signifier which can be linked to too many signifiers; or, worse, people loosely use the term without a careful conceptualization. I think for a cultural sociologist, you need to be very clear about what you mean by culture when you are doing a specific project.

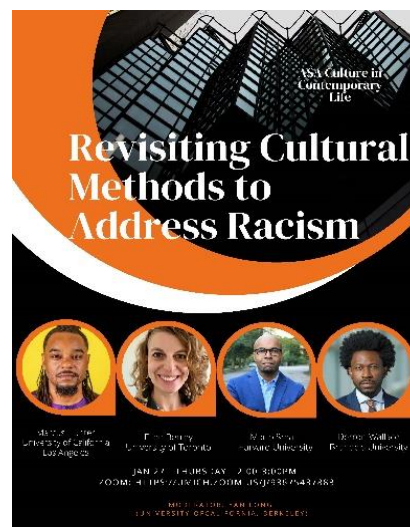
### **Do you have any advice for graduate students and young scholars?**

I think it is necessary for graduate students to ask themselves why they want to do sociology or academic work in general. This is an existential question, much more important than professional training. In terms of career development, academic jobs may not be a good investment with higher returns. You really need a more compelling reason for yourself. Again, like what I just said about culture in general, it is a meaning-seeking process.

## **Reports: “Revisiting Cultural Methods to Address Racism”**

by Manning Zhang (Brandeis University)

On Jan. 27, 2022, the Culture Section of American Sociological Association held the first event of this year’s Culture and Contemporary Life Series. Yan Long (University of California, Berkeley) moderated the discussion. Ellen Berrey (University of Toronto), Marcus Anthony Hunter (University of California, Los Angeles), Mario L. Small (Columbia University) and Derron Wallace (Brandeis University) participated as panelists. The event took the theme “Revisiting Cultural Methods to Address Racism.”



*Photo 3. Culture in Contemporary*



You can watch the recording of this event on [YouTube](#). Here are highlighted remarks from the discussion.

**Yan Long** prepared three questions. First, she asked the panelist what theoretical perspectives from the study of race and racism they regard as especially informative for cultural sociology, and what theoretical perspectives provided by cultural sociology informed their own research on race and racism.

**Derron Wallace** said that he is committed to unmasking culture as race neutral. Particularly, he found Stuart Hall's theories of race and culture compelling, and considers Stuart Hall's work worthy of more attention in US sociology. He recognizes that through cross-national or international perspectives we can further challenge and interrogate what we mean by culture. In his own work, Wallace brings Stuart Hall and Pierre Bourdieu into conversation and considers schools as central sites of cultural construction, contestation, and reproduction. He sees race as a significant social force contributing to class relations and cultural constructions.

**Mario L. Small** made two points. First, he uses the perspective of culture as an institution to build on conversations with researchers in other disciplines about the study of racial discrimination. Second, he pointed out that the sociology of culture as a subfield within the discipline has been very Eurocentric. He suggested reevaluating the subfield with respect to its diversity.

**Marcus Anthony Hunter** highlighted the works of Ida B. Wells. Hunter is always curious about the way race is conceived as something you need to "bring to the party," rather than as essentially being the foundation of the culture. As a result, work on race is pigeonholed or diminished. He argues that

whether or not race is "cultural" is actually the premise of the culture.

**Ellen Berrey** discussed how her first book, *The Enigma of Diversity*, conceptualizes the term "diversity" as a cultural object at the center of legal, political, and organizational contestation over racism. Cultural sociology helpfully foregrounds meaning-making, but it provides inadequate tools for explaining institutional racism. She explained how her book would have been different, and strengthened, if it had been more thoroughly grounded in premises of critical race theory, including an understanding of racism as a permanent structural characteristic of the United States.

The second question **Yan Long** asked was how the panelists have designed studies to review systematic racism as well as the dynamics of creating change. How have they incorporated reflectivity, particular choice of methods, and political commitment in the formulation of research questions and practice?

**Ellen Berrey** noted that her current collaborative project involves studying anti-racist campus protest and responses by university administrations and the police. She and Alex Hanna are doing a large-scale quantitative study of protest events at universities and colleges in the United States and Canada, spanning the Obama and Trump years, based on student newspaper articles. This project centers relationships between movements and organizations. It aims to support progressive and liberatory movements.

**Marcus Anthony Hunter** regarded his work as circling back to affirming the words, schemes and mindsets that he grew up with, instead of only focusing only on the negative vocabulary that has been used and that is skewed toward people who are not black. He noted his own use of the positive term

“chocolate cities,” and he suggested a perspective that reaffirms the vocabulary used on the ground.

**Mario L. Small**’s recent study maps accessibility to banks and alternative financial institutions in neighborhoods of different racial composition. His work suggests very strong patterns that cannot be accounted for by socioeconomic status. Small believes that the sociology of race and the sociology of culture share an important problem: both of them have been very jargon heavy. While some jargon is inevitable, he argued that often jargon is evidence of unclear thinking. Also, he gave a reflective analysis on the works which either expressly or not deliberately adopted a deficit model of African-American culture.

**Derron Wallace** reflected on the similarity between his experience as a community organizer and as a sociologist. He believes that adopting accessible language, and using terms drawn from the groups we study, can help the readers to “see the world as participants see it.” **Wallace** also highlighted that the training for the next generation of scholars should welcome new and innovative questions that may challenge dominant modes of theorization in cultural sociology.

**Yan Long**’s third question addressed current controversies, asking the panelists what they thought is missing in the current public debates about cancel culture and critical race theory.

**Derron Wallace** argued that we should extend the discussion concerning critical race theory to “any critical theory of race or anything critical, anything that would require that we reconsider how we distribute and use power.” He argued that there is certainly an attack on CRT in the contemporary moment, but that this is about much more than CRT. He contended that on one hand we should pay

attention to the dynamics of the conservative discourse around how critical theory is positioned, understood and misrepresented. On the other hand, we should recognize that critical race theory has to do with a critical orientation about the use and distribution of power.

**Mario L. Small** had a different take on this question. He noted that despite the ever-broadening wealth disparity, the current political environment couldn’t come up with a viable wealth tax that would redress inequality, given the vast amount of wealth that has been accumulated by the top 1 percent in the last 10 years since Occupy Wall Street. He contended that when sociologists try to figure out what we are talking about with regards to the current “debate” on Twitter over critical race theory in classrooms, we are essentially distracting ourselves over something that over the long run actually will not make a big difference. This leads us to disregard things we already know are in fact making a very large difference, such as the dramatic wealth disparities and the very heavy consequences for low-income families across the country.

On cancel culture, **Marcus Anthony Hunter** argued that humanity is not a subscription, computer or algorithm. He cautioned that researchers should not treat humanity like a magazine subscription, and treating other human beings as if they are a control key can be detrimental. **Hunter** has been working in the legislative space trying to get the United States to enact the first Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission and also to pass the H. R. 40 Commission to Study and Develop Reparation bill for African American Act. In terms of critical race theory, **Hunter** argued that to some extent the theory is normative, saying that the system is racially flawed and race intercedes in what we call justice. Rather than necessarily being anti-racist, he asked why we aren’t just pro-human, pro-love and pro-

inclusivity. He argued that we should really be talking about how we build up systemic diversity, equity and inclusion.

**Ellen Berrey** recommended listening to the opening plenary from the ASA meeting this past August, where the central topic was the attack on critical race theory. She added that we should think about the attack as part of a political movement of far-right white supremacists. Speaking about what is missing, **Berrey** expressed her expectation to see a full-throated defense of critical race research coming from university leadership, especially, and also from liberal and progressive movements.

During the Q&A session, an audience member asked what the scholars see coming out of cultural sociology that doesn't "make sense" for understanding race and racism, and what some solutions to improve that work might be.

In response to this question, **Marcus Anthony Hunter** raised additional questions: when things like race come up in the sociology of culture, why is it usually an addendum? Why is it not a prerequisite? He added that every nation is premised on a story. If the story includes race, how can you tell a national or international story with no mention of race? He encouraged scholars to take race as intrinsic, as **Derron Wallace** said earlier.

**Ellen Berrey** posed a question to those people grounded in cultural sociology but wanting to do a better job of analyzing and theorizing race and racism. Is racism what you are trying to explain? Or are you analytically prioritizing something else - such as art markets or political mobilization or neighborhood change - but your theorizing and methods need to account for racism, in order to accurately explain the institutional context, organizational dynamics, or social relations?

Another question asked about the panelist's views on the role not just of politics, but also of policy as a tool for anti-racist cultural change. **Marcus Anthony Hunter** reaffirmed his stance of being pro-human liberation and recommended that the audience look into how Barbara Lee and Cory Booker have put forward the U. S. Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission. He suggested they educate themselves by checking out policy efforts on [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov).

**Mario L. Small** echoed **Hunter's** point by suggesting that a lot of the most effective changes at the federal government began in states. He also believes that there's a part of public sociology that has to do with discourse. Changing the conversation and giving people a language to understand their circumstances can be helpful in terms of formulating social change. **Small** warned that there are times when people can very easily slip from contributing to a productive discourse to getting caught up in the noise, on Twitter for instance. He argued that when scholars are doing this kind of engagement, they should continuously ask themselves: are we doing something good as social thinkers? Are we caught up in noise when we should know better?

**Derron Wallace** wanted to call our attention to the work at the local level within the institutions that we are part of, such as that of school principals. He highlighted the policy practice gap and how people - including students and teachers - are making meaning of the given policies. He also noted that civic engagement, especially among young people, has informed sociologists that the pursuit of justice can extend well beyond the vote.

**Yan Long** thanked the speakers and the audience, and noted that upcoming events of the Culture and Contemporary Life series will discuss topics including fake news. Please pay close attention to the

note on our twitter to be informed of the most up-to-date schedule.

### Bios of Participants

**Ellen Berrey** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto and an affiliated scholar of the American Bar Foundation. Her research explores the cultural dynamics of inequality, race, law, organizations, and social movements.

**Marcus Anthony Hunter** is the Scott Waugh Endowed Chair in the Division of the Social Sciences, Professor of Sociology, and served as the Inaugural chair of the department of African American Studies at UCLA. He is generally interested in urban race relations, sexuality, politics, gender, history and change with an especial focus on urban black Americans.

**Mario L. Small** is Quetelet Professor of Social Science at Columbia University. His research interests include urban poverty, inequality, personal networks, and qualitative and mixed methods.

**Derron Wallace** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Education at Brandeis University. He specializes in cross-national studies of structural and cultural inequalities in urban schools across global cities, focusing specifically on the experiences of young people of African descent. His current research examines the educational outcomes of Black youth in London and New York City.

**Yan Long** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of California, Berkeley. She studies the interactions between globalization and authoritarian politics across empirical areas such as civic action, health, development and technology.

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## Special Announcements

### John Mohr Dissertation Improvement Grant

#### About the Grant

The **John Mohr Dissertation Improvement Grant** of \$1000 will go to one racially or ethnically under-represented graduate student at a public institution studying any topic. The recipient must be a member of the Sociology of Culture section.

This grant recognizes that scholars of color, especially graduate students, have been historically, systematically disadvantaged in academia and uses a commitment of material resources to acknowledge this harm and offer a small means of redress going forward.

Criteria for the award will be based on graduate student standing, merit, and need. Application materials include CV, dissertation abstract, an explanation as to how the grant will be used to expand your research beyond existing resources, and a brief explanation of your identity as a member of a racially or ethnically underrepresented group.

Applications are due **March 15th** every year. The Application period will open on January 1. Notifications will be sent no later than **May 1st** and dispersal will take place shortly after.

### How to make a donation

People interested in donating to the grant should send a check to the ASA accompanied by a cover letter identifying the section and purpose of the funds (i.e., it should clearly state that the funds are intended for the Sociology of Culture section's John Mohr Dissertation Improvement Grant). Here you can find a template of a cover letter for making a donation. The ASA's address for this purpose is the following:

American Sociological Association  
c/o Governance Department  
1430 K Street NW  
Washington DC 20005

Please simultaneously also email the section's secretary/COO [insert email link] to alert them of the donation. Upon receiving the funds, the section's secretary will then earmark them for the grant and coordinate with the John Mohr Grant Committee the allocation and distribution of the funds.

The current donors that fund the John Mohr Award donate yearly. Donors can, of course, choose to donate year by year or to do so just once. If you plan to donate yearly, we request that you communicate to the section's secretary [insert email link] expressing your interest in this regard. The secretary would then reach out to you each year (in September) to remind you about your donation.

### About John Mohr

[John Mohr](#) pioneered cultural research on meaning and measurement in sociology, focusing on institutional processes of meaning-making on topics ranging from poverty relief to institutional diversity initiatives. He spent his career at the University of California - Santa Barbara, and at different times served as Chair of the Culture Section and the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA). Behind the scenes, in a variety of roles, he dedicated his time and resources to diversity and equity initiatives. He died in 2019 of complications due to ALS.



*Photo 4. John Mohr*

As an incredibly supportive mentor and a brilliant scholar, John Mohr left a substantive mark on an entire generation of cultural sociologists. Testaments of his immense influence in the field are the collective book [Measuring Culture](#) (Columbia University Press) and the recently published [special issue of Poetics](#) co-edited by two of Mohr's advisees.



## Culture Section Mentorship Program

### Culture Section Mentorship Program: 2022 guidelines

Hello ASA Culture Section members!

The Culture Section is hosting the third annual Mentorship Program as part of the 2022 ASA meetings. The purpose of the program is to group together mentors and mentees based on similar mentorship interests—e.g., publishing, teaching, alt-ac jobs, equity, etc.

We are doing things a bit differently this year in that we will have two separate applications: one for mentors and the other for mentees. The first application will be for mentors. We will then use the responses to the mentor application to help us fine-tune the mentee application. The final mentor-mentee pods (generally consisting of one mentor and multiple mentees) will be announced on **May 15, 2022**.

We will match mentors and mentees based on shared interests and desired goals of the mentorship.

The type and frequency of connection is up to each mentor-mentee pod, but we do require that mentors connect with the mentees at least three times—for example, three separate Zoom meetings over the course of the calendar year.

Here is a link to the mentor application, which will **open at 12a EST on March 1, 2022, and close at 11:59p EST on April 8, 2022**: <https://bit.ly/34QsMyJ>

Here is a link to the mentee application, which will **open at 12a EST April 15, 2022, and close at 11:59p EST on May 1, 2022**: <https://bit.ly/3s6lCyU>

Thanks everyone, and please feel free to reach out if you have any questions!

The Culture Section Membership Committee: Marshall Taylor (chair), Tania Aparicio, Barbara Kiviat, Sam Leonard, Rachel Skagg, Ana Velitchkova and Amy Zhang

## Call for Newsletter Editors!

Are you interested in joining the editorial team for the Culture Section newsletter? We are looking for two additional section members to join our team. We will work together to highlight the work of section members, disseminate information about ongoing activities within the section, and foster discussion and intellectual exchange on topics of interest to our members.

Responsibilities include envisioning and organizing content for the newsletter, soliciting contributions and ideas, and preparing submitted material for publications. Our section embraces interpersonal, methodological, and theoretical diversity, and we encourage scholars from underrepresented backgrounds to apply:

In recognition of the newsletter editor's significant contributions to the intellectual life of the Culture Section, we will provide an honorary grant of \$150, to be used for research or travel expenses. This grant will be disbursed prior to the ASA Annual Meeting in recognition of a full year of service to the section (from one Annual Meeting to the next).

Please email the current newsletter editors at [asaculturenews@gmail.com](mailto:asaculturenews@gmail.com) if you are interested in this service opportunity.

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## Announcements

### New Articles

Carbone, Luca and Jonathan J.B. Mijs. 2022. "Sounds like meritocracy to my ears: exploring the link between inequality in popular music and personal culture." *Information, Communication and Society* (in press) <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/QSUU5SEBYER633MBUKIU/full?target=10.1080%2F1369118X.2021.2020870>

de Laat, Kim and Allyson Stokes. 2021. Cultural Sociology and the Politics of Canonization: An Anglo-Canadian Perspective. *Cultural Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755211048435>

Mijs, Jonathan J.B., Stijn Daenekindt, Willem de Koster & Jeroen van der Waal. 2022. "Belief in meritocracy reexamined: Scrutinizing the role of subjective social mobility" *Social Psychology Quarterly* <https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725211063818>

Jonathan Mijs (Boston University) was interviewed in a MarketWatch article titled, "Racial and economic inequality persists. Why do many people deny it?" (January 29) and quoted in a BuzzFeed article titled, "This Professor Went Viral for Asking Students How Much They Think The Average Person Makes, And It's Eye-Opening" (January 21).

Mijs, Jonathan J.B., Willem de Koster and Jeroen van der Waal. 2021. "Belief change in times of crisis: Providing facts about COVID-19-induced inequalities closes the partisan divide but fuels Republican intra-partisan polarization about inequality." *Social Science Research* (in press) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2021.102692>

Rucks-Ahidiana, Zawadi. 2022. "Race and the Financial Toolkit: Bridging Cultural Theories to Understand Behavior and Decision Making in the Racial Wealth Gap." *Sociological Inquiry*. doi: 10.1111/soin.12468.

Skovajsa, Marek. 2021. "Continuity in Discontinuity: The Recurrent Motif of Cultural Autonomy in the Development of Czech Sociology of Culture." *Cultural Sociology* 15 (4): 463-485.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975521999636>

Taylor, Anne. 2021. "Audience Agency in Social Performance," *Cultural Sociology*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755211029604>

## New Books

### *The Cage of Days: Time and Temporal Experience in Prison*

K.C. Carceral and Michael G. Flaherty  
(Columbia University Press, 2021)

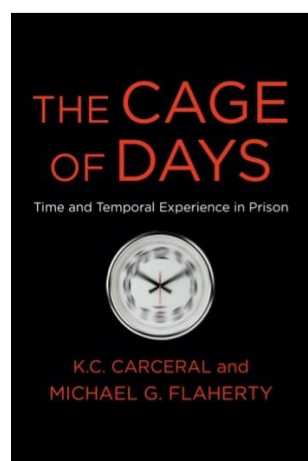


Photo 5. *The Cage of Days* Book Cover

Prisons operate with the clockwork logic of our criminal justice system: we punish people by making them “serve” time. *The Cage of Days* combines the perspectives of K. C. Carceral, a formerly incarcerated convict criminologist, and Michael G. Flaherty, a sociologist who studies temporal experience. Drawing from Carceral’s field notes, his interviews with fellow inmates, and convict memoirs, this book reveals what time does to prisoners and what prisoners do to time.

Carceral and Flaherty consider the connection between the subjective dimensions of time and the existential circumstances of imprisonment. Convicts find that their experience of time has become deeply distorted by the rhythm and routines of prison and by how authorities ensure that an inmate’s time is under their control. They become obsessed with the passage of time and preoccupied with regaining temporal autonomy, creating elaborate strategies for modifying their perception of time. To escape the feeling that their lives lack forward momentum, prisoners devise distinctive

ways to mark the passage of time, but these tactics can backfire by intensifying their awareness of temporality. Providing rich and nuanced analysis grounded in the distinctive voices of diverse prisoners, *The Cage of Days* examines how prisons regulate time and how prisoners resist the temporal regime.

The webpage for our book can be found at this link:

<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-cage-of-days/9780231555050>

Columbia University Press is offering a 20 percent discount with this promotional code: CUP20

*Fixing Stories: Local Newsmaking and International Media in Turkey and Syria.*

Noah Arjomand

(Cambridge University Press, 2021)



*Photo 6. Local Newsmaking and International Media in Turkey and Syria Book Cover*

News 'fixers' are translators and guides who assist foreign journalists. Sometimes key contributors to bold, original reporting and other times key facilitators of homogeneity and groupthink in the news media, they play the difficult but powerful role of broker between worlds, shaping the creation of knowledge from behind the scenes. In *Fixing Stories*, Noah Amir Arjomand reflects on the nature of news production and cross-cultural mediation. Based on human stories drawn from three years of field research in Turkey, this book unfolds as a series of narratives of fixers' career trajectories during a period when the international media spotlight shone on Turkey and Syria. From the Syrian Civil War, Gezi Park protest movement, rise of authoritarianism in Turkey and of ISIS in Syria, to the rekindling of conflict in both countries' Kurdish regions and Turkey's 2016 coup attempt, Arjomand brings to light vivid personal accounts and insider perspectives on world-shaking events alongside analysis of the role fixers have played in bringing news of Turkey and Syria to international audiences.

You can read the introduction here:

[https://assets.cambridge.org/9781316518007/excerpt/9781316518007\\_excerpt.pdf](https://assets.cambridge.org/9781316518007/excerpt/9781316518007_excerpt.pdf)