

Decolonizing the Civil Sphere: The Politics of Difference, Imperial Erasures, and Theorizing from History

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This article rethinks sociological approaches to difference and inclusion. It argues that civil sphere theory replicates colonial dynamics through abstracting civil codes from their role in colonial governance. Through a case study of French colonial Algeria, the article illuminates the historical co-constitution of the French Republic and the colonial subject. This imperial history explains how civil codes came about through the same social process as the domination of the colonial other. Given these entangled histories, building solidarity requires we move beyond a process of civil *repair* that rests on incorporation to one of civil *construction*, which takes account of historical wrongs and the colonial layer of meaning embedded in categories of civil discourse. Theorizing from suppressed histories allows us to question the content of the civil sphere's classificatory system and turn our attention to a resignification of the core group in the wake of colonial histories.

Keywords

colonialism, nation, civil sphere, difference, citizenship

Citizenship Officer: Do you know the motto of the French Republic?

Man: Liberty, equality, brotherhood?

Citizenship Officer: Yes, that's it. What does the 14th of July mean to you?

Man: It's Bastille Day. It's the French Revolution.

Citizenship Officer: Good. Since when have you been in France?

Man: Since forever.

Citizenship Officer: Are you sure, Monsieur? It says here that you were born in Algeria.

Man: Yes, but at that time, Algeria was part of France. I was French before becoming Algerian. I was born in France. We were French. That's how it was.

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Sélim Azzazi's (2016) short film *Ennemis intérieurs* (Enemies Within) portrays a dialogue between a young French citizenship officer and a man applying for citizenship. Sitting on a table in a dimly lit room, the citizenship officer questions the man. The man had been born in Algeria prior to Algerian independence, when it was considered a part of France; he had resided in metropolitan France for decades, and he sees himself as French. Yet in a tense interview, the viewer observes the discursive making of the boundary between those who are "legitimate" members of French society and those who are to be kept out. The man considers himself as always having been a part of France, but despite this shared colonial history, the officer places him outside the boundaries of the French Republic. The excluded person must prove his worth and his commitment to French values. Yet no matter how much this man states his devotion to France, his exclusion becomes more and more palpable.

Ennemis intérieurs speaks to a central question of democratic politics: Who belongs to the polity? Who are *the people*? And who belongs to the sphere of solidarity? The movie makes clear how citizenship acts as a governance tool and a powerful structural fissure to draw the boundary between the included and the excluded. Yet in starting from the long-standing colonial relationship between Algeria and France, the scene complicates the often-naturalized assumption of the *national* body politic. It emphasizes that far from taken for granted, the national body politic has to be imposed and continually policed. In this process, citizenship legislations become technologies of rule, mirroring the legacies of colonial hierarchies.

Sociological theory builds on the assumption that with the French Revolution, the national community for the first time overlapped with the community of rights (Brubaker 1998). Yet even in this revolutionary moment, modern rights discourse excluded large swaths of the population (e.g., men who did not meet property requirements and women), which produced a distinction between "active" and "passive" citizens (Hunt 2016). Far from a universal figure of the rights-bearing person, the French Revolution brought into existence the bourgeois ideal of "Man" as the bearer of citizen rights (Joseph-Gabriel 2019). Moreover, at the time when French Revolutionaries articulated the principles of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, France maintained its empire of colonial slavery. Despite the universal rhetoric of political principles, the empire designated the enslaved as decidedly outside the community of rights (Vergès 2006). Producing the central tension of political modernity, the colonial meaning-system shaped who could be human and as such the bearer of rights.

Ennemis intérieurs further demonstrates that struggles over belonging to the body politic continue to mark our contemporary politics. Sociologists have long been concerned with questions of inclusion, solidarity, and the polity. One of the most influential texts, Jeffrey Alexander's (2006) *The Civil Sphere*, theorizes the social and cultural processes determining who gets to be a legitimate member of the civil sphere. It analyzes how those who are excluded seek to become part of the community of solidarity. Members of the civil sphere share a sense of solidarity and sympathy for one another that bridges common sociological divides including race, class, and gender. The theory explains people's sense of *we-ness* as well as the mechanisms that allow "others" to penetrate the sphere of solidarity. The civil sphere gives us a way to approach some of the most fundamental questions of who can become part of the body politic and how its boundaries get reinforced.

Alexander (2006) defines distinct modes of incorporation through which outgroups can enter the bonds of solidarity and open the path for a process of mutual recognition. Inclusion occurs when the civil sphere extends its values of mutual respect outward onto uncivil spheres through the process of civil repair: That which is good and considered within the solidary sphere can be transferred onto outgroups, a process usually galvanized by social movements. Limitations to this solidarity, Alexander suggests, become the gap between

ideals and practice, whereby social movements can act as catalysts to widen the bounds of the civil sphere.

I seek to make an intervention in sociological approaches to solidarity and difference. To do so, I unpack the civil sphere model from the perspective of colonial history. Without questioning the colonial histories central to the formation of the civil sphere, we replicate meanings of “the good” and that which informs our sense of we-ness, while failing to address colonial dynamics. This problem arises due to a conceptual separation of the formation of the civil sphere and the colonial project. I propose that the civil sphere’s theoretical formulation stems from a reading of history that remains constrained to a national imaginary, thereby erasing a series of important imperial entanglements. Empire is seen as separate from the civil sphere and its civil codes, imposing a conceptual analytic bifurcation between the “here” and the “there” (Bhambra 2007, 2014; Connell 1997; Go 2016; Magubane 2017). Due to this erasure of imperial histories, we isolate the categories of civil discourse from the larger historical meaning-system that shaped them. Yet civil and uncivil discourses are not formalistic or linguistic opposites but are rooted in concrete historical systems of domination that depend on inventing the other as uncivil (Dussel 2003; Lugones 2010; Mignolo 2002; Said 1979). In this historical context, Western freedom articulated itself through the domination of the colonial other: one cannot abstract and dissociate the civil code from the structures of domination that enabled it in the first place (Hartman 1997).

This co-constitutive making is consequential for theorizing solidarity today. Most important, the mechanism of civil *repair* as a process of inclusion is insufficient because it does not question the meaning-system that constituted civil codes in the first place. The question is not so much one of repairing exclusionary tendencies and extending positive characteristics outward but of *constructing* spheres of solidarity for the first time by recognizing the impact of colonial hierarchies that shape metropolitan and colonial politics alike. This approach works through a theory of disavowal: The good that defines the sphere of solidarity exists because it projects its own undesirable and abject characteristics onto the colonial other. The same social processes that create codes for civility, freedom, the sacred, and the sane also invent the colonial subject as its opposite. For this reason, the civil sphere can only ever partly include colonial outgroups: Full inclusion would require a reckoning with the process of its own making. If outgroups fail to live up to desirable standards, it not only cements their exclusion but also reaffirms the *perfected* idea of what the inside claims to be and thereby reifies the meaning of the civil.

In the face of these entangled histories, I propose an alternative approach. Instead of analyzing how the civil sphere can extend outward to include its precarious others, we can examine how dynamics of inclusion/exclusion depend on colonial subjection and, in doing so, address the civil sphere’s foundation stories. To understand how this co-constitutive meaning-system operates, we need a deep immersion in the historical dynamics of empires that shaped communities of solidarity and an understanding of how these histories are not neatly demarcated from the present but continue to inform our political and sociological vocabulary today.

In what follows, I first explain how imperial erasures shape our theories of the civil sphere and, in turn, our tools to understand difference, solidarity, and inclusion. Re-embedding the civil sphere in a colonial analytic framework means we question not only how outgroups can attain characteristics of the good but how the good gained its meaning historically. Next, I demonstrate this mode of analysis through a case study of French colonial Algeria, explaining how civility coevolved with constituting the colonial other. Reconnecting the making of Western democracies with colonial governance highlights how we cannot analytically abstract the meanings of the civil, the good, and the inside from their constituting histories.

Finally, I outline how we can begin to *construct* a sphere of solidarity from the position of shared colonial histories. This requires a reinsertion of the dominant group in its own colonial history and, with it, an awareness of how civil codes are far from universal but are deeply embedded in colonial structures of domination. I suggest that in re-embedding sociological theorizing in this history, we can better understand the processes that shape our sense of we-ness but may lie outside our assumed analytic focus.

THE CIVIL SPHERE

Alexander (2006:31) defines the civil sphere as a “solidary sphere in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced.” Examining the emergence of this solidary sphere, Alexander (2006:50) starts from the premise that meaning is relative and relational, so “the civility of the self always articulates itself in the language of the incivility of the other.” The civil sphere exists within dichotomous poles of inclusion and exclusion, where a set of cultural codes serves as a collective measuring stick for categories of inclusion:¹ These codes demarcate who is worthy of rights and who is not (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012; Baiocchi 2006; Bellah et al. 1992); that is, they designate civil-uncivil, modern-traditional, rational-irrational, and sane-mad. Those associated with uncivil characteristics are barred from entry into the solidary bonds. Alexander observes that to enter the solidary sphere, one must denounce one’s private (particular) characteristics and take on the values of the solidary (universal) sphere.

Given these opposing tendencies, Alexander (2007:643) argues that the “historical efforts to institutionalize a democratic civil sphere have also legitimated racism and slavery, class exploitation, religious hatred, repression, sexism, homophobia, and national chauvinism”; for the analyst, the task is then to “explain how the dark and the light of democratic societies are fused at the hip.” This means that historically and empirically, democratic societies have been “filled with barbaric contradictions” that may be “lodged inside the sphere of solidarity itself” (Alexander 2007:643). Anticivil discourses, Alexander asserts, stem from noncivil spheres, such as markets, churches, states, or ethnic and racial groupings. There is thus a sense of competing civil codes between unity and inclusion and distinction and exclusion. The barbaric becomes synonymous with the particular, and the particular is seen as an aberration from the universal and that which enables solidarity.

In the face of these exclusions, Alexander (2006:428, 460) formulates modes of incorporation through which outgroups can enter the bonds of solidarity: assimilation, hyphenation, and multiculturalism. Assimilation rests on the idea that civil society is governed by universal civil competencies. Outgroups are tasked to live up to these standards, but their capacity for fulfilling these principles is continually questioned. Alexander is critical of this process because outgroups are evaluated by a standard forged by others, and the dynamics of the creation of this standard are rarely acknowledged.

The second mode of incorporation, hyphenation, stigmatizes others less as “foreign” but describes them as “ethnic,” maintaining a hierarchy of core versus “ethnic” qualities (Alexander 2006:433). In contrast to assimilation, hyphenation enables a more fluid exchange between primordial and outsider characteristics, and thus it creates more flexibility around the meaning of the civil. However, Alexander (2006) notes that hyphenated incorporation is temporary and unstable due to aspirations to a universal community.

Finally, whereas assimilation suggests “others to become similar,” multiculturalism, the third mode of incorporation, rests on the idea that “others remain different,” and it generally coincides with the language of the “right to be different.” For Alexander (2006:8), multiculturalism harbors the possibility of inclusion, through which “emerges the possibilities that

out-group qualities can be purified—that they can, in fact, become objects not only of tolerance but of respect and desire. As the multicultural mode of incorporation becomes more than merely a theoretical possibility, the language of incorporation changes from integration to diversity.” Diversity mechanisms aim to include outgroups in preexisting structures, institutions, knowledge systems, and political practices, but critics question the terms of this inclusion. They argue that such inclusion often continues to reify a hegemonic, core characteristic without questioning the making of the civil sphere itself. That is, even in celebrating difference, we fail to question the histories of domination upon which the civil sphere rests, or how this process of constitution feeds into what we understand the civil to be. For example, the right to difference is acceptable as long as hegemonic national projects remain untouched (Jensen 2014), as long as the state’s settler colonial presence remains unquestioned (Coulthard 2014), or as long as the multicultural social contract distracts from discussions of structural racism and imperial violence (Hesse 2000, 2007; Wekker 2016).

As a possible process for mutual recognition, Alexander (2006) theorizes the process of civil repair. Civil repair occurs when the civil sphere extends its values of inclusion and mutual respect outward onto uncivil spheres—a process usually ushered in by social movements. For Alexander, everyone has access to enter the civil sphere, but the price to enter civil life is to hide stigmatized qualities. Attaining solidarity—for all to be included in the universal—is always a possibility for Alexander; if there are real-world limitations, they are due to failed political, practical efforts or the lack of social movement activism. However, as social movements pursue political projects to alleviate their members’ social positions, they often need to reinforce the very logic of good-bad binaries. The precarious social position of immigrant movements, for example, often forecloses a critique of the civil sphere’s foundational exclusionary histories.

The problem with the concept of civil repair is twofold. First, civil repair places our conceptual focus on the outgroup and its ability to extend the sphere of solidarity outward. A deeper reading of colonial history shows that ingroups and outgroups are co-constitutive: Meanings of good and bad, inside and outside, sane and mad, come about in a relational historical construction. Unsettling hierarchies between the outgroup and the ingroup thus cannot occur without questioning the meaning of the ingroup itself. Colonial history explicates this co-constitution and shows how power constitutes outgroups to reaffirm the meaning of ingroups. Second, the language of civil repair disregards historical wrongs. Abstracting civil discourse from its histories of domination turns our analytic lens away from these power structures and instead falsely universalizes civil discourse as a common political grammar. Put differently, the ability to *repair* exclusions fails to do justice to the foundational violence upon which hegemonic discourses of civility were built. Moreover, integration into the civil sphere according to these logics depends on forgetting the foundational historical trauma or constituting the historical wound as something long past with little effect on contemporary politics (Bogues 2010; Lowe 1996).

The limitation of civil sphere theory to date is its inability to theorize the co-constitution of colonial domination and civil codes. Historically, Western democracies navigated the institution, maintenance, and reproduction of colonial projects that situated colonial others as outside the bounds of the modern polity. Therefore, the content of civility does not exist in isolation and cannot be disentangled from these histories: Colonialism gave meaning to the classification system of good, civil, and rational. Theoretical abstraction from these colonial meaning-systems, and the erasure of imperial histories, forecloses an analysis of how imperial processes shaped political grammars. In turn, I propose we re-embed histories of solidarity and colonial governance so we can question the logics that determine why the inside remains on the inside or why the good is considered good. Adding a theory of disavowal

shows how the process of repair can only ever be insufficient because it maintains a theoretical architecture of domination.

Sociological theories can avoid the imperial myopia that holds the civil sphere and its discourse as an ahistorical, abstract entity (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2015). First, using an imperial analytic framework, we can see how categories of exclusion are co-constituted through the colonial project. Civil discourses are not abstract binaries but historical products and governance tools that designate colonial subjects as “other.” Through this historical analysis, we limit their universal reach and re-embed them in their colonial spatial and temporal context. Second, in beginning with this web of colonial governing logics, it becomes clear that the sphere of solidarity does not need to be repaired; it needs to be constructed for the first time. To do so, our analyses must focus on the politics of how core groups insert their own identities into the larger, shared history of colonialism and how civil codes reflect these colonial legacies. Let us first examine the assumptions that shape the theory of the civil sphere.

DECOLONIZING THE CIVIL SPHERE

Calhoun (1995:233) explains that “our very ideas about what ‘a society’ is are shaped by understandings developed under the influence of nationalism and European state-making.” Galvanizing political modernity, the French Revolution for the first time associated the locus of power with “the people,” as opposed to the king or God (Sewell 1996). Alongside the retreat of the church and feudal structures emerged the modern nation-state, standing in direct relationship to the individual. At that moment, aiming to oppose the state’s dominance, Nisbet (1943) argues, sociologists reinstated the sphere of the “social” as the intermediate space between the individual and the state. This disciplinary foundation story of “the social” suggests the social realm exists between these two poles, and it holds the unspoken assumption that this relationship also maps onto national territorial boundaries.

Brubaker (1998) argued that the French Revolution marked the birth of the modern notion of citizenship, combining for the first time an institutionalized set of political rights with the notion of nationhood and community among “the people.” He suggests that the Revolution produced the historical confluence of the community of solidarity with the notion of abstract political rights. Following this interpretation, France is often considered the archetype of a civic nation, where belonging to the civil sphere is governed by a common adherence to political principles—as opposed to, for example, the German ethnic model. In this tradition of civic nationalism, the nation is a community of citizens, based on a conception of citizenship that “transcends all particularities” and is devoid of cultural characteristics (Schnapper 1994). Those who are not included in this community can gain entry by adhering to a set of *abstract* principles governing political life.

With the onset of political modernity, we also developed venerable narratives recounting these processes (Buck-Morss 2009); that produced the ontological exclusion of the French empire. Despite essential historical connections between metropolitan France and its Caribbean colonies—including France’s most profitable colony of the eighteenth century, Saint Domingue, now Haiti—the narrative of the French Revolution veils colonial linkages. We see the Revolution as the birthplace of popular sovereignty and the social itself, and we universalize the rights-bearing subject and its aspirational principles while conceptually excluding France’s enslaved and colonized populations. In fact, most Western democracies with developed civil spheres were colonial empires (Bhambra 2007, 2010; Connell 1997; Go 2014; Go and Lawson 2017).

The civic realm took on universal properties, but it is precisely within this historical context of colonial governance where meaning-systems of good and bad, civil and uncivil,

sacred and profane, and sane and mad were formed. The modern notion of the “people” in whose name sovereignty is anchored came to signify an abstract category, in line with the idea of “humanity” (Wilder 2005). Yet these political concepts are not abstract but deeply tied to a racial hierarchy that determines who can be included in this idea of “humanity” (Bogues 2012; Wynter 2003). As such, the abstract notion of political rights depends on a neat mapping onto the borders of the nation-state: Viewed from the perspective of Saint Domingue, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* reads as racially circumscribed and far from universal.

Once we move beyond the nation as a unit of analysis, colonial dynamics and their influence on the civil sphere become apparent. Struggles over who should be afforded rights and be part of the community have long colonial histories, going back to the Haitian Revolution (Bhambra 2016; Dubois 2000, 2012; James 1989; Lawson 2016). When French Revolutionaries presented the idea of universal, abstract political rights, Haitian revolutionaries understood better than their metropolitan counterparts that the idea of the rights-bearing individual applied to them as well. Even though metropolitans fought to keep colonies outside the “territory of rights” (Vergès 2006), and free black political subjects outside the realm of the “thinkable” (Trouillot 1995), the history of freedom is mired with colonial protest.

The exclusionary logics of the national community are thus not solely based on formalist reasoning around the inside-outside logics of national states but are culturally embedded in structures and histories of empire (Tinsley 2019). Yet with a sociological lens originating in a narrative that bifurcates the French Revolution from the Haitian Revolution (Bhambra 2015; Buck-Morss 2009), we cannot see how the empire’s cultural history of exclusion feeds into the making of the civil sphere. Despite global connections’ being so important to who we are, we study nations in isolation of colonial structures that give meaning to who is a recognized member of the body politic.

Renewed attention to *transnational* linkages in the public sphere has led scholars to address global flows and patterns (Beck 2000; Holzner and Holzner 2006). Alexander (2006:552) himself leaves open a possible change of scale for civil sphere theory, including an expansion to the global scale. However, these efforts are generally geared toward contemporary transnational processes and do not reopen a lens into the global historical processes that shaped the making of the civil sphere itself (Bhambra 2011). Alexander points to the history of colonialism, but he disregards how imperial dynamics shaped civil sphere theory. For instance, Alexander (2006:199) notes how civility operated as an anchor for European empires, and drawing on Said, he describes how the Middle East “became other” to European powers. This analysis fails to point out the *active* process through which civil codes constructed the colonial subject as the other, operating as a governing tool. The formation of codes of civility and liberty and the construction of the colonial subject are co-constitutive processes. Hence, if we re-embed our theoretical concepts in this imperial history, which had previously been erased, the categories of inclusion and exclusion are not abstract mechanisms determining membership in the nation but in fact become culturally inflected concepts and political tools in the governance of an empire.

EXCLUSIONS IN IMPERIAL CONTEXT

The civil sphere is a theoretical construction rooted in a set of histories, but the way it is currently constructed does not give us the full analytic scope of how difference arises and how it operates. Alexander (2006) studies the struggles of white women, black people, and Jews, but he analyzes them within a national imaginary. Yet these exclusionary fissures are

intrinsically connected to and co-constituted with the imperial project. Colonies are not conceptually contained spaces; rather, empires provide us with the historical frameworks in which racial, gendered, heteronormative, and religious hierarchies are constructed, mobilized, and reproduced. As a result, an imperial analytic framework is necessary to gain a complete understanding of how these power structures arise and operate.

Colonialism is not solely a geopolitical or economic system; it brings with it a set of relational representational schemas. These schemas construct the colonial subject as uncivil and thus as a legitimate target for domination (Said 1979). Civil codes operate as tools for governance, and in producing the colonial subject, they also reproduce the core group as civil (Baldwin 1992; Césaire 2000; Fanon 2008; Hall 1992). In these ways, colonialism not only affects the colonized population but deeply shapes the metropole and its governing logics. The Martiniquan anticolonial writer Aimé Césaire (2000:39) perhaps best expressed this relationship in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, explaining that colonization is the flip side of civilization:

What am I driving at? At this idea: that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment.

We tend to disconnect the history of Western democratization and its struggles for inclusion from the imperial project, but these processes are in fact historically intertwined.

Perhaps most important, the mobilization of racial categories and their mapping onto social structures is historically tied to the colonial project, enveloping metropolitan and colonial societies alike. Colonial powers justified and further entrenched racial hierarchies through large-scale historical processes, including the transatlantic slave trade, plantation labor, and the dispossession of indigenous lands in the New World (Du Bois 1979, 1998; Winant 2002). Racial meaning-systems and politics differ based on local contexts, but their origins lie in the longer, global, and relational history of colonialism.

Politics around gender similarly holds deep entanglements with the imperial project, out of which arose racially defined markers of womanhood. For example, white feminist movements for political and social rights justified their demands for inclusion by drawing distinctions between themselves and the enslaved and colonial subject abroad (Burton 1994; Grever and Waaldijk 2004; Levine 2007). Middle-class feminists voiced their dedication to the imperial project and drew on the morality of Christian evangelism. As such, ideals of the respectable white woman necessitated a drive for racial purity and respectability in the colonies, thus further bolstering justifications for colonial governance. French women were important colonial agents; many aligned with the colonial governance through propagating the idea that colonized women needed to be rescued from “native” men (Abu-Lughod 2013), and they used their vital position in the colony to make a case for their version of feminism (Boittin 2010; Clancy-Smith 1996; Lazreg 2005; Lorcin 2002, 2012). Particularly after World War I, the question for white French feminists was how they could propel the civilizing mission if colonial subjects were to gain the vote before they did (Boittin 2015). Although metropolitan women were not fully members of the metropolitan sphere of solidarity, they were beneficiaries of enslavement, imperial expansion, and racial hierarchies (Jones-Rogers 2020). And despite claims for universal womanhood, nonwhite and non-Western women were not considered equal and part of this category (Collins 1980; hooks 1989; Magubane 2003; Mahmood 2011; Mohanty 1988). Analyses of gendered politics within the national

realm are incomplete because Western feminism is a product of historical and geopolitical circumstances (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002).²

Just as gender was co-constituted with the colonial project, ideals around sexuality also developed within the geopolitical frame of imperialism. Stoler (1995) famously made the case that the fabrication of normalcy and deviance was foundational to colonial rule. Purity became a standard for civilization: Sexual practices of colonized populations were deemed deviant and thus in need of colonial guidance (Mitra 2020). Christian missionary work further entrenched these ideals of sexuality and gender, and projecting prudence reinforced civilizational superiority and social progress of the colonizer at home (Curtis 2012; Hall 2002). To understand the heterosexual matrix, we need to reconnect it to the historical context and imperial geopolitical standpoint that gave it meaning (Lugones 2010; Patil 2018).

This historical context not only shaped past political struggles but also points to the limitations and logics of seemingly universal ideas. Codes of inclusion were not solely theoretically universal and practically incomplete. Rather, they came about in a historical system of empire that at once constructed core groups as civil while inventing the colonial subject as its opposite. Western freedom articulated itself through the domination of the racialized other. One cannot “include” the colonial subject into Western civil spheres without taking account of the deeply racialized logics of liberal freedom (Bogues 2010; Hartman 1997). One cannot dissociate this civil code from the structures of domination that enabled it in the first place.

Given these entanglements, my analytic strategy moves away from the need to universalize and abstract and instead situates theories in their context, as “concept dependent.” This means all social action is embedded in peoples’ interpretations of reality, and the social world can be understood only as embedded in “concept, time, and space” (Steinmetz 2005:283). Put differently, the frames we use to understand reality are themselves objects of analysis, and theoretical work is simultaneously historical work (Somers 1994). What are the histories that gave meaning to our theories, and what are the contestations within these histories? This approach better accounts for the work theoretical concepts do in the world, while at the same time furthering sociology’s reflexivity on its own discursive construction.

Fraser’s (1990) critique of Habermas’s (1992) concept of the public sphere provides a useful theoretical parallel of how previously silenced histories can change our understanding of theory. Fraser uses feminist historiographies to show that, historically, women were excluded from not only the public sphere but the very discourses of the public and that the idea of the temporary suspension of status hierarchies was in fact used to further exclude women. Discourses of the public differ depending on context, but Fraser’s (1990:62) examination of history makes clear that the relationship between status differentials and the public may be more complicated than Habermas’s theoretical conception allows for: “We can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule.” Attention to historical gender inequalities and how they influenced the formation of the public sphere highlights an overlooked theoretical mechanism.

Based on a series of recent colonial historiographies of the French empire, I reexamine the linkages between colonial history and the making of the civil sphere (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Wilder 2005). France is often upheld as the primary example for nation-building based on an abstract set of political principles, but these historiographies show how French Republicanism and empire co-constituted one another (Abi-Mershed 2010; Belmessous 2013; Conklin 1997; Cooper 2014; Dubois 2012; Lazreg 2016; Lorcin 1999; Saada 2011; Sessions 2011; Shepard 2008; Wilder 2005). Specifically, I focus on the case of colonial Algeria, which arguably had the tightest links with metropolitan France and was at times

legally no different than other French provinces. Yet Algeria came to represent the paradigmatic colonial other, and its history shows how civil codes were used to restrict access to the French civil sphere. Colonialism is here not so much a failure or an aberration of republicanism but part of the same political process. Understanding how the civil was constructed as the opposition to the Algerian colonial subject may help us better understand politics of difference in contemporary societies.

COLONIZERS, COLONIZED, AND THE MAKING OF THE GOOD CITIZEN

We tend to analyze inclusion in/exclusion from the polity through the nation-state framework, but the struggle over who can be the bearer of rights has a long colonial history. Debates about who can attain political rights have historically run up against the question of how to govern France's colonial subjects. As a result, cultural codes about who is an ideal citizen developed in interaction with this history, and it is here where our analyses must start. Expanding our analytic lens to the colonial project steers our questions about inclusion and exclusion to one of domination and thereby to processes of constructing colonizers and colonized.

During the French Revolution, which was marked by a discourse of universalism, liberty, and equality, enslaved colonial subjects in Saint Domingue raised the question of whether these rights applied to them as well. The 1789 French National Assembly was forced to address the contradictions between universalist discourse and colonial subject status. With pressure mounting in its Caribbean possessions, the National Convention debated granting full civil rights to colonial subjects (Hunt 2016). Haiti's slave-based economy was the "jewel" of the French empire, and the enslaved in Haiti were designated not as human but as property (Dubois 2012). Haitians, however, began a hard-wrung and violent struggle for emancipation and eventually independence. As a result, Haiti instituted itself as the first free black state, while slavery continued in the remaining colonies of the French Caribbean for almost another 50 years. In 1848, slavery was abolished, and France granted nominal legal citizenship to the formerly enslaved in the First French Empire. This act set them onto a different path than that of colonial subjects of the Second French Empire (Dubois 2012; Fick 1990).³

The beginning of the Second French Empire came with the invasion of Algiers in 1830 (Sessions 2011). At this point, the status of "new" colonial subjects was not yet legally defined; during the slavery abolition debates prior to 1848, the status of indigenous Algerians remained undetermined. Legally, the French government incorporated three Algerian departments into administrative France (Cooper 2014). At this point, French colonial domination no longer rested on slavery but on the domination of indigenous subjects via economic, political, and cultural means. Yet what was the status of these new colonial subjects? In the Algerian case, the decisive moment came in 1862, when a court decided Algerians were French but not "in the same way" as those born in mainland France. In 1865, colonial law defined the legal status of a "subject" as a person who submits to French authority but does not participate in that authority; a "subject" was thus a national of France, but not a citizen (Saada 2013).

Muslim and Jewish indigenous Algerians were considered French nationals without rights. To maintain this tenuous position, French colonial law drew on cultural standards: The state created the difference between citizenship and subjecthood based on norms informing individuals' behavior in the private sphere. Strikingly, Algerian Jews were made French citizens with the 1870 Cremieux decree, based on the idea that they were "more capable" of

assimilating to Frenchness. For Algerian Muslims, application for French citizenship was possible, but under the condition of renouncing their “Islamic” personal status. The state ascribed racialized group characteristics to the French body politic, but *individuals’* inclusion pivoted on their ability to shed their defining group characteristics (Lewis 1962).

Individuals had to demonstrate they had attained traits of French civilization and thus had shed their private characteristics. Voluntarily subscribing to the French political project was insufficient. It was not enough to express a desire to be French; neither was a French education sufficient training in assimilation because, colonial administrators argued, the “imprint of private life” remained. The burden of attaining a status worthy of inclusion was placed on the colonized subject, and the criteria for inclusion were a moving bar. French citizens could shut off their private characteristics in public life, but the state argued that Muslim colonial subjects could not (Saada 2013). Moreover, when French settlers observed acts of resistance, these were interpreted as “Arab indolence” and thus served as further proof of civilizational inferiority (Belmessous 2013:133), reinforcing the idea that colonial subjects could not shed their cultural particularities.

Yet throughout the Second French Empire, the question that most preoccupied colonial administrators was how to make indigenous peoples into “Frenchmen.” In his *Principes de colonisation et de législation coloniales* (1895), for example, the French jurist Aurthur Girault asked, “What is to be done with the natives [of Algeria]?” (Girault, cited in Abi-Mershed 2010:1). Girault rejected the “monstrous systemic destruction” of indigenous communities, which he associated with British colonialism, and emphasized the “natural generosity of the French race” (Girault, cited in Abi-Mershed 2010:1). With the French *mission civilisatrice* (Conklin 1997), the desired relationship between the colonizers and the subject peoples was one of assimilation. As minister Jules Ferry suggested in 1885, “assimilation, in its absolute sense, is the work of centuries, but the civilizing work which consists in uplifting the native, in reaching out for his hand, is the daily work of a great nation” (Ferry, cited in Belmessous 2013:149).

In practice, assimilation meant to incorporate “colonial territories into the national domain by governing them with uniform political institutions, legal codes, and commercial tariffs” (Abi-Mershed 2010:2). With the imposition of cultural norms, education, language, and values of the metropole, the idea was to *absorb* indigenous populations into the French national citizenry, regardless of their own historical specificities. The French feminist Hubertine Auclert, for example, in *Les Femmes arabes en Algérie*, propagated the “Frenchification” of colonized women. Naturally, the best agents to carry out this assimilatory mission were French women themselves, who could “familiarize Muslim women with our lifestyles and ways of thinking” (Auclert 1900:26).

Despite this drive for absorption, colonial subjects were governed by a distinct legal system, the native codes (*code de l’indigénat*). The native codes enforced a series of regulations, from limited participation in local elections and extraordinary taxation to forced labor (*corvée*) and excessive punishment for subversive behavior that upset the “colonial order.” Even though the native codes presented separate legal codes and produced strong demarcations between citizen and subject in social and political life, they rested on the idea that the subject was *moving toward* entry to the French body politic. The native codes were designed to transform “natives into docile subjects while they were progressing along the path to civilisation” (Belmessous 2013:149). From the perspective of the Algerian colonial subject, the policy of assimilation operated as a moving ideal. The Franco-Algerian philosopher Sidi Mohammed Barkat (2005:22) described this constant state of not-yet as “not truly inclusion nor in fact exclusion, but the indefinite hanging on for some future inclusion.” An individual’s failure to assimilate contributed to the hardening of racial ideas of difference.

The crux of this cultural system was that it defined ideals for colonized *and* colonizer alike. The utopia underlying assimilation was the idea that colonial subjects not only should become Europeans but in fact should become *improved*, or perfected, Europeans. Assimilation was grounded in a utopia that not only highlighted its “not-yet” and “ever-becoming” characteristics but also served as a way to affirm, through demarcating the colonial other, what Frenchness meant. The cultural standards underpinning assimilatory logics meant Frenchness projected all that was undesirable about itself onto the colonial subject; in turn, France held up its own fabricated purity as the standard colonial subjects could not meet. In a sense, the Rousseauian ideal of the perfectible man was applied to uphold, and thus re-create, the standard for subjects in the colonies. “Colonizers,” Belmessous (2013:3) writes, “wanted colonised peoples to be what they themselves were not yet.” Spelling out the content of assimilation helped articulate and reaffirm what Frenchness ought to be in the first place.

The centrality of the empire to French identity, captured in the idea of “Greater France,” was further entrenched after World War I (Conklin 1997; Wilder 2005). Colonial subjects, it was declared, would keep their personal status defined by customary law. They continued to be French nationals without citizenship rights until passage of the Lamine-Guèye law after World War II. Debates about boundaries of citizenship had broken out again because France had lost its moral superiority following the horrors of the Vichy regime. Moreover, during the war, French colonial subjects had taken up arms in resistance to Vichy France, leading many to argue that it was in fact the colonies that had liberated metropolitan France. Colonial subjects made the case that they had earned the right to take part in debates about France’s new constitution. As part of these discussions, the Senegalese colonial delegate Lamine Guèye pushed through legislation that as of June 1, 1946, “all overseas residents (including Algeria) have the status of citizen, with the same title as the French nationals [living] in the metropole or the overseas territories” (Loi Lamine Guèye 1946). The law gave rise to various questions. Could colonial subjects have “the rights of French citizens” without being French citizens? Could two citizenship regimes coexist? For opponents of the law, the central point was that extending rights to the colonial population would threaten the meaning of Frenchness itself. Diminishing colonial difference, they argued, would threaten French identity and make France itself a colony of its own empire.

In 1953, the debate was settled: *Cultural* nationality would be the source for rights and status and for disenfranchising colonial subjects. Africans and Frenchpersons were fundamentally different, colonial delegates asserted: One was born French, one could not become French. The constitution of 1958, which also serves as the current French constitution, resolved interpretive confusions by stating there is only one French citizenship, under which all citizens are equal under the law, irrespective of origin, religion, or race. Yet nationality, the precursor to citizenship rights, could be only the product of *cultural* heritage (Cooper 2014; Genova 2004).

This captures the great paradox we inherited from nineteenth-century European citizenship theory: Citizenship rights follow a universal language, according to which all can meritocratically gain citizenship rights, but belonging to the national community is historically produced and culturally constrained. At the heart of citizenship rights is the ideal of a meritocratic citizen, and understandings of what this ideal citizen looks like are culturally constructed. There is no legal definition of how we imagine a citizen, but cultural understandings of how easily one can attain these meritocratic traits are embedded in and were produced through colonial histories. In opposition to the legalistic, formulaic language of rights, civil sphere theory gives us a language for cultural understandings of “the good.” However, because it does not include the colonial relationship in its analytic framework, it does not question how the meanings of the good were constituted in a relationship

of domination. In the French case, even though the Revolution proclaimed equality under law and theoretically gave equal access to political rights, French colonial history never overcame the difficulties of dealing with race and the colonial population (Mbembe 2011; Stoler 2011; Wilder 2005).

Questions about what the civil sphere signifies and who can be part of it are struggles of colonial domination and our ongoing imperial “history of the present” (Hall 2018). Interpreting civil codes in the context of colonial history leads us in a new direction: It suggests the contextual contingency and governance logics of classificatory systems of good/bad or inside/outside. France constructed colonial subjects through a set of racialized characteristics depicted as the opposite of civility. Political principles were neither universal nor imperfect but articulated through notions of the community of rights. Those seeking to bridge the distance to become the meritocratic citizen in effect reproduce and reify what this citizen looks like, further upholding the standard of civility. Given this history, rather than focusing on how postcolonial subjects can attain traits sufficient for citizenship status, we need to question the classificatory system and the cultural associations upon which it rests.

DISAVOWAL, COLONIAL MEANING-SYSTEMS, AND CIVIL CONSTRUCTION

Citizenship Officer: Request on the 15th of November 1996. Nationality: Algerian. Arrival in France: 1959. Divorced. One child. French language: Correct. Well, given your behavior, I’ll be giving a negative opinion. And because of your meetings [with Arabs] you leave me no choice. You’ll go through the deportation committee.

This case study demonstrates how the meaning of Frenchness and meanings of civility came about in contradistinction to the colonial other. Metropolitan and colonial political processes do not exist in analytically distinct or abstract spaces but share one political and cultural grammar. Civilizing ideologies project that which is considered abject in the metropole onto the colonial subject, while at the same time creating a standard the colonial subject only ever fails to achieve. The utopia underlying assimilation was the idea that colonial subjects should not only become Europeans but in fact should become *perfected* Europeans. This created an unachievable ideal while reinforcing definitions of the core group. French mechanisms of inclusion not only were flawed but reified a colonial power hierarchy, defining that which is civilized and desirable by setting in stone its opposite. These kinds of imperial logics made it almost impossible for Muslim Algerians to shed their stigmatized, private traits, which were seen to be so definitive of their identity that they could not be combined with the political principles of French politics. The state used discourses of civility to keep colonial subjects out of democratic life, based on a particular cultural construction of civility that derived from social evolutionary thought and corresponding racial hierarchies.

This history entails an ideal of conformity that could potentially act as a moving bar whereby the onus of proving oneself a legitimate member of the community is always placed on the (post)colonial subject. Yet the (post)colonial subject is always already outside the boundaries of the national community and must live up to ideals stricter than those set for citizens themselves. In this process, it is not only the outsider who gets culturally marked but also the insider. In reiterating the many ways the colonial subject, or the postcolonial immigrant, falls short of meeting the standards set by the core group, the core group reiterates its own sense of self. If the colonial subject cannot attain the qualities necessary to be included, the very projection of the ideal and the concurrent shortcomings reify the idea of perfect civility.

Given this long-standing history, our theoretical approaches must include a theory of the civil sphere and its disavowal. To date, sociological approaches tend to focus on overcoming the boundary between outside and inside. We discuss how outgroups can gain inclusion into a civil community, and we discuss mechanisms outgroups adopt to be seen as legitimate members of the national body politic. These mechanisms range from assimilatory standards to multiculturalism predicated on the right to difference. Yet most of our approaches to difference do not account for the perspective of the colony. Civil codes cannot be dissociated, because this abstraction belies their use as a governance tool to maintain colonial hierarchies and determine colonial difference. Writing from the perspective of the colony, however, we may ask different questions. For example, in abstracting civil codes, which histories do we silence or push to the past? Shifting the question from inside-outside dynamics to an investigation of what constitutes “the inside”—Frenchness—means we begin to interrogate how colonialism needed to constitute cultural meanings of the good and the civil.

What does this mean for our theories of solidarity? First, the process for inclusion, becoming part of the sphere of solidarity, cannot be one of civil *repair*. We need a new framework that takes account of the colonial myopias in history and the historical making of the civil. Instead of *repairing* or *reconstructing* an existing framework, the task is to *construct*, perhaps for the first time, a sphere of solidarity that works from a reflexivity of histories of violence. This process necessarily requires uncovering the dominant group’s colonial history and in doing so, locating its signifiers in concrete histories. It is not possible to understand what constitutes the civil sphere without studying its colonial making, because it does not exist in isolation, analytically bifurcated from its colonies; it is defined by this alterity. The historical record shows the colonial project was not solely about constructing “the other”—it was just as much about upholding the perfected version of “the civil.” Colonialism reiterated what we associate with “the good,” and yet the core group falsely universalized civil codes, and they remain dissociated of this history.

Re-embedding our theoretical framework in these histories points to the limits of universalization. The civil sphere’s signifiers cannot be ahistorical and abstract, because they are shaped through histories of empire. Overcoming these binaries does not mean shifting outgroups toward the ingroup but allowing for historical analysis of how the signifiers came to be produced and for what purpose. In this mode, we no longer focus on boundary struggles, of resignifying outgroups, but we begin to question the constitution and content of the inside and the corresponding classificatory system. The question becomes whether it is possible to imagine the sphere of solidarity not by extending exclusionary histories but by calling into consciousness the long-standing, shared history of colonialism.

Here, the anticolonial canon has answers. It is perhaps what C. L. R. James (1966:187) had in mind when he described the Black Jacobins of revolutionary Saint Domingue: “These are my ancestors, these are my people. They are yours too if you want them.” Moving away from the restrictive French Revolution as the inception of the French Republic, the more fruitful source for solidarity may be Revolutionary Haiti, which gave rise to histories of freedom not through the category of the bourgeois metropolitan ideal of Man but through overcoming slavery and producing a more universal human (Bogues 2005).

In his letter to his nephew, James Baldwin (1992:8) makes another helpful point:

There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other

hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.

More recently, the French Algerian writer and activist Houria Bouteldja (2017:50) drew on James and Baldwin:

James offers you the memory of his negro ancestors who rose against you and who, by freeing him, freed you. In essence, James says, change the Pantheon, this is how we will make History and build the Future together. It sounds a whole lot better than “our ancestors the Gauls,” don’t you think?

The core group often sees its own making as disconnected from its empire. In turn, resituating Western democratization and its concurrent colonial project enables a more accurate historical account for building solidarity. Decolonizing efforts along these lines have already drawn on diverse strategies, from political organizing to intellectual work to museum activism. Seeking to unsettle the “national” democratization myths, these movements aim to write French colonial history back in, to shift the question from one of “inclusion” to that of “decolonization.” As opposed to pessimism about the possibilities for solidarity, as Alexander (2006:208–209) suggests, these movements aim to change the terms of debate to suggest that historical justice become the basis for solidarity.

Analytically this has two consequences. First, we begin to question the false universalism of civil codes, which are presented as abstracted from colonial and deeply cultural inflected histories. If the core group has deemed its history universal, the analytic move here is to anchor it in its concrete historical context (Chakrabarty 2009). To date, the congruence of political principles with exclusionary ideals of the political community allows the core group to continue to see itself as disconnected from histories of violence. Second, moving beyond the false universals in civil codes leaves open the possibility of new sources of solidarity that can govern political life. As the quotes above suggest, the point is not to include outgroups in a political and cultural grammar that positions colonial history as a long-gone past but rather to reimagine the terms on which solidarity can arise. In this sense, we may begin to analyze how the core group needs to rethink its own positionality and insert itself into its concrete place in history, thus *locating* itself not in an ahistorical, universalized space but in its specific historical place. Civil/uncivil discourses provided the governance logics for colonial domination; in abstracting these categories, we erase the colonial context that gave them meaning.

CONCLUSION

Civil sphere theory reads history to create abstractions and does not consider how colonial history shapes the creation of theoretical categories. This move displaces our analytic focus: It leads us to focus on civil repair movements while reifying the conceptual architecture we built around colonial exclusions. Instead, in placing theoretical categories in historical context, not only do we make explicit the erasures of colonial history, but we show how the categories so central to Western democratization gained meaning in the colonial project. In investigating how empires shaped the making of the civil sphere, we elevate colonial histories in the creation of modern social and political vocabulary.

Bringing colonial history to questions of the civil sphere builds on a tradition in sociology that suggests a tighter link between theory and history more generally (Sewell 2005). Calhoun (1996:328) suggests that social theory needs “an approach that opens up inquiry into the historical constitution of basic theoretical categories.” Because our theoretical categories are

themselves entangled with histories of domination, these categories often reaffirm the very exclusions they seek to study. If we place our conceptual architecture in the larger cultural framework of empire, we begin to see how theories get falsely universalized and abstracted beyond the context that gives them meaning (Chakrabarty 2009; Go 2016). Studying civil discourses and the politics of difference from the perspective of the colonial subject illuminates how political grammars and civil discourses came about as an ideal in this colonial context. In writing imperial histories back into the story, our analytic frameworks turn our lens to the cultural constructions that animate these theories but often remain unspoken (Trouillot 2004).

With closer attention to the historical making of signifiers, it is possible to point to the limits of otherwise universalized theories and to construct frameworks that better reflect the power struggles of history writing. This imperial framework also gives us a starting point to analyze the co-constitution and interaction of various forms of racial and gendered exclusions, constructed and mobilized within imperial governance logics. The often-erased histories of empire inform all exclusions, including those of women, minorities, and other groups “within the nation”; analyzing their positionalities without the context of empire is incomplete.

It is conceivable that excluded groups within a nation could be included in a previously imperfect national project, yet this logic falters with colonial subjects. As I have attempted to show, colonial subjects are by definition invented as outside the community of rights. The implications of “including” those who are placed outside the boundaries of the political are different from including individuals who are excluded from the civil sphere but part of the nation. Bringing colonial subjects or their descendants into a sphere of solidarity necessarily means questioning the civil codes that placed them on the outside, and it means rewriting the national project through these very histories of colonization. In bringing these histories back, we may gain a better and more accurate foundation to theorize and build movements of solidarity.

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NOTES

1. Alexander positions himself in opposition to a series of social scientists who viewed the “problem” of outgroups as the encroaching of “the stranger” into otherwise well-integrated social systems. These approaches tended to assume that exclusion occurs as a result of the mere encounter with the other, disregarding how outgroups came to be signified in the first place. In contrast, Alexander (2006:411) rightfully makes the case that the production of the outgroup itself is a consequence of “processes internal to the social system.” In this move, Alexander turns our attention toward the discursive meaning-systems that operate within the civil sphere and signify these outgroups.
2. The continuing manifestation of gendered colonial governance logics is perhaps clearest in the centrality of the veil to contemporary French national politics (Scott 2010). In his chapter “Algeria Unveiled,” Fanon (2004:47) described how much of colonial governance centered on the woman’s body:

Every rejected veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialists horizons until then forbidden, and revealed to them, piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare. The occupier's aggressiveness, and hence his hopes, multiplied tenfold each time a new face was uncovered. Every new Algerian woman unveiled announced to the occupier an Algerian society whose system of defence were in the process of dislocation, open and breached. Every veil that fell, every body that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the *haik*, every face that offered itself to the bold and impatient glance of the occupier, was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and was accepting the rape of the colonizer. Algerian society with every abandoned veil seemed to express its willingness to attend the master's school and to decide to change its habits under the occupier's direction and patronage.

Analyses of gender and religion must remain tied to the colonial contexts that turned the veil into a specific colonial obsession and technology of rule.

3. A great paradox here is that French colonial elites believed formerly enslaved Caribbean populations could in fact attain French citizenship because they had been "exposed to French civilization" in the context of slavery. In this sense, slavery became a precondition for citizenship for colonial subjects (Saada 2013:336).

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