Culture, the civic, and religion: characteristics and contributions of cultural analysis through three exemplary books

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Clemens, Elisabeth S. 2020. Civic Gifts: Voluntarism and the Making of the American Nation-State. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 392. Paper $35.00.

Dromi, Shai M. 2020. Above the Fray: The Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 240. Paper $27.50.

Swidler, Ann and Susan Cotts Watkins. 2017. A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pp. 304. $24.95.

The cultural analysis of what is termed, in the broadest sense, “the civic,” has blossomed within sociology over the past two decades (Adler Jr. 2019; Adler Jr. and Offutt 2017; Baggett 2001; Bender 2003; Braunstein 2017; Delehanty and Oyakawa 2018; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Eliasoph 2011; Kaufman 2003; Krause 2014; Kurasawa 2007; Lichterman 2005; Lichterman and Potts 2009; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; McCormick 2015; Polletta 2006, 2020; Wood 2002). Oriented around an array of terms and concepts—civil society, civic arena, civil sphere, civic action, civic engagement—this efflorescence has generated considerable evidence of what a cultural approach brings to a research domain previously dominated by organizational, political, or normative approaches (Boli and Thomas 1999; Habermas 1981; Putnam 2000). Though most of this recent work is not “about” religion, a hallmark of this efflorescence is the frequent presence of religion as a core object of

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the analysis, as religious actors, ideas, and institutions inhabit the civic landscape of post-secular modernity (Gorski et al. 2012; Guhin 2014).

The three books reviewed here are engaging, exemplary pieces of scholarship that move the project of explaining the civic along. They are trustworthy guides for understanding how the historical association between religion and philanthropy (Boltanski 2012 [1990]; Mauss 1990 [1950]; Silber 1998) unfolds in important cases (the Red Cross, global AIDS relief, United States charitable campaigns). I was asked to review these books together. As a result, one might assume that the network of meaning among them that I articulate in this essay is just an artifice, the result of the idiosyncratic tastes of the journal’s book review editor. In reality, despite their recent publication, I already had dog-eared copies of two on my shelf, with the third on my “must read” list. As a group, they provide an opportunity to take stock of core theoretical and methodological characteristics in the cultural analysis of the civic. Beyond this, they produce a summary “state of the field” in terms of knowledge about the civic.

I begin with a brief background about research on the civic before the (most recent) cultural turn. Then, I examine commonalities in how the books analyze the civic, which I present as evidence of a congealing cultural approach. Next, I argue that a close reading of the books reveals a coherent set of conclusions about the civic, evidence of how the cultural approach has produced accumulated knowledge across the past two decades. Along the way, I observe how the books engage with the “strong program” (Alexander and Smith 2010). Notably, despite the strong program’s ongoing engagement with the civic (Ostertag and Díaz 2017; Villegas 2019), its influence on two of these books is mostly indirect. None of the authors begin or end by contesting or revising the strong program’s core ideas. Instead, in credit to the strength of the strong program, it influences these books through its centering of meaning in sociological analysis, in addition to sharing some conceptual footholds. These books, in turn, suggest some new ground for the strong program to cultivate regarding the civic, especially a focus on the state and institutional religious actors. I conclude by considering the horizon for cultural analysis of the civic.

**Non-cultural sociology of the civic**

While social scientific engagement with what we might now call the civic has a long history in American sociology, going back to Alexis de Tocqueville, W.E.B. Du Bois and Jane Addams, scholarly attention to the civic exploded with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Much of the early scholarship was normative, drawing on Habermas’ (1981) ideas to understand democratic practice beyond the formal institutions of the state and the economy. In the United States, the ensuing sacralization of the civic led to new articulations of citizenship, new forms of socialization, and new warrants for state action (Dill 2013). It also paralleled the institutional growth of the
“Third Sector,” whose size and claims to independence ushered in a sector-based way of identifying the civic. By the late 1990s, however, promotion of voluntarism (and volunteerism) turned to scholarly concern, with evidence that bowling leagues and social trust were declining (Foley and Edwards 1996; Putnam 1995). The following years were taken up by sociological arguments about the nature of social capital, the causes of its decline, and arguments about whether it actually was in decline (Paxton 1999). Meanwhile, scholarly attention to the global civic increased, with researchers tracing the structure of global society and the rise of transnational civic organizations (Boli and Thomas 1999).

Cultural sociology of the civic

Notably, the rise of scholarship on the civic coincided with the explosion of sociological engagement with culture. As a result, we now have two-plus decades of cultural sociological analysis that proffers alternative ways of understanding the civic.

Most prominently, Alexander’s programmatic statement articulated a new theoretical and explanatory framework (Alexander 2006). Drawing on a wide range of empirical projects previously undertaken, Alexander’s book stood out in three ways. First, it turned sociological scholarship about the civic back towards solidarity, a conceptual distinction from social capital that, drawing on Durkheim, introduced a range of new objects to analyze, including discursive categories, contestations, and performances. Second, Alexander highlighted the uneven, varied, even conflictual nature of the civic. The civic was not a set of activities or a clearly marked sphere, but a dimension of social life constructed by persons in relation to social evils, influenced by mediating institutions of mass society, challenged by social inequality, and always at risk. Looking back on the book now, it was notable for its sustained attention to racial domination, racial reconciliation and the role of social movements.

The third notable feature of the book was how it delimited the civil sphere in a surprising way—by cordonning off elements of religion. To be sure, examples of religion were present throughout the book. For example, the section on social movements dealt at length with the Black Church, particularly its role in producing a Black civil society that undergirded the “civil repair” of racial domination through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Or, for example, the section on modes of incorporation explored the shift from assimilation to multiculturalism through the transformation of Jewish identity in the United States. What is notable about both these examples regarding minority religious groups is that they indirectly suggested the religious exclusiveness of the civil sphere in the United States. This exclusiveness is historically accurate at many moments—perhaps even more so today—since religious traditions in the United States, especially a hegemonic one like White Protestantism, could generate a narrow solidarity that resisted broader

1 I first encountered Putnam’s argument, and its rippling effects, as an undergraduate researcher at The Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio. The article, I was told, changed everything in terms of thinking about democracy and civil society. It did that, but was not the last word.
social solidarity. But what Alexander’s approach tended to miss were institutional manifestations of religion that encouraged civil repair, including those which were instrumental in the very creation of the civil sphere to begin with. As Bellah (2015, p. 42) argued in response to Alexander’s book, “it is difficult to argue that the American civil sphere was ever in a very clear sense secular.” The strong program’s analysis of the civic began with a tenuous engagement with religion.

Beyond Alexander and the strong program, a wide-ranging list of other cultural sociologists—some of whom Alexander and Smith (2010, p. 15) termed “friends and fellow travelers”—have illuminated the civic. Plenty have now trod this path that those working implicitly or explicitly outside of the strong program should no longer be considered “lone scholar[s] working by candlelight” (p. 15), lacking a shared intellectual project. Some have contributed to a shared intellectual project by pointing out the temporary, thin, and even anti-solidaristic outcomes of social bonds (Bender 2003; Eliasoph 1998, 2011; Wuthnow 1998). Others have shown that individualism need not be opposed to civic engagement, and that religion can provide meanings and practices that allow for both (Baggett 2001; Braunstein 2017; Delehanty and Oyakawa 2018; Konieczny 2013; Lichterman 2005; Wood 2002). Scholars focused beyond the United States have shown how the purported rationality of organized humanitarianism skews transnational action and how human rights defines crises while producing new forms of action for solving them (Krause 2014; Kurasawa 2007).

A quick scan of the titles of these authors’ works shows the continued saliency of religion to cultural analyses of the civic. The strong program might make sense of this by claiming that “religion and the civil sphere each have their own culture and organization” (Alexander 2015:177), with interesting connections between “distinctive domains.” Instead, the empirical regularity of such interesting connections suggests the ongoing institutional and ideational religious dimensions of the civic, at least in the American case, but possibly globally as well (Csordas 2009). Rather than spending time marking out two domains, which assumes the incompatibility of the secular (the universal) with the religious (the particular), the challenge for cultural sociologists is instead to understand how and why religious institutions, actors, and ideas that inhabit the civic generally act as if no such separate domains exist.

This is a long way of saying that the three books reviewed here get at some important dimensions of the civic, providing an opportunity to reflect on how cultural sociologists approach the civic.

What the cultural analysis of the civic entails

Conceptual bases: fields, relational geometries, and fantastical imaginations

Shai Dromi’s Above the Fray: The Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector is an historical case study about the founding of a new field of social action and the ensuing durability of a field’s meanings through time. Across five empirical chapters, Dromi describes the appeal of Henry Dunant’s suffering-laden
battlefield account, *A Memory of Solferino*, to mid-19th Century European elite; its translation into the unique moral principles of the Geneva Convention through a Calvinist reform movement in Switzerland; the ensuing foundings of Red Cross organizations across national contexts; and the unfolding uses of a new logic to other social fields.

Written in a renaissance moment for field theory, Dromi stakes out a strong cultural position against materialist or status-based versions of field theory, arguing for “field emergence as culturally dependent” (p. 133). According to Dromi, the development of the humanitarian field—and possibly others as well—is impossible without propulsive motivations among a radical group of persons who feel that a new human enterprise is required to transform the world. The historical context of Geneva is crucial, with its centuries of Protestant religious experimentation set among the proliferating battles of nearby great powers. The recent arrival of Catholics, and the lax religious rigor associated with state religion, led a group of Calvinist reformers to organize the Réveil (the Awakening), an orthodox movement that advocated social activism amid suspicion of the state. Spurred by Dunant’s book, the members drew from their theological beliefs to articulate three orientations that Dromi argues guide the humanitarian field to this day: the permanence of organized aid, the independence of organized aid, and the neutrality in delivering aid.

Elisabeth S. Clemens’ *Civic Gifts: Voluntarism and the Making of the American Nation-State* is an ambitious retelling of the development of the American state through episodes of historical conflict between “two different and demonstrably contradictory relational geometries: the form of the gift and the model of liberal citizenship” (p. 266). The form of the gift meets needs, generates relationships and mobilizes power, but also endangers the civic equality of citizens by fostering dependence and inscribing status differences. The book’s argument is framed by an historical puzzle: how is it that the nation departed the founding-era suspicion that charity led to dependence that negated egalitarian citizenship, arriving at a point where gift structures of benevolence are present throughout society, especially in the architecture of the national state? Across nine chapters, seven rich with archival material, Clemens examines how voluntarism evolved as a core balancing technique between benevolence and democracy to achieve “iterated problem-solving” (p. 257). Voluntarism proved useful for divergent ideological visions, variously embraced by anti-state Republicans and state-building Democrats, such that the United States contains numerous associational configurations that boost the state, including “nationalized citizen philanthropy, local-civic alliances, and local-business networks” (p. 237). Clemens deploys a similar historical eye as Dromi, but instead of tracing the development of a new field, Clemens shows how basic relational geometries—and conflicts between them—can exist across multiple fields (national state, local municipalities, capitalist economy). The symbolic power of voluntarism for resolving tensions between relational geometries is not field-specific. Its transportability and familiarity led to its centrality across U.S. history, as voluntarism has undergirded mass disaster relief, war bond drives, and foreign aid. Its flexibility and legitimacy inspired organizational creativity and hybridity, including mass membership organizations, employer-based fundraising, and a universe of non-profit organizations for delivering key state functions.
Ann Swidler’s and Susan Cotts Watkins’ book, *A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa*, is the engaging summary of a multi-year, mixed methods project to understand altruistic responses to the AIDS crisis in Malawi. Using interviews, observations, survey evidence, and a trove of diary ethnographies recorded by Malawians, Swidler and Watkins describe the culture of AIDS relief found in objects, practices, and discourse. They recount the array of non-governmental actors addressing AIDS in Malawi and examine the structure of brokered interaction that these organizations depend on and persistently misunderstand. The authors implicitly assume components of the other books: an established social field, differing relational geometries, and multiple connections between state and non-state actors. With these in the background, the book focuses on the fantasies of all actors involved. Cultural sociologists of a certain era might immediately think of Janice Radway’s work on romantic fantasy, but these authors mean something more implicit, visceral, and motivational. Hopeful but frustrated fantasies abound in the global AIDS movement, as donors seek to fundamentally change Malawi, village chiefs seek to preserve the social order of local life, and Malawians seek educational credentials and labor opportunities to produce a better future. Fantasy—to use a strong culture program term that the authors don’t—is a type of structural narrative which describes the “landscape of aspirations” (p. 12) for all involved. As with most fantasy, fruitful consummation is the desired end, but conflicting emotional desires and material situations prevent that from happening. (And, in case you’re wondering, the authors do use these sorts of fantasy metaphors throughout the book).

Meaning at the center

The common denominator among cultural sociologists of all stripes is the centrality of meaning (Mohr et al. 2020; Spillman 2020), so pointing this out once more is a bit like noting that good crusts are important to great pies. Nonetheless, these books remind us that meaning can be analyzed through different types of cultural objects, practices, and structures. They also remind us that meanings can differ in their internal coherence, breadth and strength (Adler Jr. et al. 2022; Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011; Sewell 1999). Swidler and Watkins show how words with ambiguous meanings hide conflict and undermine purpose; Dromi shows how clear ideals connected to specific practices can focus a field even after the original ideals are forgotten; and Clemens reveals that conflict between ideas can lead to organizational innovation.

More so than the other authors, Swidler and Watkins turn to language. The authors’ treatment of language is more from a pragmatic tradition of actors’ usage than from a strong-program tradition of coded discourse. They describe the near fetishism of words like “sustainability” in the AIDS altruism enterprise. For international organizations, sustainability is similar to a floating signifier: popular, unquestioned, and with ambiguous meaning. For donors, sustainability gives a rationale for sponsoring projects that have very little to do with AIDS prevention—youth groups, small business loans—but a lot to do with transforming the social structure of villages. For Malawians, sustainability gives a name to the demands of Western-style
individual autonomy that donors build through their involvement in village life. Other popular phrases are an example of what Swidler and Watkins call “working misunderstandings—ways of accommodating one another that allow them, however, uncomfortably, to get along” (p. 123). For example, everyone agrees that stigma is bad, though Malawians and donors have different meanings of why and how. Meanwhile, not everyone agrees about the role of “vulnerable women” in the epidemic, so very little gets done regarding these women as the “gaps between expectations and understandings of different participants in the AIDS enterprise are finessed, sidestepped, or obscured” (p. 148). These findings suggest a lot of conflict in the field of AIDS altruism. What is less clear is whether, beyond fantasy, any other deep meanings—about human rights, about the evil of disease—structure this field. In the arena of transnational altruism, where resource inequality abounds amid partnership (Adler Jr. and Offutt 2017), the question of shared deep meaning is one still awaiting an answer.

Dromi, by comparison, focuses less on the ambiguous meanings of words, more on the unambiguous ideals at the beginning of the humanitarian movement. In contrast to Swidler and Watkins, as well as others who have pointed to the fractures between idea-laden language and practice in civic organizations (Adler Jr. 2019, Krause 2014), Dromi describes how the Red Cross’s ideals of permanency, independence, and neutrality began with clear meanings connected to distinct practices. In trying to push against “secular modernity” (p. 5), the founders of the Red Cross highlighted specific actions that battlefield aid could provide and articulated new roles for relevant actors. As these ideals were practiced, their appeal broadened, with states encouraging humanitarian work as a way of universalizing their national ethos and professions (journalists, nurses, lawyers) engaging with humanitarian work as a way to grow their own prestige. One of the most striking arguments about the strength of meaning across time is Dromi’s analysis of what at first appears as a counterexample to the argument: Médecins sans Frontières (MSF; Doctors Without Borders). Dromi argues that its “attempt to reinvent humanitarianism—despite its self-portrayal as entirely novel—stayed within the confines of the already-existing cultural framework of its field” (p. 117). This is a bit like the non-disenchanted version of Weber’s Protestant ethic thesis. Here, according to Dromi, the original ideals of a field can still animate similar actions with similar meanings across time. Thus, the old meanings of some fields do not die, but instead lie buried, as also exemplified in the strange historiography of humanitarian action and human rights which, Dromi reminds us, usually forgets its own religious roots. It would be helpful to know, though, what this rejection of deep meanings by contemporary humanitarian actors means for these actors. Does overt rejection of older meanings help these actors to relate in new ways with states, which have themselves changed? How constraining are the deep meanings to new ones, as well as new forms of action?

One of the many ways that Clemens addresses the workings of meaning is by showing how the tension between the gift and democracy has been addressed in different eras. Her theoretical approach to explain this iterative problem-solving is to argue that the recurring encounter between benevolence and democracy is a “constitutive contradiction” (p. 259), an irresolvable tension that exists because of the presence of diverse cultural materials in a society. During historical episodes, one
relational geometry may prevail, but never for long. Meanwhile, actors may incorporate elements of the differing geometries over time into existing organizational forms, leading to hybridized organizations. For example, the moralistic charity case work of one era became the client-centered “rehabilitation” of the mid-20th century, which in turn gave way to today’s governmental welfare delivered through non-profit organizations. In contrast to Dromi, early meanings and practices do not strongly determine those of a latter era, yet the thread of voluntarism remains across time. And, in contrast to Swidler and Watkins, the ambiguous meanings of voluntarism are central to its success, as voluntarism “represents one form of open architecture that engages both public and private effort at multiple scales as a form of aspiration-ally democratic governance” (p. 275). The missing part of the story we would like to know more about are the cases where voluntarism inserted new, anti-democratic injustices into the state, like eugenics (Wilde 2019) or the institutionalization of the mentally disabled.

Crisis as key

These books show that crisis is a key analytic target for cultural sociologists. This is not saying, à la Rahm Emmanuel and others, that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. Instead, crises are important because their dynamics make large social transformation possible and because some actors are especially adept at making this happen.

This message comes across most strongly in Clemens’ book, which includes explicit theorization for why crisis has been so fundamental to the unfolding of the structures of benevolence in the United States. Crises permeate the book: the Civil War, the Chicago Fire, the San Francisco earthquake, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II. Notably, though, only war and widespread economic devastation that affects the status of elites shakes widespread faith in voluntaristic benevolence. When this happens, the door opens for a more generalized, civic reciprocity achieved through governmental programs. Drawing on Swidler’s well-known discussion of “unsettled times” (Swidler 1986, 2001)2, Clemens proposes that these sorts of crises prompt actors to solidify a particular interpretation of benevolence into the state, especially through the boundary-making power of law. Clemens notes that the two world wars were especially responsible for driving “the consolidation of charity and citizenship” (p. 262). On the other side of major crises, though, is a different type of crisis, that of apathy and plummeting support for government-guaranteed equitable benevolence. In a dynamic that feels familiar to anyone who paid attention to the Reagan Revolution and the Tea Party, the expansion of government programs during crises usually prompted counter mobilizations that removed democratic protections from benevolence and re-embedded reciprocity in local power structures, which are rife with status problems. In the face of growing governmental programs, local elites feared losing the power that came with their leadership of municipal charity funds while national industrial leaders feared federal

2 See Adler Jr. (2019) for a critique of unsettledness as conceptual category.
powers of regulation. This pushback after crisis raises important questions for how the boundaries of the civic expand and contract, with both dynamics drawing from the same well of voluntarism.

The other two books flesh out some finer points about crises. Dromi shows that the numerous, massive, bloody battles of emerging European nation-states provided the background, not to mention repeated opportunity, for the emergence of new civic practices. Prior to the Geneva Convention there were temporary efforts by existing social institutions (the church, the military medical corps) to aid the wounded. But Dunant’s book argued for a coherent, principled response to crisis, quickly becoming a conversation starter for actors. Though the Red Cross is known in the United States for disaster relief and blood donations, its international reputation is due to its ability to keep responding to the iconic crisis: war.

Swidler and Watkins cover a different type of crisis: a viral pandemic in the context of a weak state and massive under-development. The differences between civic action in this crisis and that of wars is instructive. While wars do include public relations (“Uncle Sam Wants You!”), long-term humanitarian campaigns require even more—the production of despairing fantasy—while engendering something less: a veritable collage of uncoordinated action that, the authors admit, is impossible to map. When a non-martial crisis is successfully produced, urgency demands that something be done. In Malawi, the repeated production of “emergency” prompted action, but Swidler and Watkins argue that the large majority of aid practices did little to change the course of infection prevention in Malawi. So many of the efforts of AIDS altruism were unrelated to actually preventing the disease, with many donors “convinced that because the problem was urgent, at least some of what they were doing had to work” (p. 55). As humans across the globe are well aware since early 2020, coordinated, purposeful action is incredibly difficult to achieve in the face of a changing crisis with no one solution. Wars, by contrast, are simply easier.

**What the civic itself entails**

An important focus for cultural sociologists of the civic is the articulation of what we might call “core findings,” recurring themes in scholarship that suggest primary features or mechanisms which are likely foundational to any particular iteration of the civic. Here I point out three.

**A landscape of religion**

As I noted at the beginning, none of these books are about religion *qua* religion. But none are able to tell the story of the civic without tracing the presence of religion. They do this in a way that is different from the strong program’s skepticism towards particular religious institutions and ideas. As a result, we can see that religious meanings, connected to religious actions and religious organizations, are core to the meaning structure of civic forms.
Dromi catches the phenomenological experience of an unsuspecting cultural sociologist finding religion in the civic. Having begun dissertation research to understand the transnational spread of the Red Cross, Dromi was in the archive studying diaries of the founders. Then, the author explains, “before I knew it, my research had turned to the role of religion in shaping civil society organization” (ix). In doing so, Dromi uncovers a forgotten genealogy of modernity, attributing the origins of today’s universalizing humanitarian practices to a strand of Calvinism that sought to redeem corrupt society through the work of Christianity. In the founding of humanitarianism, religious faith was not only personal motive, but also the source of forceful ideas. Further, Dromi argues that when today’s humanitarians claim an impartial, neutral stance, “they are ironically articulating a stance derived from one specific tradition, early-nineteenth-century Swiss Calvinism.” Findings like this make it clear that cultural sociologists also have to explain the collective forgetting of religion in the civic arena today.

One of the benefits of Swidler’s and Watkin’s book for cultural sociologists of the civic is the authors’ recurring encounters with religious persons over the course of their work. They stay at a guest house run by a Catholic group, they meet evangelical mission teams on the airplane, they attend a congregation in a village. These interactions reconfirm a reality of global Christian presence, a religious stamp on the global civic (Adler Jr. and Offutt 2017). They also suggest that the civic is inseparable from the substance of religion that is embedded in particular forms of interaction and belief. Alongside local religious actors is the transnational institutional side of religion, obvious in the authors’ mapping of the field, which includes religious entities such as Baylor College of Medicine, World Vision International, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Save the Children, Catholic Development Commission in Malawi, and more.

The cover of Clemens’ book is a giveaway about religion, in two ways. The flag of the Red Cross flutters, alerting the reader to the foundational importance of the Red Cross to the emergence of the civic. It also makes clear the power of religious symbols as signals of the civic to this day. Over the course of tracing the American state, Clemens notes how religious groups, of differing stripes at different times, were supporters or opponents of increased association with the state in order to expand the reach of aid. An exemplary nugget is when Harry Hopkins, FDR’s head of the Federal Emergency Relief Association, had the Archdiocese of Chicago declared a public agency entity so it could receive New Deal dollars. A few decades later, religious non-profit organizations were a major part of the delivery of public services, while at the same time treated differently by emerging federal taxation and legal guidelines. These sorts of historical developments ensure that the state-religion nexus in the United States will continue to be a hot zone of constitutive contradiction. Cultural sociologists examining the civic will continue to encounter the state and religion. They will do well to see them not as their own hermetically sealed domains (Stabler 2018), instead examining how religious meanings shape state action, especially towards religion (Adler Jr. et al. 2020, 2021a).

This highlighting of religion as central to the cultural sociology of the civic is not meant to resurrect the Tocqueville-inspired zeal of Putnam and others, for whom
small-scale, organized religious volunteerism was the hallmark of civil society. Indeed, the strong program was helpful in critiquing such an organization-focused, “Third Sector” approach to the civic. But, by treating religion as its own domain fully outside the civic, the strong program’s approach misses key forces within the civic. These books show that many civic actors are operating through, and possibly in service to, religious ideas and institutions.

**Growth of the civic and the role of the state**

A second theme in these books is that the civic is everywhere, having grown explosively over the past two centuries through institutional differentiation as well as institutional re-embedding. These books demonstrate that a core task of cultural sociologists is to show how expansion happens, but also the implications of such expansion for societies and citizens.

In each book, the state is a core actor in this process, variously providing resources, symbolic legitimation, and opportunities for the civic (Mayrl and Quinn 2016). This omnipresence—even importance—of the state is at odds with some normative and theoretical construals of civil society, including that of the strong program. It also pushes against those who would argue for the primacy of the civic over the state for the health of democracy. An implicit starting assumption for cultural sociologists investigating the civic should be that the state is likely to be involved with, and likely to have a strong interest in, the development of the civic. This is not only true for democracies, though these books focus on them.

Clemens’ book, given its focus on providing an alternative account of the rise of the American state, gives the most sustained attention to the state. In examining that champion of the civic, Alexis de Tocqueville, Clemens notes how much the country had changed in the decades just before his arrival from France. He did not find an American exceptionalism trapped in amber from another time. Instead, as Clemens writes, “developments long in the making contributed to the creation of a firm legal and cultural foundation for the ‘art of association’ celebrated by Tocqueville” (p. 45). In the early 19th century, associations had grown as alternative forms of government. Despite concerns about the factionalist danger of this growing associationalism, states abetted this change by loosening the strictures for organizations to receive public charters, with the most well-known case being the disestablishment of religion. States did this not for love of an ideal, but because the rising “doctrine of voluntarism” (p. 48) made clear that doing so increased the state’s infrastructural power. At a time “when the capacities of formal government institutions remained quite limited” (p. 46), state officials were happy to have new organizations help with “social support, economic development, and national security as well as religion” (p. 46). A century later, this mixing of voluntarism and governance was well advanced. The American state’s openness to associationalism led to “Third Way” theories that claimed that associations could be both a bulwark against state encroachment against democracy and democratic vehicles for accomplishing the work of a massive state (p. 254). As Clemens recounts, this is a strange and far-reaching achievement:
individual liberty seen as best expressed and protected through non-state associations, which in turn produce the state.

Dromi’s book also deals with a similarly surprising historical paradox involving the state. After all, Dromi explains, it is a relatively new claim that humanitarian associations—not religious orders, not medicine, not the state—are the proper vehicle for carrying the highest of human ideals. Similar to Clemens, Dromi shows that, even though humanitarian associations developed in tension with the state as they sought to address problems that the state could not or would not address, they nonetheless came to interact intimately with the state. To pull off battlefield humanitarianism, activists had to convince states to sign on to the Geneva Convention. Then, abetted by the activist founders’ preference for decentralized organization, humanitarianism spread because nations picked it up, each chartering its own Red Cross during a moment of raging nationalism. As a result, each national Red Cross society ended up with its own unique character. In Japan, the Red Cross was more hierarchical and closely linked to the military; in the United States, it was more voluntaristic and had few ties with the military. As Dromi argues, this pattern of interweaving the civic and the state yokes nationalism to humanitarianism, allowing national ideals to contribute to a universal good.

The role of rationality

One hallmark of the strong program of cultural sociology has been its unwillingness to drink the Kool-Aid of teleological progress narratives. Western modernity, the strong program supporters argue, is not characterized by the replacement of irrationality, but by a complex dynamic of social self-understanding in which rationality is often promoted as the appropriate template for social life (in organization, in state apparatus, in personal behavior), while the presence of irrationally is either an unmarked or denigrated presence. In reality, strong program scholars remind us, social life is grounded in ritual, emotions, identity, value, and aesthetics.

The civic has a complicated relationship to this problem. The civic has long been a space lauded as the place for the protection and advancement of non-rationalized action, guided by values and emotions formerly coded as irrational (Adler Jr. 2019). At the same time, as Krause (2014) portrayed in her important book The Good Project, the fundraising, organizational, and delivery structures of altruism have become warped by rationalist criteria like “clear benefit” and “donor value.” And even this level of organizational rationalization of the civic is under pressure, with leaders behind the “effective altruism” and “give later” movements suggesting a turn to even more rationalization and even less emotion to make altruism truly “work.”

Swilder and Watkins make a crucial contribution to understanding the problematic role of rationality in altruism. First, they argue that actors are pragmatically oriented towards connection and larger meaning in altruistic action, and that this is difficult to achieve across distance (Adler Jr. 2019). Humans enjoy fantasy; altruism may require some level of it. Second, they show that Western donors repeatedly failed to use reasoned inquiry to understand the consequences of the patron-client and chieftain cultural models that exist in Malawi, instead importing a Western
model of individuality and autonomy. Rationality can easily run amok. Third, echoing Swidler’s earlier critiques about the Weberian model of culture, they point out how the uncertainty of action towards a goal leads altruists to turn to the strategies of action they know best. This is especially the case with AIDS, which lacks an easy technological answer. In the case of Malawi, donors and altruists promoted behavioral change—most of which had nothing to do with the most likely AIDS transmission scenarios—as the rational solution. Not surprisingly, these programs had no discernible effect. Worse yet, most altruists were not interested in doing real evaluation to understand if and why their altruistic action worked. Instead, Swidler and Watkins explain that altruists and beneficiaries become invested in “creative collusion” (p. 197) to keep the funds rolling in. Fourth, the activities of donors created a cascade of irrationality. Donors have god-like power to begin and end projects, which induces a state of expectation for Malawians that something good could happen (e.g. funds arriving) and that something bad would as well (e.g. funds departing). As the authors put it, “this elaborate apparatus of ostensibly modern, or modernizing activity … do[es] not ‘empower’ local communities, as donors wish, but creates a capricious, unpredictable, and irrationalizing set of incentives” (p. 209). The upshot of their argument is that claims for more rationality are likely underselling the importance of emotion in altruistic action while overselling the actual accomplishments of what altruists are doing.

The horizon for cultural analysis of the civic

These books are exemplars of the cultural sociology of the civic. Alone, each provides a theoretically fruitful empirical reconstruction of an important case. Together, they provide insight into how cultural sociologists—including those beyond the strong program—go about their craft. They lay out some core aspects of the civic: the importance of religious phenomena, the growth of the civic alongside the state, and the workings of ir/rationality.

I think, too, that these books push us past domain-specific conceptualizations of the civic towards an institutional approach in which civic organizations are central actors though not exhaustive of the activities or meanings of the civic. They historicize the civic, showing how the meanings, practices, and relationships of today’s civic actors occur in relation to earlier settlements of the civic. They show us how the civic is entangled with other elements of society. This is especially important as the boundary of the contemporary civic is quite blurry, prodded by the transformations of capitalism, the nation-state system, and democracy. For example, these works help focus on how “social entrepreneurship,” in which everyone—from students, to professors, to manual laborers—are fashioned as entrepreneurs for the good of society, promotes a distinct relational geometry, legitimates a new category of actors, downplays numerous emotions, and likely forgets a history of creative civic action.

I end with one eye on the pandemic, considering what the virus case curve has to do with the civic. We are now in a new type of crisis, one whose catastrophic human
effects may stretch for some time to come. What might our authors have to say about this?

Swidler’s and Watkins’ work is most directly related to COVID-19, as they address a viral pandemic. The AIDS pandemic mobilized massive amounts of resources but only occurred when donors and governments constructed a shared focus on the moral urgency of action. In the case of the United States and COVID-19, there is no shared evil to confront, as interpretation of and action against the virus are riven by political, religious, and geographic polarization. Health workers and teachers are selfless heroes for some, over-reactive provocateurs for others. The deep meaning of the crisis is fractured, the governmental response is widely varied (Adler et al. 2021b), and the possibility of finding widespread “working understandings” seems limited. Clemens’ work might lead us to believe that we’ve entered a window of possibility for state consolidation of democracy-friendly benevolence. In early response to the pandemic, mutual aid, mega-philanthropy, and state action through civic groups were all deployed as ameliorative responses. But now, a coordinated assault on American democracy seems more cohesive than an attack on the virus. The country may have skipped over the democracy-enhancing power of the crisis. Instead, democratic capacity may be decaying through the looming rollback of early childhood vaccine mandates, the weakening of local governmental powers, and bumpy civic-government collaborations against disease.

In light of the pandemic, a reader of these three books is struck by the tenuousness of what the civic actually does. And yet, the civic is a highly sacralized component of contemporary society, prone to idealization. This gap between sacralization and pragmatic reality is the space for cultural sociologists to show what the civil sphere can do and what it might do better (Reed and Alexander 2007). A common finding in our work is that civic actors are capable of great feats but are not a panacea. We might theorize that part of the deep meaning and promise of the civil sphere is that hoping for the latter just might produce the former.

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