

*Rupture, Repair, and the Civil Sphere: Moral Solidarity and Dynamics of Perception in
Post-Apartheid South Africa*

Matthew Coetzee, University of Notre Dame

This paper examines the moral dynamics of civil repair in moments of acute social disruption, focusing on the July 2021 unrest in South Africa—the largest instance of political violence since the end of apartheid. Sparked by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma, the unrest resulted in 354 deaths, over 2,000 arrests, and an estimated \$3.4 billion in damages. While initially framed as politically motivated looting, the violence escalated along racial lines, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, where armed community groups mobilized in response to the perceived absence of state intervention. In Durban North, vigilante groups erected roadblocks, conducted racial profiling, and killed at least 36 Black South Africans in what became known as the Phoenix Massacre. In contrast, Durban West followed a markedly different trajectory, where cross-racial coalitions actively worked to counter misinformation and de-escalate violence. Durban South, situated between these two extremes, prioritized spatial control over racial exclusion, deploying boundary policing efforts that limited direct violence but did not fundamentally alter existing social divisions.

Integrating Jeffrey Alexander's Civil Sphere Theory (CST) with William Sewell's (1996) eventful sociology, this study argues that civil repair is not merely an institutional process that follows crises, but an immediate and contested moral struggle. Extending Alexander's (2006) conceptualization of civil repair, this paper develops a three-part typology of repair—antifragile, restorative, and precarious—illustrating how different crisis responses shape moral solidarity and democratic inclusion. While all three forms attempt to restore social order, they vary in their democratic orientation. Antifragile repair, exemplified by Durban West, fosters inclusive solidarity, as cross-racial collaboration reorients the moral framework toward democratic participation and pluralism. Restorative repair, evident in Durban South, prioritizes functional stability without deepening moral solidarity, maintaining pre-crisis social divisions while preventing escalation. Precarious repair, seen in Durban North, solidifies exclusionary solidarity, where racialized moral boundaries justify defensive violence, undermining civic trust and democratic inclusion. These

forms of repair illustrate that democratic commitments are neither automatic nor inevitable but shaped by how communities negotiate moral legitimacy under crisis conditions.

Table 1: Typology of Civil Repair and its Moral Implications

Type of Civil Repair	Case Study	Moral Solidarity Outcome	Relationship to Democracy
<i>Antifragile Repair</i>	Durban West	Inclusive solidarity, expanded civic participation	Strengthens commitment to democratic inclusion
<i>Restorative Repair</i>	Durban South	Stability maintained, but no deepened solidarity	Preserves order without challenging exclusionary structures
<i>Precarious Repair</i>	Durban North	Exclusionary solidarity, racialized moral boundaries reinforced	Weakens moral commitment to democratic inclusion

Rather than treating civil repair as a linear or inevitable post-crisis outcome, this study demonstrates that moral solidarity is shaped by how communities perceive and process crisis events in real time. These perceptual shifts—how communities absorb, filter, and interpret overwhelming crisis information—determine whether societies entrench cycles of violence, stabilize without transformation, or reorient toward inclusion and democratic renewal.

This study introduces Perceptual Aperture Dynamics (PAD), a framework for understanding how communities process crisis situations through shifts in cognitive, cultural, and emotional perception. Unlike traditional framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000), which focuses on how actors construct narratives, PAD captures the cognitive mechanisms that govern how communities experience, absorb, and filter crisis information. Extending research on the “too much information

problem” (Simon, 1971), PAD reveals that moral perception is not just about meaning-making but about regulating cognitive overload in ways that shape crisis responses and moral action.

Drawing on physiological and photographic concepts of aperture, this framework explains how shifts in crisis perception influence moral action. Just as the pupil of an eye constricts (miosis) in bright light to focus sharply but at the cost of peripheral vision, a high-aperture response allows communities to filter and structure crisis information, enabling deliberate, long-term adaptation. However, this slower processing can delay immediate action. Conversely, just as the pupil dilates (mydriasis) in darkness to take in more light but risks sensory overload, a low-aperture response enables rapid recognition of immediate threats but at the cost of broader awareness. While this heightened perception allows for quick, defensive reactions, it can also lead to emotional escalation, moral exclusion, and the reactivation of historical trauma. Crucially, shifts between these perceptual states shape crisis responses. Societies that remain locked in a low-aperture (mydriasis) response risk reinforcing cycles of violence, whereas those that oscillate strategically between high- and low-aperture states can recalibrate toward repair and inclusivity.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates 120 in-depth interviews conducted in two waves (2022 and 2024) to assess long-term crisis responses, 800+ community-generated media files, and GIS mapping using the University of Cape Town’s Unrest Tracker to spatially analyze crisis dynamics. Despite experiencing similar levels of state withdrawal and violence, Durban’s three communities diverged in their perceptual aperture shifts.

Durban North exemplifies a precarious repair process, in which communities remained trapped in a low-aperture (mydriasis) response, focusing on a singular, racialized threat. Historical traumas from the 1949 and 1985 riots were reactivated, with digital networks such as WhatsApp amplifying fear and legitimizing vigilante violence. Over time, this constricted moral perception reinforced exclusionary solidarity, deepening racial divisions and sustaining long-term distrust.

Durban South represents a restorative repair process, where crisis perception operated at a mid-range aperture, enabling spatial control rather than racial exclusion. Community members organized boundary policing efforts that prevented large-scale violence but did not challenge pre-existing racial and economic hierarchies. This strategic but limited aperture response stabilized the situation without fundamentally altering patterns of social exclusion.

Durban West illustrates antifragile repair, where community leaders actively manage perceptual aperture shifts, integrating diverse historical perspectives rather than reinforcing a singular trauma narrative. Unlike Durban North, which focused on past racial violence as an immutable threat, Durban West's leaders cultivated a high-aperture (miosis) response, allowing for broad moral and cognitive processing. This approach enabled counter-misinformation strategies, cross-racial collaboration, and community-driven economic initiatives. However, high-aperture responses also carry risks—without structured leadership, broad moral perspectives can overwhelm communities. DW mitigated this challenge by actively reframing uncertainty into an opportunity for collective action.

These cases demonstrate that crisis perception is dynamic, not static. Communities shift between perceptual states, and their ability to do so strategically determines whether they reinforce exclusion or reorient toward repair. While this study emphasizes grassroots moral action, it also highlights how institutions mediate, reinforce, or fail to regulate moral responses in crisis. The South African state's absence during the unrest created a governance vacuum, forcing communities to reconstruct moral legitimacy through alternative structures. Community Policing Forums (CPFs) and Neighborhood Watch Groups (NWGs) played contradictory roles—in some areas, they facilitated inclusive civic repair, while in others, they legitimized racialized moral policing, reinforcing exclusionary violence.

Rather than treating civil repair as a static institutional outcome, this study argues that it is a contested moral process, in which competing ethical commitments structure crisis responses. The case of Durban demonstrates that moral action in crisis is not only about survival but about the struggle to define democratic inclusion. Whether societies harden symbolic boundaries, stabilize without transformation, or expand the civic sphere depends on their ability to recalibrate perceptual aperture in response to crisis.

Works Cited:

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2006. *The Civil Sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow. 2000. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26(1):611–39.

Eyerman, Ron. 2001. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Halbwachs, Maurice, and Lewis A. Coser, trans. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sewell, William H., Jr. 1996. "Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology." Pp. 245–80 in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, edited by T. J. McDonald. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Simon, Herbert A. 1971. "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World." Pp. 37–72 in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, edited by M. Greenberger. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Description

This paper examines the contested process of civil repair following the July 2021 unrest in South Africa, the country's most severe instance of political violence since the end of apartheid. Sparked by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma, the unrest resulted in 354 deaths, widespread looting, and an estimated \$3.4 billion in damages. While initially framed as politically motivated, the violence quickly escalated along racial lines, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, where community defense groups mobilized in the absence of state intervention. Responses diverged dramatically: in Durban North, vigilante groups engaged in racial profiling and extrajudicial killings, culminating in the Phoenix Massacre, while in Durban West, cross-racial coalitions countered misinformation and de-escalated violence.

Drawing on Jeffrey Alexander's Civil Sphere Theory and William Sewell's eventful sociology, this study argues that civil repair is not a linear institutional process but an immediate and contested moral struggle. The paper introduces a three-part typology of repair—antifragile, restorative, and precarious—each shaping moral solidarity and democratic inclusion in distinct ways. Antifragile repair fosters inclusive civic participation, restorative repair maintains stability without addressing exclusionary structures, and precarious repair reinforces racialized moral boundaries, undermining democratic trust. Additionally, this study introduces Perceptual Aperture Dynamics (PAD) to explain how communities process crises through shifts in cognitive and emotional perception. Using 120 in-depth interviews, 800+ community-generated media files, and GIS mapping, it analyzes how communities filtered crisis information, either reinforcing cycles of violence or recalibrating toward repair. The findings highlight how historical memory, digital communication, and grassroots mobilization shape moral responses in crisis. By demonstrating that democratic commitments emerge from struggles over moral legitimacy, solidarity, and exclusion, this research contributes to the study of social conflict, crisis perception, and civil repair in divided societies.