

Inclusion Theories and the Global South:
Why Civil Sphere Theory Couldn't Understand the Egyptian Revolution
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Abstract: The dominant historical narrative of inclusion in Europe starts with the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man (Brubaker 1998), followed by civil, political, and social citizenship rights (Marshall and Bottomore 1992). In settler colonies, the dominant narrative speaks of three phases of incorporation: assimilation, hyphenation, and multiculturalism (Alexander 2008). Globally, the narrative goes with the liberal democracy's defeat of fascism and socialism and the gradual spread of democracy across the globe (Alexander 2022; Fukuyama 1992; Huntington 1993). Though dominant, proponents of that narrative barely study the rest of the globe. Jeffrey Alexander's attempt to globalize his Civil Sphere Theory is an exception. This article engages with his work, especially his essay on the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, to show why the dominant Global North narrative is hardly equipped to understand coexistence/inclusion/solidarity in the Global South. I provide an alternative that centers four issues silenced in Civil Sphere Theory: empire, domination, violence, and partiality.

Questions of inclusion and coexistence in Global Northern sociology have a sizable literature (e.g., Lamont 2023). The dominant historical narrative starts with the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man (Brubaker 1998). At the background of many historical accounts of citizenship rights, lies Marshall's (1992) important work on citizenship rights in the UK, which discusses the progressive introduction of three kinds of rights: civil rights (freedom and equality before the law), political rights (equal participation in democratic, free, and fair elections), and social rights (access to basic economic welfare and education).

In the US, Jeffrey Alexander (2001) speaks of three phases/modes of incorporation of the US's once-ethnicized Europeans: assimilation (acceptance if stigmatized qualities are hidden from the public), hyphenation (out-sider qualities are tolerated but not symmetrical to the dominant group's identity), and multiculturalism (out-group qualities may be respected and desired) (Kymlicka 1996). The narrative generally continues with the inclusion of women (Orloff 1993), people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community in the legal codes of Western societies. That narrative slowly started to be questioned by historical sociologists (Hammer 2020; Kent-Stoll 2024).

But that narrative is not just about the West. Globally, the narrative goes with the liberal democracy's defeat of fascism and socialism and the gradual spread of democracy across the globe (Alexander 2022; Fukuyama 1992; Huntington 1993). A few sociologists from the Global North, however, move beyond those general remarks. Jeffrey Alexander's (2011) essay on the 2011 Arab Spring Egyptian Revolution, however, is an exception. This was probably one of the few works he

authored on the Global South and a beginning for a series of books applying his Civil Sphere Theory beyond the US (e.g., Latin America, Nordic countries, Canada, and India). Empirically rooted in the Egyptian Revolution, this article engages critically with Civil Sphere Theory (CST) as a recent reincarnation of the dominant narrative that aims to expand globally, showing four crucial issues that the theory silences: empire, domination, violence, and partiality.

The first section makes the empire visible in CST's narrative of the Egyptian Revolution. While CST presents the imperial center as a pro-democratic actor in the region, such a narrative disregards historical facts and literature that show the anti-democratic role played by the empire (Jamal 2012). Most importantly, that section argues that struggles for democratization and inclusive politics in the periphery have the heavy burden of convincing the imperial center that it won't be a threat. This is extremely hard, given that being convinced is eventually at the hands of an unsympathetic center and that it often views our region merely through Islam (and all the negative things the empire associates it with, like terrorism), Israel, and the oil prisms. CST was not an exception.

The second section argues that inclusion projects entail domination as the marginalized groups are burdened with using inclusive interpretations of the dominant group's discourse to convince them to be included. This is the case in all inclusion projects. Expanding on the CST inclusion mechanism, the section proposes three necessary but not sufficient conditions for inclusion. The first condition—a polity with a political tradition open to inclusive interpretations—emphasizes that traditions' openness to inclusive interpretations does not preclude exclusive ones. The second condition—the dominant group should not perceive inclusion as a threat—emphasizes domination and that such a threat perception is not merely a result of the marginalized groups' performances. Finally, the third condition—the marginalized group's disturbance of the status quo to force inclusion—emphasizes that inclusion can happen because the dominant group believes such disturbance is more costly than inclusion, not only because they came to sympathize with the marginalized. Inclusion projects are reformist in nature and depend on the dominant's tolerance, and liberation struggles often have factions that reject such domination and seek uncompromised self-determination (Brown 2008).

The third section makes violence visible in CST. It advances three arguments. First, civil spheres are established and sustained by violence as much as civil discourse and institutions. Here, I show that CST's celebrated civil spheres were violent struggles and that CST indeed celebrates violence “for freedom and dignity” when liberal democracies do it. Second, I argue against the common sociological narrative regarding the decline of violence within modern states, proposing that the modern state's unprecedented violence and control raise the stakes of politics, exacerbating polarization and curtailing coexistence projects (Bamyeh 2009).

While CST admits that perfect universalism is never achievable, the fourth and last section critiques its claim of the unprecedented universalism of Global Northern secular modernity. This

is because such a claim requires serious comparative work with premodern universalist projects in other geographies (Bamyeh 2022). The section then argues that CST's inclusion mechanism is based on particularist experience rather than what it claims—the universalism principle. I show this through Alexander's dismissive position on the Egyptian Revolution a few years after the initial enthusiasm. I argue that without formalizing criteria to be universalist and civil, something Alexander (2015:185) refuses to do, the political or biased use of “anticivil” labeling exacerbates.

Realizing coexistence projects is a messy process. It blends and synthesizes diverse cultural references that legitimize coexistence with pragmatic considerations. It is a challenging process everywhere, especially in the Global South. This increases if the region is under heavy geopolitical competition and hostile imperial narratives. The struggle is fierce, but there is always hope, even if we should not expect any utopia on this earth. There will never be a perfect society, but there can be a more just and inclusive one!

The early solidaristic characteristics of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution rapidly shifted towards polarization as different groups fiercely competed over power and the way Egypt should go forward. In 2013, the ancient regime's military took advantage of that polarization, ending the democratic experiment and committing the bloodiest massacre in Egypt's modern history. A few months after the coup, a song titled “What Should I Tell You?!” expressed a longing to transcend the polarization and dehumanization that suffocated Egypt, singing

Since when do you and I have disputes/ and when you see me or I see you, we look away?/
It is not reasonable that each of us will have a different route/This is a strange situation and
a feeling that is novel to us/

What should I tell you?/ What would the hatred route yield?/ Why did our hearts die?/
Where are we going?/ We have a [divisive] devil between us/ Our hope, o our homeland,
is exhausted/ None of us is not losing or injured/

[Addressing the police] The feeling that you could oppress me is painful/ You comfortably
sleep, and my tears increase because of you/ On what basis you counter my smile with
bullets/ And why, by your hand, make every family has a martyr? ...

[Addressing political and social groups] We have been friends and neighbors/ together
through thick and thin for years/ Just like you, my heart aches for our country/ What then?/
Where are our routes taking us?/ I fear what will happen to us tomorrow/ When will we
wake up?!

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