



The Nordic Civil Sphere

EDITED BY JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER,
ANNA LUND AND ANDREA VOYER

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To the Dream of a Truly Civil State

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Edited by

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Anna Lund,
and Andrea Voyer

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Independence: Cultural Codes and Symbolic Performance (2012), editor of *Cultural Agency Reloaded: The Legacy of Antanas Mockus* (2017), and coeditor with Jeffrey C. Alexander of *The Civil Sphere in Latin America* (2018).

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This volume is part of a series of conference-cum-book projects that aim to simultaneously globalize and de-provincialize civil sphere theorizing. The first three of these efforts were published by Cambridge University Press: *The Civil Sphere in Latin America* (eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Carlo Tognato, 2017), *The Civil Sphere in East Asia* (eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, David A. Palmer, Sunwoong Park, and Agnes Shuk-mei Ku, 2019), and *Breaching the Civil Order: Radicalism and the Civil Sphere* (eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Trevor Stack, and Farhad Khoshrokovar, 2019). The current volume, the first of three to be published by Polity Press, will be followed by *Populism and the Civil Sphere* (eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Peter Kivisto, and Giuseppe Sciortino) and *The Indian Civil Sphere* (eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Suryakant Waghmore).

The conference that preceded this book took place in Växjö, Sweden, on June 8–9, 2018. We gratefully acknowledge the Center for Cultural Sociology and the Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at Linnaeus University, who graciously supported this book project and hosted the intellectually stimulating and socially convivial conference.

The three coeditors have worked together on various occasions over many years, thinking together about cultural sociology, the civil sphere, and multiculturalism in the United States and Sweden. Andrea Voyer spent a year in residence at Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology, where Anna Lund has been a regular visitor since 2004. Jeff Alexander has been a regular visitor to Nordic academic centers since the early 1980s.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, New Haven
Anna Lund, Stockholm
Andrea Voyer, Stockholm

*Vi är insatta i det stora system av ömsesidighet och beroende på vilket
hela tillvaron vilar.*

*[We are included in the larger system of reciprocity and dependence
upon which all existence rests.]*

– Elin Wägner (1941), journalist, feminist,
environmental activist, and author*

* E. Wägner, *Väckarklocka*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1953 [1941], p. 335.

Introduction

Civil Spheres, Pro-Civil States, and Their Contradictions

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Anna Lund, and Andrea Voyer

The premise of this volume is that civil sphere theory (CST) can provide new ways of understanding the particularities of Nordic social democratic societies, not just their well-known and long-heralded glories, but the more recent, and less-discussed, grave difficulties they face as well. Understanding these particularities of contemporary Nordic countries (we discuss Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) will help advance and revise CST in turn.

The civil sphere is an activating symbolic structure of meaning and emotion. Such a sphere “relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of principle, not experience, because of our putative commitment to a common secular faith.” According to CST, “democracy as a way of life” is not a “game governed by technical rules” but by expectations and feelings, and sacred and profane values concerning what is good and bad (Alexander 2006: 4). The civil sphere is a cultural-cum-institutional arena. An idealized community defined by a universalizing ethic of solidarity, it is, however, never more than partially institutionalized. It reaches for the democratic skies, but it has feet of clay. Real civil spheres are continually inspiring, and they are productive of real and practical civil repair, but they are also filled to brimming with tumult and contradiction.

The civil sphere has uncertain and tense boundaries with other spheres of social life, for example markets, religions, families, and states. To the degree that the pressures generated by such non-civil spheres inhibit the formation of civil solidarity, these non-civil institutions and values are represented – by social actors and social theory alike – as “destructive intrusions,” as dogmatic and restrictive churches, patriarchal and authoritarian families, class-dividing economies, and coercive states. When non-civil institutions provide critically important resources for

the creation and maintenance of civil spheres, and they often have, they are represented in a radically different manner, as crucial “facilitating inputs,” as reformist religions that contribute ideals of justice and models of dissent; as markets that promote practices of responsibility and freedom; as families and schools that teach autonomy and respect among genders; as states that provide material resources for empathy and self-respect.

In addition to these tensions generated by functional boundaries, there are also contradictions created by time and space. Civil spheres are not only instantiated in highly differentiated, multi-functional social systems, they are also lodged in delimited physical spaces and founded at specific historical times. The universalizing ideals and institutions that constitute “real existing” civil spheres have been realized mostly within national containers. The United States, South Korea, India, Colombia, and Sweden all possess civil spheres that expand their people’s possibilities for justice, solidarity, and equality – but only for *their* people. In the very process of allowing more universal solidarities, in other words, civil containers also become particular. American, Korean, Indian, Colombian, and Swedish, they are nationally confined civil spheres, defined by place. The civil possibilities of such national spaces, moreover, are also delimited by time. Communities who have “arrived first” on the national scene – sometimes via immigration, sometimes through invasion, sometimes through refoundings via revolution – become privileged core groups, the founders of national institutions, the creators of national myth. The primordial characteristics of such core groups bring abstract civil values down to earth, limiting them greatly in the process. The civil qualities available inside any nation are, then, limited by the primordial characteristics of its founding groups – their race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class status, and language.

The contributions to this volume speak to the universalizing culture and institutions of Nordic civil spheres, but also to the pressures of time, place, and function that undermine and contradict them. Nordic nations have long been admired for implementing egalitarian social policies without abandoning political democracy. Alone in the modern world, they have brought democracy to socialism and socialism to democracy. It is the contention of this volume, however, that this admirable empirical achievement, so impressive normatively, has not been conceptualized theoretically in entirely satisfactory ways. Facing the massive political and organizational fact of Nordic social democracy, explanatory frameworks have themselves tended toward the material and organizational, to conflict-theoretical concepts that put the emphasis on states, economies, institutions, politics, and demography¹ (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990,

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1999; Hort 2014a, 2014b; Sainsbury 2001). Theorists have treated Nordic social democracy as an “unmoved mover.” Social democracy is assigned the role of savior, to whom the Nordic region, as Mother Mary, has given virginal birth. Challenging this origin myth, contributors to this volume avoid the widespread tendency to reify the social democratic state. Nordic social democracy, far from being an immaculate conception, has grown from the fertile and dense grounding of nation-states.

To explore the limitations and possibilities that such grounding implies, we believe that CST, and cultural sociology more broadly, should be added to the theoretical brew. As Enroth and Henriksson discuss in chapter 1, in 1907, when Karl Staaf, the leader of Sweden’s Liberal Party, declared the need for “a social-reformative point of view,” he referenced precisely the kind of non-political, civil sphere relationships and sensibilities that were needed to buttress the creation of such a newly reformist state. It would be a point of view, according to Staaf, that seeks to “strengthen the solidarity [*samhörighet*] among the members of society, and believes itself through the strengthening of solidarity to gain a stronger lever for progress than cannot be gained in any other way” (Levin 1997: 261). Building a reformist state requires a solidary community, upon which “a strong unified activity [functions] for the common good of all” (Levin 1997: 261–2). In 1903, the socialist leader Gustaf Steefen declared that, if “democrats” were to succeed in controlling the “social forces” of capitalism, they would have to act on behalf of “the highest cultural idealism” (Karlsson 1993: 52). As the Swedish Social Democratic Party actually began taking control of the state, in the mid-century period, it framed radical political and organizational reform as expressions not of the exigencies of class and material conflict, but of the wide and welcoming solidarity of the “people’s home” (*folkhemmet*), of “society” itself (Linderborg 2001: 376–7; cf. Jepperson 2002).

Even as the creation of the social democratic state depended on civil solidarity and democratic ideals, the reverse was true as well. If the civil sphere were to inspire civil repair, its success would ultimately depend on the political power and bureaucratic organization of the state. As Enroth and Henriksson argue in chapter 1, “The encompassing vision of civil solidarity on which the welfare state rests can only be realized” through a vast material repair, one that involves “timely and targeted political intervention into all relevant aspects of the spatial, physical, social, and economic organization of human life in ‘society.’” Indeed, by the 1940s, the Swedish state had “emerged as a – or *the* – force actively promoting the civil sphere . . . through [its] universalizing discourse as well as [its] policy.”

Even though, as Engelstad and Larsen suggest in chapter 2, it was the cultural power of Nordic civil spheres that produced what they felicitously describe as “pro-civil states,” the “civil reforms” introduced by such states are undertaken in distinctively organizational and material ways. Healthcare, pensions, family policies, education, and employment were reorganized, funded by taxation, and implemented via bureaucratic norms and sanctions. The state also intervened directly in the economy, “[s]etting the basic rules for labor market negotiation . . . over wages [and] working conditions” via Basic Agreements between unions and employer federations, translating broad solidary feelings into contractual “class compromise.”

In this back and forth between civil sphere and state, Nordic social democratic political parties, as interstitial organizations, crystallized broad civil values into political ideologies, recruited cadres to organize and expand civil power, formulated detailed social policies and implemented them via control of the state. Yet, throughout this process, as Engelstad and Larsen point out, social democratic parties also worked to sustain the autonomy of the civil sphere vis-à-vis the state. On the one hand, civil values could be “institutionalized” only “through a whole range of regulative institutions”; on the other hand, it was social democratic policy to nurture the independence of communicative institutions. Nordic social democratic states subsidized factual and fictional media – journalism and the arts – without strings attached, respecting the “arm’s-length principle” of non-intervention and encouraging the free expression of critical evaluation via voluntary organizations, white papers, and state-organized public hearings.

Nordic social democratic states are not themselves civil sphere institutions; directed by political parties, their aim is to produce and deploy power. Social democratic political power, however, has transformed Nordic states into institutions that implement power on behalf of civil values and institutions. This has remained the case even after the anti-statist reforms of the 1990s, when the worldwide ideological, economic, and political “crisis of (state) socialism” triggered withering criticism of Nordic states as top-down and authoritarian, indeed as anti-civil. In response, Nordic societies initiated extensive privatization and established voluntary citizen councils, not only to advise the state, but also to allocate funding. Yet, despite such significance organizational shifts, social democratic parties continued to exercise powerful supervision, and Nordic governments remained pro-civil states.

The state is not the only non-civil sphere of social life shaping civil solidarity. In chapter 3, Egholm devotes her analysis not to Danish social democracy, but to the work of philanthropic organizations in the history

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leading up to it. Egholm shows that the state was shaped by philanthropic organizations who employed a civil sphere discourse as they argued for the inclusion of the “deserving poor.” Such movements across spheres are “civil translations” that “change the content of what is moved as well as the entities to which they are moved.” “[I]t is not only social movements that carry the promise of civil translations”; such work can be carried out by establishment organizations as well. Egholm also finds that even the most progressive core group notions of what constituted civil “deservingness” were heavily weighted by restrictions that today seem primordial and anti-civil, limitations based on stereotypes about class and gender.

Nordic social democracy was not immaculately conceived; it did not emerge simply from the sinewy strength of socialist parties, the responsive efficacy of the party state, or the benevolence of philanthropists. Repairing the “functional” strains produced by industrial capitalism depended on the cultural and institutional ground base of robust and solidaristic civil spheres. But these civil spheres were not themselves pure and pristine. Indeed, as the contributors to this volume suggest, the solidarities that sustained Nordic social democracy were national, not truly universal in scope. And, as *Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish* civil spheres, they were also constricted by the limitations of time and space.

Nilsson and Trulsson’s depiction in chapter 4 of the struggle of Islamic women for the right to work while wearing visible religious clothing provides a striking segue from the functional-economic challenges to civil solidarity, which social democracy did so much to address, to the civil sphere’s primordial contradictions, which persist. The Swedish social democratic state is not only pro-civil, but also white in color; European in ethnicity; secular in a religion-is-a-private-matter-mildly-Christian kind of way; and gender-equal in a subtly restrictive manner that stigmatizes ethnic and religious traditions that order gender in an “older” fashion. This primordialism produces a challenging situation in the interface between the right to work, religion, and gender equality. Following the prescriptives of EU policies of neutrality, some Swedish companies implemented dress requirements that “force [Muslim women who wanted to wear the veil] to choose between the hijab and providing for themselves,” thereby denying these women equal access to the right to work, which is considered an ideal of the social democratic civil sphere (chapter 4). Moreover, the attempts to address this civil exclusion, which were initially interpreted in line with historical struggles “for the right to work, the right to vote, and other epic events in the progressive storyline of the Swedish national historical consciousness,” were stymied by a

“refusal to see hijabi women as autonomous subjects. Recognition of particular identities is difficult in Sweden, as independence and autonomy are believed to be achieved through the individual’s dissolution of strong religious or cultural communities” that deviate from primordial Swedishness.

The significant, highly deleterious social effects of such primordialization of the state’s civility – of what happens to individuals and groups and movements because they are not perceived as being fully Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, or Swedish – is the principal focus of other contributions to this volume as well.

If the progressive, universalizing discourses of Nordic civil spheres make such limiting particularities invisible to the gaze of national core groups, they are highly visible to those on the other side. In response to experiences of degradation, however, representatives of Nordic countries’ subaltern groups, inspired by the ideals and promises of civil incorporation, have often responded in highly reflexive ways. They have scripted compelling cultural performances that critically reveal the primordial undersides of social democratic codes, expanding civil values by weaving them into proud expressions of group traditions and identities. Reflexive social performances that simultaneously challenge core primordialities and endorse core group civil values are the central concerns of chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 5, Schall describes the role of the arts in enabling expression of minority group members experiences and transformative views of “home/belonging, racism, political action, and Swedishness.” As an example of such possibilities, Swedish hip-hop “has potential for shifting cultural codes, particularly around equality, tolerance, self-confidence, and the civility of ‘righteous anger,’” which could lead to civil repair and claims of belonging, as in the following lyrics:

Sweden is our home
Since long ago
Because today a Swede can
Look like anything
I have to be able to be myself
Because I swear, man, in Sweden
Everyone has to be worth the same.

(HighWon, “Det nya Sverige,” “The New Sweden,” *För evigt*, 2010)

Righteous anger is not just the inheritance of those who are new to the Nordic countries; it also reverberates in the claims and concerns of the indigenous people. In chapter 6, Skille and Broch examine Sámi sports organizations’ quest for recognition to show that the Nordic

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nations have always built their solidarity against a neglected outsider within. As the Sámi “were colonized and their land was parceled up by the Nordic nation-states,” they were subject to assimilation practices. While initially denied any formal standing in national sports associations, Sámi sports were eventually included and regarded as “a contributor to the multicultural landscape of the Norwegian civil sphere.” This inclusion also worked toward a reintegration of Sámi people across national borders. Sámi were, through sports, performatively “re-fused.” The recognition of Sámi sports associations was itself a consequence of the rise of multiculturalism as a civil quality. Thus, inclusion of “Sámi sports had become a means for the Norwegian state to perform its obligation of civil repair.”

Social democratic civility and universalism and its primordial underside are vividly on display in the relationships among native and “foreign” students in Swedish schools. For decades, the Social Democratic government brought hundreds of thousands of immigrants to Sweden from regions whose culture and institutions diverged from core group practices, confident that the newcomers would be offered not only the material benefits of socialism but also the solidarity of the people’s home. As described by Anna Lund and Voyer in chapter 7 and Stefan Lund in chapter 8, the school is a site for the enactment, negotiation, and contestation of civil and uncivil boundaries associated with modes of incorporation in the civil sphere. Lund and Voyer examine modes of incorporation as they are crystallized in everyday social categories and their civil and uncivil connotations when it comes to core values of Swedish individualism and equality. These connotations shape the relationships between students, the possibilities for student self-identification, and the scope of aspirations and actions of students in the school context. They also document a novel position within the civil sphere: that of the outsider within. The outsider within is, in Lund and Voyer’s words, “an internally referenced category with characteristics defined in negation: in being Swedish, but not typically or unproblematically Swedish.” The outsider within can mount an internal challenge to the primordialism of the civil sphere by “showing how the indeterminacy of categorizations and their intersection with social life shape the potential for agency.” In chapter 8, Lund further demonstrates that “school choice and formal schooling are crucibles for the development of civil solidarity and incorporation.” As students select their high schools and programs of study, they negotiate the meaning of Swedishness and its presumed ties to pro-academic characteristics. For academically oriented students from non-Swedish cultural backgrounds and stigmatized immigrant neighborhoods, inclusion in a rigorous academic program presents challenges as their “ways

of communicating and interacting with people have to be relearned” and they feel they must differentiate themselves from pejorative views of immigrants: that they are not oriented toward learning and instead “are loud and talkative, passionate, and exhibit a general disorderly behavior.”

At first glance, the findings of Steen-Johnsen and Winsvold in chapter 9 would seem to contradict these discussions of primordial constrictions and the social performances that display and oppose them. In the wake of the 2011 Anders Behring Breivik terrorists attack that killed 77 people, they find, Norwegians sustained civil and inclusive discourse. Through a variety of spirited and inspired social performances, and “contrary to political reactions witnessed after terror attacks elsewhere, Norwegian political leaders stressed the importance of maintaining the openness, tolerance, and solidarity proclaimed to characterize Norwegian society. The public followed suit, organizing peaceful rose marches nationwide.” However, there is a crucial caveat to Steen-Johnsen and Winsvold’s demonstration of the vitality of Norway’s vital center: their finding that core group reactions would probably be quite different if the person committing terrorist violence were an immigrant himself. “[T]errorism may lead to changes in the weighting of values . . . In the face of terrorism, some new, particular, non-civil values such as security, courage, and trust enter into the core cultural lexicon of public life.” As a result, Muslims in Norway came to be associated with terror, although the terrorist himself had been Norwegian.

Kivisto and Saukonen analyze just how dangerously far the strain between pro-civil social democratic states and the restrictive particularisms that primordialize them might go. Extreme right-wing parties and the rise of populism have emerged as a backlash against multiculturalism, but the ideals they champion have been an element of national politics all along. Such parties advance an undiluted expression of the primordialism of the nation-state; in the case of the True Finns party described in chapter 10, “a sense of distinctiveness . . . which asserted that ‘the Finnish language is the basis of Finnish identity,’ connecting language to the primordial history of the Finnish people.” It is the preservation of Finnish identity that motivates the nationalists, and intolerance and anti-immigrant sentiment follow from a sense of threat arising from the exclusionary understanding of the fusion between the Finnish welfare state and a mythical ancestral people, the “True Finns.” It is the welcoming society the True Finns fear – a fear that is not widely held by the public at large – but it serves to explain the intense venom directed at multiculturalism.

Conclusion

CST reorients normative and empirical social analysis to issues of meaning, to institutions and structures of feeling that are civil and democratic, and to primordial identifications and backlash sentiments that undermine them. CST provides a way to think about power, domination, and the allocation of material and ideal resources that is fundamentally different from how organizational materialism (Mann 1993: 52) conceptualizes such phenomena. Gaining power is a matter not only of controlling resources and dominating fields, but also of performing discourses individually and collectively, of entering into the thicket of social meanings. In the analyses of the Nordic civil sphere that follow, contributors move away from Weberian and Marxist sensibilities to something more Durkheimian, Geertzian, and thickly semiotic, while continuing to focus on issues of solidarity and incorporation, domination and exclusion. They look at how social actors create powerful narratives, work the binaries, and invent master symbols that structure social feeling and delineate the lines of social solidarity. They look at how meaning-making constitutes civil power. Insofar as there is a democracy, state power depends on becoming a collective representation of civil sphere values. It is the discursive construction of one's own cause as civil and one's opponents as anti-civil that decides who can wield the material power of the state. In a democracy, state power is neither *sui generis* nor purely instrumental; it is all about the movement of people and parties representing the civil sphere into the state. If democracy is the transposition of civil into state power, then Nordic social democratic political parties perform the role of translators, widening the sense of civil solidarity and representing it in the state.

The implicit assumption is that, after representatives of the civil sphere take power, state institutions will be willing and able to work on behalf of civil sphere beliefs and sentiments in an organizational way. In civil sphere theorizing to this point, however, exactly how this state-political institutionalization actually takes place has not been explored. This is precisely what an examination of Nordic social democracy allows us to see. Contributors to *The Nordic Civil Sphere* have opened up the black box of how states interpolate civil power, how government effectuates civil commitments inside the state, and how state power, after it is shaped by the civil sphere, has an independent and powerful democratic effect. Social democracy created big states in order to realize a more civil solidarity. As material organizational power became infused with civil democratic values and meanings, social democratic states engineered

civil repair (Selznick 1957). Civil solidarity can be fully realized only if state power reaches into a wide range of non-civil institutions. Such actions are regulated by the personnel and ideologies of political parties.

Institutionalizing the civil sphere in the state is an uneven and highly stratified process, deeply affected by the contradictions of time, place, and function. Several of the chapters that follow examine how social democracy deals with the “functional” contradictions generated by market economies, especially the anti-civil effects of class. Other chapters examine how social democracy’s ambitious repair efforts have been limited by exclusions that have been generated by the contradictions of time and place. Nordic countries have core groups whose primordial qualities create everyday essentialisms that block civil repair. CST conceptualizes this bumpy road as struggles over the mode of incorporation. Demanding assimilation actually enforces core group hegemony; multi-cultural incorporation allows difference to be coded in a civil way.

The chapters in this book provide new insights into the Nordic civil sphere, but they also develop and expand upon CST. The link between state power and the civil sphere, and the resulting collaborations that Tognato, in his commentary, describes as “the civil state,” come through clearly in these texts. But there are additional developments in CST that bear mentioning. In the well-developed Nordic societies, interstitial institutions are important sites for civil sphere processes. Schools, philanthropical organizations, political parties, popular culture, and sports associations can be analyzed in terms that go beyond differentiation and power: they are settings for the establishment of collective solidarity and exclusion, social performance, and civil repair.

The meaning-centered analysis demanded by CST enriches our understanding of classic sociological questions of what makes society possible. The contributions in this volume apply these questions to the ongoing project that is the Nordic civil sphere.

Note

- 1 Typical are Esping-Andersen’s influential contributions to theorizing the welfare state (e.g. 1990, 1999), which are concentrated almost entirely in the theoretical worlds of political economy and class struggle. Though less Marxist in its framing, Hort’s (2014a, 2014b) broad and influential volumes similarly focus on the interplay of politics, social forces, and economic development (cf., Sainsbury 2001). For an alternative take on the formation of welfare states, one that emphasizes the significant role of moral universalism, see Kildal and Kuhnle’s (2007) edited volume on normative foundations.

INTRODUCTION

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Part I

Social Democracy and the Civil Sphere

