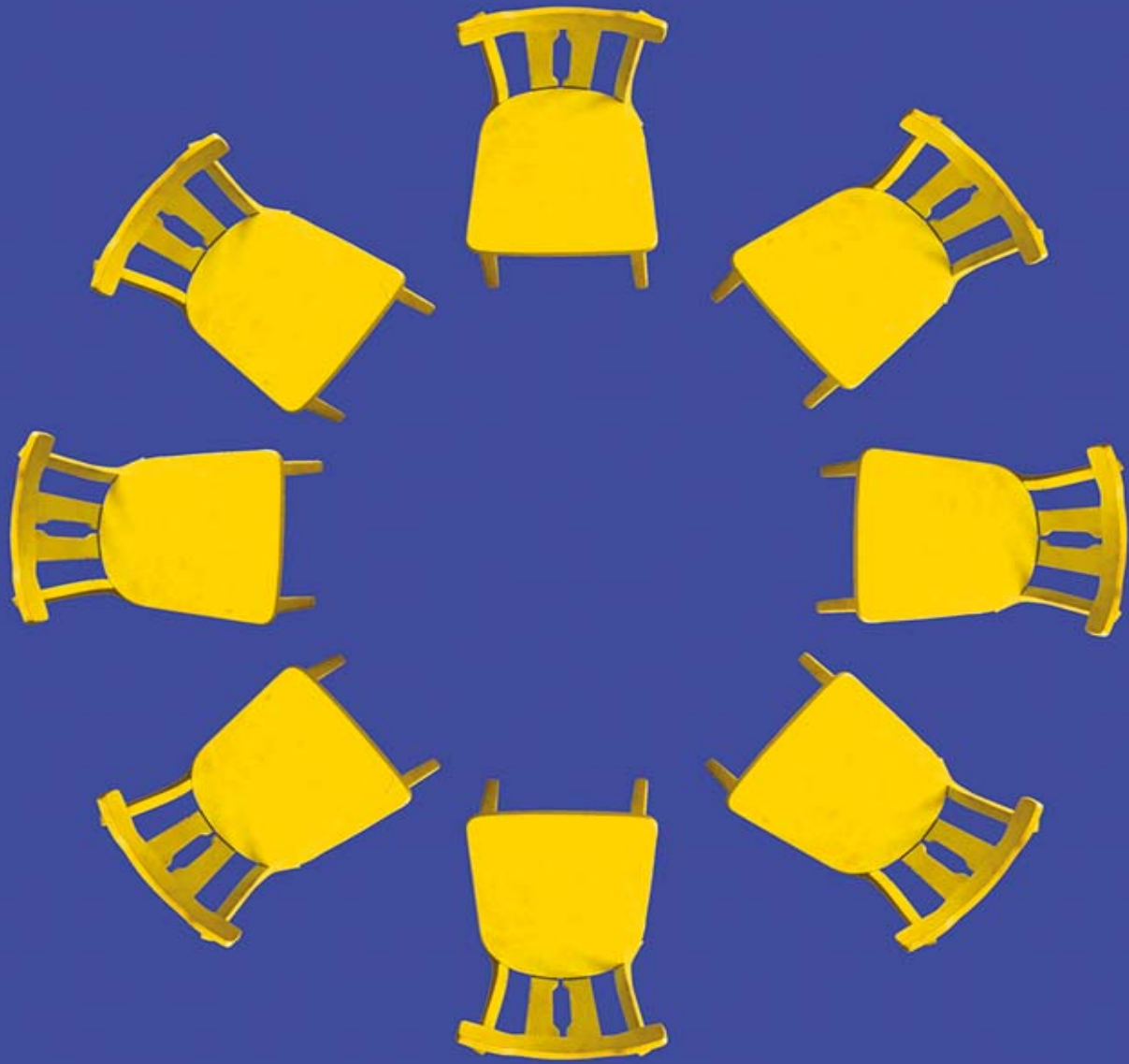


CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY



THE CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Bin Xu

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The Culture of Democracy

A Sociological Approach to Civil Society

Bin Xu

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Dedication

For Gary Alan Fine and Ming-Cheng Lo

Preface

The idea of writing this book came to me when I finished my first book, a cultural-sociological study of civic engagement under authoritarianism (*The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*, Stanford University Press, 2017). I realized there was no book-length introduction that provided a road map of the cultural sociology of civil society. The absence of such a book is in stark contrast to the rapid growth of the field in the past three decades or so. The process of writing this book was concurrent with many challenges the world was facing, including the COVID-19 crisis, the protests in Hong Kong, the 2020 US presidential elections, and so forth. Hope emerged from upheavals like sunlight piercing through dark clouds, but the clouds have yet to dissipate. Meanwhile, many pressing concerns in today's world continue to worry us, such as the decay of civil life, polarization in the public sphere, moral-political dilemmas of humanitarianism, civil societies under authoritarianism, disinformation, climate change, and so on. I cannot say the cultural sociology of civil society has already offered ready-made answers for all these new and old issues. But at least this book is intended to confirm the merit of an art of listening. In a world where voices are too cacophonous and people are too busy to listen to each other, cultural sociology enables us to listen carefully to people's desires, imaginations, ideas, and stories, all of which cannot be reduced to organizations and political structures.

This book would not have been possible without the help I fortunately received. Special thanks go to two of my gurus, Gary Alan Fine and Ming-Cheng Lo, whose work on civil

society, publics, and democracy has been a source of inspiration to me. Gary's idea of "tiny publics" is a significant part of my first book and this one. I also thank him for sharing his *The Hinge: Civil Society, Group Cultures, and the Power of Local Commitments* (2021) before it was published. Ming-Cheng's influence on my thoughts on civil society, especially in the context of East Asia, is so deep that only after I sent out a proposal to Polity did I realize that the title of this book bears such a close resemblance with that of her essay "Cultures of Democracy: A Civil-Society Approach" (2010). I thank Ming-Cheng for allowing me to infringe on her copyright, albeit unintentionally. To repay my intellectual debts, I dedicate this book to Gary and Ming-Cheng. I also would like to thank Jonathan Skerrett of Polity Press for being interested in this project and guiding me through the reviewing process, and Karina Jákupsdóttir for her help in the publishing process. I am grateful to the four anonymous reviewers for Polity for their helpful comments and suggestions. I particularly thank Kang Yi for reading the whole manuscript and providing valuable suggestions. Amin Ghaziani kindly shared his experience of writing his book in this "Cultural Sociology" series (*Sex Cultures*). I have also learned a great deal from my conversations about the topics covered in this book with friends and colleagues, including Deborah Davis, Nina Eliasoph, Yi Kang, Michael Kennedy, Shang Liu, David Palmer, Maria Repnikova, and Anthony Spires, among many others.

The final stage of writing and revising this book was supported by Emory University's Chronos Faculty Fellowship, which was generously provided by the Abraham J. & Phyllis Katz Foundation.

1

Introduction: The Culture of Democracy

My family wrote a letter to me, citing the Bible (to encourage me), “I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course.” Yet, the civil society I have endeavored to build in China is now on the edge of falling apart. And the universal suffrage I have been fighting for will not be achieved in Hong Kong any time soon. I have finished the course empty-handed. The only thing that gives me hope is that I have seen so many honest, kind-hearted faces along the way. (Chan 2020: 90)

Kin-man Chan wrote these words just before his release from prison in 2020. The term “civil society” summarizes his career and life. Chan, a Hong Kong-born, Yale-trained sociologist, spent much time promoting the idea and practices of “civil society” in Mainland China through his research, teaching, public speaking, and personnel training. He understood “civil society” not as a direct challenge to the authoritarian state but as a “parallel society,” where citizens can organize their own public activities to improve the society. He aimed to build democracy from below, solidifying its social and cultural foundation before a representative democracy was possible. To do so, Chan even tried to seek the local Mainland government’s cooperation and endorsement. This strategy put him in an awkward “middle-of-the-road” position. Oppositional activists in both the Mainland and Hong Kong criticized him for being too mild, and the

Chinese government suspiciously watched his public engagement.

In 2013, Chan surprisingly announced that, along with two other activists, he was starting “Occupy Central with Love and Peace,” a civil disobedience campaign initiative to advocate for genuine universal suffrage in Hong Kong. This initiative went beyond Chan’s previous idea of a “parallel society”; instead, it directly challenged the Mainland authorities’ intervention in Hong Kong. The campaign later became part of what was known as the Umbrella Movement in 2014. In 2019, a larger, more defiant anti-extradition movement, which will be detailed in [chapter 5](#), broke out and then was brutally suppressed by the Hong Kong police. Chan found himself again in a dilemma. The younger, more militant activists challenged his belief in peaceful, reasonable, and nonviolent strategies, whereas the Hong Kong government viewed him as a main instigator of the movements. Consequently, Chan was arrested and sentenced to sixteen months in prison. The Mainland nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with Chan were interrogated and raided. Meanwhile, the media and associational life in Hong Kong were forced into a corner. When I was completing this book in June 2021, *Apple Daily*, an influential newspaper famous for its criticisms of the Chinese government, was shut down. Hong Kongers flocked to newsstands to buy the last issue of the paper as a tribute to the demise of a once-independent and vibrant public sphere.

Outside Hong Kong, many people like Chan enthusiastically engage in associational life and speak in the public sphere. Not everyone is as prominent or as devoted as Chan, but some are. Most of the participants in civil societies are not jailed, but some are. Despite setbacks like that in Hong Kong, civil societies continue to exist and even thrive. The lasting vibrancy of civil society is remarkable against the

dark backdrop of pressing problems in today's world, such as robust authoritarianism, polarized political debates, disinformation, widening socioeconomic inequality, and, most recently, rampant pandemic. During COVID-19, the United Nations Human Rights Council recognized the crucial role of civil society in responding to the pandemic, despite all the challenges civil society is facing: "civil society ... is critical to providing accurate information about the situation and needs on the ground, designing responsive measures that are inclusive, safe and enabling, contributing to the implementation of measures adopted by the authorities, providing essential services and feedback on recovery and response measures, and pursuing transparency and accountability" (United Nations Human Rights Council 2021).

Part of the vibrancy of civil society comes from people's belief that they should and can solve many social problems through their public actions in accordance with their imaginations of a good society. They envision such a good society in various ways, not necessarily using the term "civil society." They also develop different norms and styles of their mutual interactions when they make concerted efforts to improve their societies. All these - the desire to build a good society, the imagining of such a good society, the understanding of their engagement, and the norm of their interaction - constitute the *cultural* aspect of civil society. Central to the cultural aspect of civil society is the *culture of democracy*, including cultural values, individual interpretations, and interaction norms about features of a democratic society, such as civility, independence, equality, liberty, tolerance, solidarity, inclusiveness, and so on (Lo 2010). The culture of democracy undergoes different interpretations and encounters various challenges. But it shapes people's actions, changes their lives, and alters political and social processes. It is real and significant.

In recent decades, sociologists have shown how a focus on the cultural aspect of civil society, particularly the culture of democracy, can help us understand some significant topics, including the public sphere, civil associations, individuals' civic engagement, global civil society, and civil societies in undemocratic contexts. This book introduces this booming scholarship, the *cultural sociology of civil society*, including its theoretical ideas, conceptual tools, and empirical studies. It tries to convince readers that cultural sociology represents an "art of listening" – a thoroughly empirical perspective that does not dismiss people's normative ideas about civil society, as some theories would do, but prioritizes a careful listening to the expressions of these ideas. This art of listening is what we need in this cacophonous world.

Let me first define several key concepts.

Civil Society

Much ink has been spilled over the concept of civil society. In its convoluted history, "civil society" has been used to refer to ideas as broad as society in general, including the market and even the state, and as narrow as only voluntary associations (Ehrenberg 2017). Without engaging in the conceptual debate, I define "civil society" by its four empirically identifiable components: civil society as the public sphere, as associations, as citizens' civic engagement, and as culture (Edwards 2020).

Civil society as the public sphere. The origin of the public sphere dates to ancient Athens, especially in *agoras* (public squares), where citizens met each other, traded goods, chatted, gossiped, and discussed public issues. Such public spaces for discussions also existed in other societies, such as the Middle East before modern times (Keane 2009: 123–53). But the concept of the "public sphere" did not become

prominent in social sciences until Jürgen Habermas published his landmark book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, in its original German version in 1962 and English translation in 1989 (Habermas 1989). Now, the term has a life of its own, has become one of those “celebrity” social science concepts whose stardom inevitably generates various interpretations and controversies. Here I use a *discursive* definition: the public sphere is a public space – institutional or physical or virtual – for *discourses*, that is, communication, discussion, and debate, about issues of public concern.

Civil society as associations. This might be the most common usage of the term “civil society,” and thus, people often equate civil society with NGOs or “civil associations.” In this sense, civil society includes various groups, associations, organizations, and their networks. They all share the common feature that they are relatively independent of states and markets, and the degree of their independence varies. Here’s a list of typical examples: international NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) with chapters and member organizations around the world; smaller issue-based organizations like the Equal Justice Initiative, an American nonprofit organization founded by Bryan Stevenson to provide legal representation for wrongly convicted prisoners; parent teacher associations (PTAs) in local schools; professional associations like the International Sociological Association; feminist groups in China that fight against sexism in workplaces; a small group of volunteers who regularly work at a nursing home in Japan; and so on. The totality of associations is often called the “third sector” – as opposed to the state and the market – or the “nonprofit or voluntary sector.”

Civil society as civic engagement. Neither civil associations nor the public sphere can exist without citizens' active participation in discussions of public affairs and their concerted effort to change society. Individual citizens are the foot soldiers of civil society. They are volunteers, NGO staff members, online users, residents who attend town hall meetings, and so on. Education institutions, governments, and organizations encourage civic engagement through informal practices and formal programs, such as the requirement for volunteering hours in high schools.

The term "civic engagement" usually includes two subcategories (Berger 2009): first, political engagement, which means activities related to political processes and institutions of states, such as voting, seeking or holding public office, writing letters to or calling representatives, lobbying, political campaigns, protests, circulating a political petition, and so on; second, social engagement, which means activities related to civil associations with goals to improve their society, including volunteering, fundraising, public discussions, and so on. This book mostly focuses on "social engagement" but does not overemphasize the distinction between "political" and "social" engagements because the two types of engagement are not always separable.

The Cultural Aspect of Civil Society

None of these three components - associations, the public sphere, and civic engagement - would constitute a civil society if they were not combined with the *cultural* aspect of civil society, the fourth component (Seligman 1995; Edwards 2020: 42-4). As John A. Hall describes, the concept of civil society is a "package deal," "being at one and the same time a social value and a set of social institutions" (Hall 1995: 2). This "package deal"

observation rightly suggests that the cultural aspect is not a separate domain but an “aspect” of all other components “at one and the same time.” Nevertheless, “culture” is more than “value.” Contemporary cultural sociologists have developed at least four ways to define “culture” in civil society.

Culture in structure. In this definition, culture refers to the items in the “structure” or “classification” of symbols, meanings, moral principles, values, assumptions, and cognitive categories, which, in this case, pertain to what a good society should be. Culture in structure precedes and is independent of individuals. But it is neither monolithic nor static. Rather, it includes various items that are often in conflict with each other, and such items may change over time. Thus, it offers individuals multiple options of meanings to understand their social life, although in a certain social and historical context, the available options are limited. In the contemporary cultural sociology of civil society, two prominent theories represent this structural perspective. First, Jeffrey C. Alexander’s *civil sphere theory* (CST) asserts that in a civil society there is an autonomous cultural structure of *binary codes*. Actors use such codes as a common language to communicate with each other, even if the contents of their views are dramatically different (Alexander 2006). Another structural theory is John W. Meyer’s *world culture* or *world polity* theory. World culture includes rules, ethics, and norms about certain issues such as human rights and is formally defined in regulations, laws, and treaties at the global level (Lechner and Boli 2005; Meyer et al. 2009). International nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) are the major carriers of this world culture (Boli and Thomas 1997).

Culture in action. People may selectively draw upon some items but not others in the cultural structure they live under. They may also reinterpret the items to understand

and justify their actions. Thus, cultural meanings are enacted in actions. This conception of culture in action highlights individuals' agency and the possibility of changes in structure (Swidler 1986; Sewell 1999). When used in research on civil society, its empirical focus is civil society actors' real-world actions to react to various situations, and their agency in picking and choosing different values about civil society in the cultural structure. For example, volunteers interpret their action as their contribution to society but may also use the language of expressive individualism ("volunteering makes *me* happy") to understand their actions (Wuthnow 1991). Organizations also strategically select values to define their goals and adapt to the cultural contexts they are working in (Swidler and Watkins 2017).

Culture in interaction. Culture also means norms of interactions, including conventions, rules, and expectations concerning appropriate ways in which individuals and groups engage in interactions in specific situations. Norms of interaction may or may not be the same as the values defined in the cultural structure because individual actors may selectively use and change the items in the structure to respond to the situations of their interactions. Norms of interaction also differ from cultures in action in that they are mostly the meaning-making processes *between* individuals rather than *of* individuals. In other words, from this perspective, the analytical unit is the interaction between at least two people, in a small group, and often at the meso level.

The concept of culture in interaction is deeply rooted in the rich tradition of microsociology (Goffman 1983; Fine 2012). It also dovetails with some of the most important theoretical ideas about civil society. The "civil" in "civil society" means not only values (culture in structure) and their interpretations (culture in action) but also civil norms

of interactions among civically engaged citizens (culture in interaction) (Shils 1997). Some classical theories assert that all these three cultural dimensions should be consistent with each other. For Tocqueville, the civil norms of interactions are the “art of association,” which citizens learn in their collective effort to address public issues and consolidate democracy (Tocqueville [1840] 2004). For Habermas, democracy hinges on the egalitarian, open, and rational norms of discussions in the public sphere (Habermas 1989). Contemporary cultural sociologists, however, reveal discrepancies among the three cultural dimensions. Civil associations must reconcile the need to address difficult public issues with the social desire to maintain order in interaction. Thus, they may mute discussions about public issues in their activities to avoid potential conflicts among their members (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Pro-democracy associations may develop authoritarian norms of interactions among the members. Effective discussions in the public sphere may rely on emotions rather than Habermas’s rational judgment (Bail et al. 2017). All these findings add complexities to the ideal situations in classical theories.

Culture in object. Culture also means “*cultural objects*,” which embody meanings in audible, visible, and tangible forms, such as movies, music, advertisements, novels, museums, and so on (Griswold 2013). Cultural objects go through the processes of production, dissemination, and reception and may change the meanings they originally carry (Peterson and Anand 2004). The cultural object approach is relatively underdeveloped in the cultural sociology of civil society, but the existing studies indicate strong potential for future research. For example, INGOs’ design and dissemination of advertisements encounter difficulties and misuses in local contexts (McDonnell 2016). Images about human suffering in the non-Western context

for humanitarian purposes ironically reify the spectatorship of Westerners and thus exacerbate global inequality (Chouliaraki 2013). Artistic and literary activities and projects are also common ways for citizens to be engaged in public affairs (Büyükokutan 2018).

It is worth noting that all these perspectives are only analytical distinctions. A social phenomenon can be examined from more than one of these perspectives, even in a single study. A study of volunteering, for instance, may focus on how individuals understand the meanings of their work (*culture in action*) and simultaneously on how they reconcile their own understandings with other volunteers' when they are working as a group (*culture in interaction*). Meanwhile, the prevalent ideas about volunteering in the broader cultural structure – compassion, individualism, altruism, and so on – shape their understanding and interactions (*culture in structure*). For this reason, a reader may find a study discussed in more than one chapter of this book.

The Culture of Democracy

The most prevalent and influential culture in today's civil societies is the *culture of democracy*.

To define “culture of democracy,” we first need to define “democracy,” another essential but complex concept (Held 2006; Keane 2009). In this book, I follow John Dewey's definition: democracy is “more than a form of government” – an electoral system of representation, the rule of law, and the checks and balances among the legislature, the executive branch, and the justice system. Rather, it is also “primarily a mode of associational living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey 1916: 87). Along this line of thinking, some theorists argue that civil society and state institutions are two necessary components of a

democracy (Keane 1998: 7–8) and that civil society is one of the necessary conditions for a consolidated democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996). This idea is consistent with the underlying assumption of some democratic theories that challenge the dominant *representative liberalism*, which is centered on a competitive election system. For example, *the participatory liberal theory* stresses ordinary citizens' direct participation in decision-making processes in their communities. *The discursive theory*, represented by Habermas and other theorists, asserts that inclusiveness should be achieved through open, civil, egalitarian, reasonable deliberation. *The constructionist theory* highlights popular inclusiveness but argues that some socially constructed categories, concepts, and norms may limit powerless people's participation (Ferree et al. 2002a). In short, "democracy" in the "culture of democracy" means *democratic social life*.

Then, what does *culture* in "culture of democracy" mean? For cultural sociology, as discussed above, the "culture" in the "culture of democracy" refers to at least three interrelated dimensions. First, as *culture in structure*, it refers to values about the features of a democratic society. Second, such values inform people's imagining of a democratic society but must be enacted in public actions which aim to pursue and maintain a democratic social life. Thus, it is *culture in action*. Third, it is a democratic *norm of interaction* among engaged citizens, such as equal, open, tolerant, nonviolent, and inclusive manners of communication and styles of self-governing. All three aspects of the culture of democracy exist in real civil societies, in real people's minds and actions.

In sum, the *culture of democracy* refers to values about democratic social life, people's imagining of a democratic society, and democratic norms of their interactions, all of

which are involved and realized in their concerted effort to build a democratic society.

The culture of democracy is central to the culture aspect of civil society. This statement is not theorists' arbitrary judgment. Rather, it is an observation that the culture of democracy historically originated from at least three major transformations in the second part of the twentieth century. The term "civil society" emerged from these historical transformations as an idea *of* and *for* democracy.

First, "civil society" was believed to be incarnated in the development of independent social spaces under Communism in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1960s-1980s (Kennedy 2002), as well as the "Third Wave Democracy" in Southern Europe, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia-Pacific. These processes inspired people to link civil societies to the potential of democracy under undemocratic regimes, although such linkage remains open to debate.

Second, some scholars and public figures in Europe and the United States were worried about the health of their established democracies. Symptoms, as they believe, included the decline of "civil society" - more specifically, the decline of "social capital" - and rampant individualism (Putnam 2000; Bellah et al. 2008 [1985]). In the United States, America as a nation of "joiners" and American democracy based on a moral community - a mythical image derived from the very beginning of the country - were believed to be in a crisis, and the solution was to reinvigorate the civil society. In the United Kingdom, a similar solution was proposed by politicians and intellectuals, such as David Blunkett, who advocated for the renewal of democracy through rebuilding a strong civil society and civic culture.

Third, the acceleration of globalization has weakened nation-states' role in regulating citizens' social life and strengthened transnational, global associations and the public spheres, especially after the end of the Cold War (Kaldor 2003). Correspondingly, universal values and ideas about human rights, equality, and so on have been realized and diffused in the global practices of international organizations, activists, and participants of public discussions (Meyer et al. 1997; Lechner and Boli 2005). On the other hand, such diffusion intensified the debate over democracy - mostly, Western democracy - and whether and how it is interwoven with imperialism and neoliberalism.

A product of these entwined historical changes, the culture of democracy is not a homogeneous, static set of values but full of dynamics, contradictions, and conflicts. The culture of democracy exists in the cultural structure of civil society, but its items may be in constant conflict with each other. People also often selectively use these items in their discourses and actions: for instance, emphasizing "liberty" but downplaying "equality." The same cultural term in the democratic cultural structure also can be used to express various ideas that range from the right to the left on the political spectrum. For example, "liberty" can mean an antagonism toward the state or the emancipation of underprivileged groups from the dominance of the market. A democratic norm of interaction, for example, solidarity and equality, may be practiced in the internal interactions among members of a group but not extended to outsiders whose social characteristics are different from theirs. Organizations and individuals following the culture of democracy can be simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, solidary and repressive. A certain association emphasizes their "civil" characters but meanwhile paints a negative picture of other "uncivil" groups, and such characterization may justify their exclusionary practices and rhetoric

(Alexander 2006). Others may have a publicly stated goal to pursue some aspects of a democratic social life, but their internal interactions may follow norms quite different from or even opposite to the culture of democracy: exclusive membership, hierarchical relations, and explicit racism. Moreover, many associations and civil society actors do not pursue democracy. All these complexities result from the fact that the culture of democracy exists at the intersections of social fault lines, such as class, ethnicity, gender, regions, nation-states, and so on.

Nevertheless, cultural sociology observes that, while various other cultures exist in civil societies around the world, the culture of democracy remains the most influential, even though such influence is most visible when the culture of democracy is contested, challenged, or altered. Many cultures of civil society are different renditions of the culture of democracy. They may mix key elements of the culture of democracy with other cultural items, some of which are even antidemocratic. Others develop their own nondemocratic cultures as responses to the global diffusion of the culture of democracy. The challenges, however, signify the centrality of the culture of democracy.

Why Cultural Sociology?

Cultural sociology is an empirically grounded perspective that focuses on the cultural aspect of civil society, especially the culture of democracy. Thus, it differs from other common perspectives by offering distinctive answers to two key questions: First, does culture matter in civil society? Second, is the culture of democracy the only culture or the only legitimate culture in civil society? (See [table 1.1.](#))

The “normative perspective” gives “yes” as answer to both questions. It asserts that culture matters greatly in civil society and that the culture of democracy is – and should be – the only or the only legitimate culture in civil society. From this perspective, civil society and the culture of democracy are both normative concepts. This perspective is prevalent in political theories and corresponding ideas that guide real-world civil society practices, for example, NGOs’ statements and advertisements, in which “civil society” is often equated with an ideal society with equality, openness, and democracy. These features are used as a benchmark to judge real-world civil societies; some are qualified, bona fide civil societies, whereas others are not. Such a perspective is not wrong within the boundary of political theory. But when it is used in social scientific research it provokes controversies.

[Table 1.1](#) Different perspectives on civil society

| | Normative perspective | Cultural sociology | Minimal-culture perspective |
|--|-----------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Does culture matter in civil society? | Yes | Yes, but “culture” means many things | No |
| Is the culture of democracy the only or the only legitimate culture in civil society? | Yes | No, but the culture of democracy is central | No |

Even in the heyday of this normative perspective, the 1990s, when the fall of Communism was celebrated as a triumph of civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe, scholars cautioned against the tendency to idealize civil society and mix the normative with the analytical. Sociologist Krishan Kumar expresses this caution: “Civil society’ sounds good; it has a good feel to it; it has the look of a fine old wine, full of depth and complexity.” Nonetheless, Kumar continues, “fine old wines can

stimulate but they can also make you drunk” (Kumar 1993: 376). Charles Tilly also claims that the concepts of civil society and the public sphere are “morally admirable but analytically useless” (cited in Emirbayer and Sheller 1999: 145). For many social scientists, “civil society” seems to be little more than “chicken soup for the social scientific soul.” Its normatively heartening implications become its analytical liability. Other critics, in a more poignant way, point out that the normative perspective has the political overtone that the liberal democratic culture originated from the West is the gold standard for the rest of the world.

To remedy this issue, social scientists develop a “minimal-culture perspective” on civil society. It answers “no” to both questions: culture does not matter much in civil society, and the culture of democracy certainly is not and should not be the only game in town. Its solution is simple: excising the cultural aspect, adopting a bare-bones analytical concept, and reducing “civil society” to organizations and actors who are engaged in realpolitik or provide social services. In this way, this perspective believes, the normative trouble of “civil society” can be shaken off, and the concept can be refurbished into a purely analytical one.

The cultural sociology of civil society shares with both perspectives some common ground but also differs from them on some significant issues. Like the normative perspective, it gives the answer “yes” to the first question (“Does culture matter in civil society?”) and thus eschews the minimal-culture perspective’s dismissal of culture. Nevertheless, the cultural sociology of civil society offers a much broader, more empirical definition of “culture,” including not only “culture” as “values” in the normative perspective, a typical culture-in-structure concept, but also culture in action, culture as norms of interaction, and culture in objects.

Cultural sociology answers “no” to the second question (“Is the culture of democracy the only culture or only legitimate culture in civil society?”) and, in this sense, leans toward the empirical approach of the minimal-culture perspective. Yet, unlike the minimal-culture perspective, cultural sociology emphasizes that although the culture of democracy is not the only culture of civil society, it is still the most significant. It would be erroneous to deny the fact that the culture of democracy inspires and encourages numerous people to participate in various public activities to improve their societies and build a democratic social life.

In sum, the cultural sociology of civil society is a thoroughly empirical perspective that takes the cultural aspect of civil society seriously. Cultural sociologists do not use the culture of democracy as a normative standard to judge real-world civil societies; rather, they recognize the fact that it is the central, most influential culture in the past and current historical contexts of civil society. Cultural sociologists study the culture of democracy empirically. Neglecting this cultural aspect of civil society does not make an analysis more objective. Instead, it makes such an analysis incomplete.

This Book

The Culture of Democracy: A Sociological Approach to Civil Society is an up-to-date, comprehensive introduction to the cultural sociology of civil society, which, for the first time, pulls together various strands of this booming scholarship into a single volume. It takes a global perspective. It devotes about half of its space to discussions of civil societies in the non-Western regions, including Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. It also presents global and transnational associations and public spheres that transcend national borders.

The following chapters are arranged in a logical order. [Chapters 2-4](#) cover the cultural aspect of three main components of civil society: the public sphere, associations, and civic engagement. [Chapter 5](#) examines how the culture of democracy historically emerged in undemocratic contexts and how it is still entangled with undemocratic states and changes of democratic cultures in those contexts. [Chapter 6](#) broadens the scope from the territories of nation-states to global civil society, including INGOs, citizens' volunteering in other countries, and discourses in transnational public spheres. The concluding chapter briefly recapitulates the main points in previous chapters and emphasizes the merit of cultural sociology as an art of listening amid the cacophonous voices in today's civil societies.

A few words are in order here to clarify the goal and scope of this book. First, this book is not an introduction to the whole field of civil society; rather, it surveys a particular approach, that is, the cultural sociology of civil society, and how this approach sheds light on some important issues in academic research as well as real-world civil societies. Second, while this book mostly draws on sociological studies, it often ventures out of disciplinary boundaries to include theories and studies in other fields, such as political science, media studies, political theory, and anthropology. Cross-fertilization is a merit instead of a weakness, and there is no need for intellectual patrolling along artificial disciplinary borders. Finally, I deliberately leave some related subfields and topics – such as social movements and the media, two important parts of civil society – to other, more specialized books. The reason for this omission is more practical than theoretical: these topics are already established subfields in their own right; introductory texts to them are widely available (Jasper 2014).

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Values, Codes, and Styles in the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" remains one of the most significant yet controversial concepts in modern social science (Habermas 1989). To understand the concept and its controversy, you can try picturing Habermas's favorite epitome of the bourgeois public sphere, a coffeehouse. On a cold, misty day in London, as the stereotype of eighteenth-century England goes, a patron entered the coffeehouse, hung his (yes, more likely a man than a woman) coat on a peg, and started to talk with other men. The coat would have told us about this person's social identity: the equivalent now would be a businessman's nice suit, or an ordinary office worker's plain jacket. But with all coats hung on pegs, the wearers' identities were suspended and bracketed. The topics of conversation were important public issues, and the conversations were egalitarian, inclusive, and rational: no shouting matches; no curse words; and even when debates occurred, all engaged parties expressed their opinions in a respectful manner. To Habermas, this was what the culture of democracy looked like.

This is just a myth, you might say. Yes, the reality is messier. Scholars, including Habermas himself, have shown that such an ideal has never been fully realized. Various social identities – race, nationality, class, gender, and so on – and their corresponding inequalities are rarely suspended or bracketed in public discussions. Even when identities appear to be suspended, that is probably because people