



## THE RELEVANCE OF CIVILITY TODAY

The paper emphasizes the contemporary relevance of civility, understood as a respectful way of treating the other and recognition of people's differences and sensibilities. It outlines the sociological importance of civility as being connected with its role as both a normative guidance orienting us towards prescriptive ideals and as an empirical concept with important social impact on identities and actions. The paper examines Adam Smith's theory which roots civility in a commercial society, analyses Elias's (1994) history of civility as the folding of the logic of the civilizing process, and it debates theories linking the idea of civility to civil society. In conclusion, emphases are put on the importance of civility, seen as the act of respectful engaging with people across deep divisions, for the quality of democracy.

**Key words:** market; respect; civil society; democracy; civility

### Introduction: Rediscovering the idea of civility

Civility is the notion with 'a heavy historical burden' and its protracted trajectory runs from classical civility's embracement of the virtue of citizen, through civility standing for manners and courtesy, becoming the well-established name for 'civilization' and being a norm engendering people to be respectful of others, to civility being viewed as an essential aspect of civil society (Baumgarten et al. 2011: 305). The long history of the idea of civility reveals the multiplicity of meanings of this notion and its various etymologically roots. The term's association with many other concepts, such as citizen, manners, respect, civilization, civil society, also shows the ambiguity of the idea of civility and its complicating status as being both a normative and empirical notion. Throughout history the evolution of the term of civility has been shaped by the changes in norms and values of societies, yet the rules of civility can sometimes lag behind societal changes. And when such a lack of correspondence between societal norms and the nature of civility happens, the standing of the of idea of civility deteriorates.

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The decline of acceptability of the notion of civility is a part of contemporary culture. In the context of today's emphases on authenticity, identity and transparency, the idea of civility is not too highly valued and is not too often referred to in the public discourses. The perceived irrelevance of this norm for today's society is connected with civility being mainly identified as a type of conduct which emphasizes formal and empty politeness and manners, which is portrayed as an artificial, dull and alienating or even seen as a mask under which people hide what they really think and feel. A lack of interest in the notion of civility is also a result of civility being viewed as an elitist and conservative set of practices of exclusion and rules of keeping others at a distance. Additionally, the process of democratization of manners in modern societies has led to questioning what is hiding behind a veneer of civility and to querying the necessity of self-control and restrictions on people's conduct. Taking into account this criticism and the fact that meaning of this notion is far from obvious, it is not surprising that there is no much interest in the idea of civility not only in public discourses but also in the social sciences.

Yet, despite the apparent worthlessness and unimportance of this idea in today's world, some argue that civility is one of the best answers to the diversity and complexity of contemporary societies (Boyd 2006; Hall 2013; Thiranagama et al. 2018). In similar way, this paper views an implementation of ground rules of civility as an initial step in democratic and constructive ways of dealing with our complex, diverse and unequal world's problems. If we accept a general understanding of civility as a respectful way of treating the other, recognition of people's differences and sensibilities and deferential engagements with people across divisions, we can argue that practice of such civility can enrich today's democracy. In other words, civility, as a norm compelling people to treating each other with respect and to agreeing to differ within specified limits over many issues, therefore contributing to tolerance and a non-conflictual social environment, and as 'the disposition that makes political life possible because it allows those with different and conflicting views of the good to live peacefully side-by-side' (Boyd 2006: 865), can benefit democracy. Civility, when recognized and adopted, can help us improve the quality of democracy because it can skill us how to agree to differ, handle diversity, manage and regularize conflicts so they can be productive. What's more the value and importance of civility for the health of democracy is not only because civility is a norm generating both respectful behaviour towards the other and the restraint from any confrontation in the face of any difference of opinions, but also because civility can be a precondition to projects of social change which aim to reduce inequality, exclusion and marginalization. Such a potential importance and desirability of civility should be reflected in an expansion of sociology's interest in this notion.

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### A short account of the evolution of civility

To support the argument about the relevance of idea of civility for living together in contemporary democratic societies, we need to learn more about the content of this term and to discover in what contexts specific versions of civility tend to flourish. Although, due to the space limits, we cannot provide a full picture of how the idea of civility has evolved through the history, nonetheless, with a help of Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) thoughts about historical semantics and the importance of context in shaping the meanings of words, will try to shed some light on how the notion of civility acquired new meanings over time and how these shifts in its meaning reflect new developments in society, politics, and culture. By charting the term of civility's ideological employment, its political functions and its utilization in debates of temporalities, it becomes clear that the value of the notion of civility is not exhausted by its 'sloganic usage and utility' (Koselleck 2004: 222) . According to Koselleck's (2004: 76) idea about the autonomous power of words, seen as capable of both describing and ordering the surrounding world, the term of civility is not only one of concepts with 'semantic carrying capacity', but also the important notion that makes human actions intelligible to others and allows for debating the condition of our future live together. However, although historical events are not possible without linguistic activity; 'neither events nor experiences are exhausted by their linguistic articulation' as there are numerous social, political, and technological factors that shape the life chances of civility (Koselleck 2004: 222). Hence, to reveal how the challenge of contemporary society reshapes the nature of civility, there is a need to consider broader shifts in societies and cultures on which the rules of civility depend on.

The accounts of the concept of civility's deep historical roots, show that the term 'civility' was linked to the Latin word '*civis*' which stands for 'citizen' or 'member of a community' and is connected to the adjective '*civilis*' and the nouns '*civitas*' and '*civilitas*' (Nehring 2011: 315), which referred to the state or quality of being a good citizen. This first meaning of civility, derived from the classical notion of organized political community or *civitas* slowly evolved to encompass a broader sense of respectful and considerate treatment of others in all types of interactions, not just within the context of citizenship. In the Middle Ages, in contrast to classical antiquity, the ideal of civility was in decline. Yet during the sixteenth century, as the examination of the importance of civility in Europe reveals, the idea of civility regained the visibility and became closely related to courtesy, kindness, good manners and politeness. Civility at that period was part of a set of social virtues common taught by humanists of the time, such as Baldassare Castiglione, who in his book *Il Cortegiano* (1528) praised courtesy or that of the Dutch humanist Erasmus, whose book *De Civiltate Morum Puerilium*

(1530) was the first one to introduce the concept of civility into the educational field (Wirth 2022). These works, while combining classical traditions with religious thoughts, claimed that it was a part of moral and religious duty to live modestly and display politeness and good manners.

What's more, as 'civil' people with manners were increasingly identified as 'civilized', to be 'civilized' also started to mean 'freedom from barbarity; with 'Europeans being viewed as "civil" and "civilized," representing a superior political, moral, and cultural system known as "civilization", while "the other", by contrast, was seen as deficient politically, morally, and culturally' (Thomas 2018: 16). Such an additional utilization of the word civility as an ideological 'weapon' with a 'polemical thrust' (Koselleck 2004: 78), which helped the 'civilized elites' to distinguish themselves from the rest of society and to reinforce their power and privileges, was particularly true in the seventeenth-century England. By the eighteenth century both meanings of civility; 'politeness' and 'the state of being civilized', which stood for what would come to be called 'civilization' were well established there and both included in Samuel Johnson's definition of civility in his *Dictionary* (1755; quoted in Thomas 2018: 7).

The notion of civility achieved another new meaning in the political writings of the French Enlightenment which defined the role civility as the critical aspect of political democratic culture. The ideas of French philosophy of that period established the importance of the notion of civility as providing the foundation for a more just, tolerant, and cohesive society. The core features of civility were elaborated as involving toleration of views different from one's own as well as a respect for the right of others to arrange their lives – within the limits of legality – according to their own convictions (Baumgarten et al. 2011; Nehring 2011). Interestingly, Montesquieu ([1748]1988), not only argued for the desirability civility in negotiating tensions between nations, but he also examined the interconnections between different forms of government and their moral infrastructures, including a norm of civility (Heilbron 2022 : 11).

The French Enlightenment-like interest in the civility's links with the nature of state, democratic values and political culture, resonated with Scottish moral philosophers, who more directly associated civility with civil society, the idea of which was introduced by the Scottish social philosopher Adam Ferguson ([1759] 1995). During the Scottish Enlightenment, its representatives also explored how a historically new type of 'commercial society' might have shaped social and economic relations as well political institutions. And it was Adam Smith, one the most important writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, who brought to our attention the potential of a commercial society to facilitate civility (Baumgarten et al. 2011; Hall, Trentmann 2005).

While before the nineteenth century civility was valued as contributing to non-violent forms of conflict solution, as societies were becoming larger and

more anonymous, the appreciation of the civility's capacities to moderate the nature of social relationships and to make 'a difference in the quality of the daily life of the members of society' became important (Shils 1992: 5). In contrast with the past, the nineteenth century European forms of civility underwent significant transformation, reflecting both the expansion and citizenship rights and the increased in socio-economic inequalities. The classic form of the Victorian civility was linked to the rise of bourgeois life in Europe and favoured of the status quo and was tied up with class and privilege. The form of civility of that time was an elite project and its discussions were framed through the growth of nation-states, and processes of urbanization and industrialization. Yet some of those debates were also raising important questions about how civility should extend to all citizens, regardless of their social background (Hall 2013). Nevertheless, civility, as it that appeared in the upper classes context, was relying on the reciprocal reserve, indifference and was aiming to preserve divisions in class-bound societies. Moreover, conservative aspects of civility at that time were not only connected with its role in accepting and sustaining inequities, but also with its role in legitimizing the colonial expansion. In the nineteenth century, in the context of the colonial expansion and global trade, European states invoked a 'standard of civilization' in international law and the forms of civility that appeared in the colonies were marked through the distinction between the 'civilized' West and the 'uncivilized' others (Thiranagama et al. 2018: 155).

By the mid of twentieth century, the of content liberal theories of civility was criticised for falsifying the relations between people and for being a conservative, outmoded, formalized and old-fashioned strategy that destroys the intimacy and limits people's spontaneity and warmth of human relations. However, at the end of the twentieth century, at the same time as civility in its conservative, liberal version rooted in the emergence and development of bourgeois urban cultures was being rejected or watered down, waves of democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America revitalized the concept of civil society as protecting societies against anti-democratic and arbitrary politics. New theories of civil society, although stressing different values, from liberal to communitarian ones, by associating it with democratic processes, have contributed to the revival of the notion of civility.

The evolution of the concept of civility makes clear that civility is a fragile and easily undermined aspect of social relations which rests 'on the presence of sufficient means for self-expression as well as the ability to resist arbitrary subordination'(Hall 2013: 251). To guarantee such sufficient means for the cultivation of civility, some theories suggest we should be relying on the supportive role of market, others point to the civilizing process, and finally some highlight the supportive role of civil society. Hence, to develop the argument

about today's relevance of civility today, the paper will exam all three approaches. It will firstly consider Adam Smith's theory which roots civility in a commercial society. Secondly, it will debate the idea of civility as a consequence of the rise the Western civilization, as developed Norbert Elias in his influential book *The Civilizing Process* (1994). Finally, we will scrutinize theories of civil society and their views of democratic civil society's links with civility. Conclusion will summarize arguments why civility matters in our present political, social, economic and technological conditions.

### **Civility as rooted in a commercial society**

As the above short presentation of the history of the notion of civility highlights, one of the important contributions to our understanding that content of the notion of civility came from representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment who emphasized the benefit of a commercial society for civility. The main tenets of their argument was that, while the emergence of civil society in the Scottish cities from the mid of the eighteenth century exposed the role of civility in shaping urban and political cultures, it was the advancement of the market that assisted the development of civility. In short, the Scottish scholars of the period prized the market, or competitive consumption, for providing a support to civility (Hall 2013).

According to writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, civility, seen as civic relations between urban people of different interests or as the 'gentle mores' of commercial societies, was of an enormous importance because it enhanced the society's capacity to achieve an unity outside the states. While viewing earlier societies' relationship as less amiable and as dominated by the personalized relations of the close-knit community, the Scottish intellectuals argued that the advance of the market fostered the development of different forms of social relationships, ones that might assist cooperation and fair practices at the market (Keane 1988: 42–46). Hence, scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment, while stressing that civility was underwritten by the wealth of markets, attributed the resolution of social tensions to the achievement of a social connectedness grounded in civility. In these writers' view, societies, where commerce was the paramount activity of its members, civility and bonds of sociability were the norm rather than the exception (Taylor 2018).

Among the Scottish intellectuals, who argued that civility softens modern relationships, the important voice belonged to Adam Smith ([1776] 1999; [1759]1982). Smith's main contribution to debates about civility is his thesis that the expansion of markets not only increases the wealth accumulation but it also endorses civility (Hall 2013; Campbell, Hall 2022; Fleischacker 2022).

While viewing civility as being a fundamental aspect of human nature, and while defining economic activity as movement towards others, he emphasized the importance of civility for the functioning of market economies as well as the role of vibrant commercial societies for the reinforcement of civility. This idea is rooted in Smith's assertion that the human need for approval and recognition motivates market activity and that the market, where everybody pursues their personal interests and creates wealth, might discipline our self-presentations and make us attuned to others and to be ready for cooperation (Fleischacker 2022). Hence in Smith's explanation of the civility's links with the market, there are two processes involved. On the one hand, the market, by controlling the conditions for everybody's self-presentation, restrains our self-interest and creates systems of mutual recognitions, thus it facilitates civility. On the other hand, civility, by enhancing the value of cooperation, endorses the expansion of markets as 'individuals contribute to the overall well-being of society without necessarily being aware of the fact that they are doing so when pursuing their own interests' (Susen 2021: 385). In other words, the market creation of wealth establishes a supportive context for enhancing practice of civility, the implementation of which increases the wealth accumulation.

Moreover, Smith understood acts of civility as being motivated not only by people's self-interest but also by 'fellow-feelings'. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*, he argued that self-interest and sympathy play together a crucial role in establishing civility, seen as being the essential for a well-functioning society as it forms the basis for harmonious social order. While discussing how civility is reinforced by both self-interest and sympathy, Smith writes 'How selfish soever man may be supposed there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others . . . Nature when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please and an original aversion to offend his brethren' (Smith [1759]1982: 47). According to Smith, everybody thinks about their own interests but at the same time people's natural propensity to sympathize with others leads to sympathetic interactions through which they develop a sense of shared moral sentiments, and sympathy and self-interest together strengthen civility (Fleischacker 2022; Thiranagama et al. 2018). In his perspective, people's self-interest is strong as 'the acquisition of wealth is the only way in which one can impress one's fellows' (Hall 2013: 55), while sympathy moderates the pursuit of individual interests and such a moderation makes easier for one person's feeling to match with that of others' feelings and – by the same token – it makes easier to achieve a sense of 'concord' (Fleischacker 2022). Smith's idea that people are equally predisposed to act selfishly and sympathetically and his understanding of acts of civility as being motivated by people's desire to be seen as respectable and by their prosocial behaviour, comes close to Rousseau's beliefs in people's natural goodness and in the human

tendency to notice one another and to compare themselves. Following Rousseau's ideas, Smith thought that a desire for others' approval was the fact of human condition, which 'was bund up with the facts of our material life' as all of us 'are materially dependent upon one another for provision of our needs' (Robin 2022: 44).

To sum up, Smith, while emphasizing the importance of civility for the functioning of market economies, also pointed out to the role the market in supporting the development of civility. Smith's account of the links between the market and civility continues to be influential in discussions about social behaviour and the functioning of market economies. His insight on civility has been examined by many scholars, yet the question whether Smith was a moralist of civility or the mere free marketer still remains unanswered (Fleischacker 2022; Hall 2013; Rucht 2011). While some scholars query whether Smith realized that the market when left to itself might potentially presents a threat to civil society, according to other researchers, Smith had some awareness that civility could be a causality of commercial society as he understood that in such a society civility could be threaten by various negative consequences of selfishly motivated actions originated at the market. For example, Smith thought that, in a case of the market failure, when civil society could become a sphere of conflicting egoistic interests competing with each other, it was the state's task to create the condition for the rules of civility (Robin 2022).

With the widespread comprehension that in the economic sphere people also compete for unfounded approval, that the pursuit of individual interests does not ultimately secure the wellbeing of others, and thereby that economic exchange does not necessarily encourage civility, many scholars doubt the market's capacity to instil the rules of civility (Robin 2022; Fleschacker 2022; Taylor 2018). The realization that the market cannot be trusted to enact the rules of civility and that people acquire recognition not only through the market activities – has led to critical examinations of the classical liberal idea of the market as the essential part of civil society. These critical interrogations of Smith's model of civil society, while identifying the thesis about the possession of wealth is the main source of respect and recognition as the underling flawed assumption, point to the misleading foundations of the idea about the market's capacity to ensure the rules of civility and social solidarity (Robin 2022; Fleschacker 2022; Taylor 2018).

Ongoing questioning of Smith's idea of civility as rooted in a commercial society and the growing comprehension of the pathologies of the market have revitalized the idea of civil society as the public space outside of the market. However, before we debate the role of civility in the context of civil society, we will examine the role of civility in the process of civilization as developed by Norbert Elias, for whom, in contrast to Adam Smith, it was not the growth of the



market but rather the establishment of the state monopoly on the use of violence that was an effective means towards civility.

### **Civility and the civilizing process**

Norbert Elias developed the history of civility as the folding of the logic of the civilizing process in his influential book *'The Civilizing Process'* (originally published in 1939 as a two-volume work in German, the first volume was translated into English in 1978 as *The History of Manners* and the second one as *Power and Civility* in 1982, while the revised English edition combining both volumes was published in 1994). For him, civility was the 'hallmark of civilizing process' which empowered 'civilized individual' and which played the crucial role in justifying and in maintaining social divisions in the bourgeois world (Elias 1978: 242). Elias (1994), while explaining the history of civility as being parallel to the civilizing process in which people learned to reduce violence and to control their affections in public and private contexts, argued that the civilizing process gradually led to making of the 'civilized individual'. According to him, modern 'civilized' people were more refined and self-restrained persons who internalized of social norms and codes of conduct.

Elias aimed not only to show the changes in rules of behaviour and in the personality's structure, but he also wanted to explain the role of external constraints in the shaping feelings, personalities and steering actions. In his search for the links between 'civilized' structures of personality and external conditions responsible for shaping 'civilizing' human behaviour, Elias relied on a variety of literary sources, but primarily on books of manners used by the knights, the courtiers, the upper classes and the bourgeoisie. With a help of books of manners that instructed people on the civil way to behave, Elias researched 'civility codes', for example, he used for this purpose Erasmus's book *On Civility in Children* (1530) which was one of the most successful treatises in the sixteenth century Europe on the rules of civility. Although Elias (1994;1996) acknowledged that the development of civility is not necessarily linear process, nonetheless he presented courtesy, civility and civilization as the three parts of a temporal trend (Gornicka, Mennell 2021).

The standards of courtly behaviour in the feudal period, which were expressed through the concept of 'courtesy', were used to keep subordinates in their place and preserving the hierarchy of the court society (Elias 1982). As in the course of the civilizing process the distinctive emotional culture of aristocratic society was replaced by the privacy of the world of the bourgeois, the self-constraint rules of civility became a new mode of social control and medium by which hierarchies were maintained. With the emergence of the bourgeois society, hence

with the second step on 'the ladder of civilization' being taken, and with civility becoming the domain feature of this society, people's competition for prestige and power started to reflect their self-restraints and internalized control over emotions (Baumgarten et al. 2011:297). For Elias (1994), civility, as related to the emergence of the world of the bourgeois 'civilized' individuals dominated by manners and self-restraints, was the main trademark of civilizing process which at the level of personality strengthened individuals' self-control. By bringing the changes in people's character and alterations in manner, civility was an empowering resource of self-determining actor whose strength of self-constraints 'tends towards moderation and authorizes the lightening of taboos'(Elias 1978: 242).

In his social history of civilization, Elias, while searching for an explanation how the taming of the self-control did occur, was concerned with the complex historical relationship between the production of 'civilized individuals' and the emergence of the condition in which 'the transformation of external compulsions into internal compulsions takes place' (Mennell 2001: 39). According to Elias, the process of internalization of constraints and control over emotions was paralleled to the growth of centralized states which brought about the reduction in the use of violence. Elias's theory of the state and his view of the monopolization of the legitimate use of violence as a very important mechanism of social change, inspired by Max Weber's perspective, assumed that the processes through which monopoly of the legitimate use of violence was established 'went hand in hand with the establishment of zones of "civility" within societies' (Nehring 2011: 316). As the control of violence become increasingly more centralized in the organization of modern state, the monopolization of physical force was followed by changes in the personality and behaviour patterns of people. With the formation of monopolies of force and the development of modern state, people's conduct, seen as being motivated by 'fear of loss or reduction of social prestige', was gradually becoming the subject of self-control (Elias 1994: 473). The state-formation processes led to both the physical and psychological pacification of society, and these two processes together projected the image of civilized characteristics a given society. Viewing the pacification of territories and 'taming' of warriors as universal requirements of effective state formation, Elias placed the development of the mechanism of self-control in the context of the specific power structure and demonstrated the occurrences of historical trends towards the increasing elaboration and refinement of manners and etiquette (Gornicka, Mennell 2021: 279). Because he saw the taming of the self and the monopolization of violence by the state, hence also the rule of law, as being deeply intertwined, in Elias's view the state played a crucial role in setting conditions for civility.

The making of the 'civilized' individual meant especially a 'particularly strong shift in individual self-control, above all, in self-control acting

independently of external agents as a self-activating automatism' (Elias 1978: 225). With the conversion of external social constraints into self-restraints and self-regulations, people learnt to conceal their passions, act against their feelings and 'disavow' their heart, thus 'the true self' was often 'hidden from all others' (Elias 1982: 258, 244). As the civilizing process resulted in the advancement of civility defined by people's ability to control their affections and their feelings in public and private setting, 'life becomes in a sense less dangerous, but also less emotional or pleasurable' (Elias 1982: 242). With the deeper internalization of social norms and the emergence of the skill of observing oneself and others, people's perception of others becomes more redefined and more 'psychologised' (Gornicka, Mennell 2021: 278). According to Elias, with these developments, there was an advance in the 'frontiers of modesty and shame' (Mennell 2001: 34).

Elias was aware of the fragility of the condition of civility and warned against obstacles and holdups in the development of civility. For example, he identified the emergence of 'the permissive society', associated with the advancement of the processes of democratization of manners and life-styles after the 1960s, as a case of a setback in the development of civility. Elias's (1996: 29) contribution to the idea of civility, apart from reminding us that civility is not necessarily linear process and that stressing 'the difficulty which stands in the way of efforts to achieve total absence of formality and norms', also includes his emphasis on the role of political and legal contexts in shaping the change in the relation between external social constraints and individual self-constraints. Elias also recognized that the civilizing process, apart from being linked to the formation of modern nation-states, was as well connected with the rise of urbanization, the increased division of labour, the growth of bureaucracies and changes in social structures and hierarchies. For example, Elias, like Smith, noted that 'the increasing division of labour under the pressure of competition' led to the development of more functions, to longer chains of interdependence and to more numerous and elaborate rules of behaviour, all of which gradually put more pressure on people and increasingly demanded greater self-restraint (Elias 1994: 433).

Elias's theory is often criticized for its negligence of the role of the cultural context of violence reduction, for example, his perspective is disapproved for disregarding the significance of religion for social regulation, and for proposing an 'entirely Eurocentric' conception of civility (Goody 2006). What's more Elias is not only criticized for ignoring the historical specificity of non-Western contexts, but also for overlooking the significance of various political and cultural upheavals as well as the role of democracy for development and support of civility (Gornicka, Mennell 2021; Taylor 2018). Generally, Elias's historical sociology cautions us more about negative consequences of a lack of constraints rather than endorses the value of democracy and engagement. We can also

question Elias's idea that it is our fear of shame or losing control what 'makes us civilized' because such a fear may suppress real and authentic values or personalities. Furthermore, Elias, while highlighting the way civility moderates relations and its role in reinforcing hierarchies and keeping others at a distance, seems not to be concerned with the civility's potentially negative impact, such as endorsing and preserving social divisions and hierarchies. Moreover, Elias's idea of civility can be also criticized for neglecting sociable consequences of civility. Elias's identification of civility in terms of individuals' ability for self-control and restraint does not pay any attention to the 'cooperative character' of civility, and it does not see civility as the essential prerequisite of pro-social behaviour (Sennett 2012: 120). As Elias disregarded the importance of social involvement, there is no also active engagement at the core of his idea of civility.

However, Elias's description of 'unsocial sociability' as one of the main features of civility may offer us a valuable warning about civility's potential to sustain social divisions and hierarchies. While today, in contrast to Elias's civility's attachment to the value of social distance and detachment, we value civility as the essential for the inclusion of others, we can still learn from Elias's exposure of the civility's capacity to endorse the process of exclusion, often along class, gender or racial lines (Nehring 2011: 315). Also his view of civility as a consequence of the rise of the Western civilization and as connected with the Polish, formal and distant behaviour of the upper ranks of society, through which they sought to distinguish themselves from lower social groups, raises broader questions about violence and control. Norbert Elias's examination of the relationship between civility, the state, and violence, by opening up questions about the ways in which the monopolization of violence by the state and the growth of civility were mutually reinforcing, forces us to rethink what particular forms of restraint and exclusion are reproduced in a context of contemporary types of state.

By the mid of the twentieth century the processes of information of daily life and democratization of manners led to a less conformist approach to rules of behaviour, thereby Elias's socio-historical account of civility as a formalized and restrained conduct has lost its influence. The appeal of Elias's idea of civility is also negatively impacted by his theory's detachment from the idea of civility as one of the public virtues on which democratic order depends.

### **Civility's links with civil society**

The renewal of interest in civil society, seen as *polis* or *agora*, that is, the space outside of the market and the state, was inspired by a wave of democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America at the end of the twentieth century (Arato 1981; Melucci 1989). The democratic movements in the Soviet bloc countries

aimed at the rejection of authoritarianism and the restoration of democracy, and their goal is best summarized by Andrew Arato's (1981) axiom 'civil society against the state'. As their anti-state stand was justified by the authoritarian nature of the political context in which these opposition movements emerged, these movements met with overall uncritical support in the West (Touriane et al. 1983). Yet, the theories of civil society inspired by such movements as the Polish *Solidarity*, although contributing to the revival of interest in civil society seen as linked to 'protection and/ or self-organization of social life in the face of the totalitarian or authoritarian state' (Cohen, Arato 1992: 31), did not see civil society as constituting 'a state of civility' (Seligman 1992: 5).

In other words, the theories which defined civil society as a form of 'collective actions that are differentiated not only from the state but also from the market economy' (Cohen, Arato 1992: 5) and focused on decoding a totalitarian state, were not concerned with any normative foundations of democracies. Representatives of the strand which saw civil society as 'non-state institutions and practices which enjoy a high degree of autonomy' (Kumar 1993: 283), were not anxious about the role of civility in the enhancement of social integration, the reconstruction of civil institutions, in strengthening democratic societies. In short, they generally underplayed the role of civility in supporting democratic processes. By downplaying and glossing over the role of values, they overlooked the role of civility as a force for better social integration in general, and, more specifically, as a remedy for the decline of social unity and trust. Because of the failure to acknowledge that 'civil-state institutions are good to the extent that they are animated by civic virtues' (Berger 1998: 362), this perspective's potential to answer the question as how to create solidarity and facilitate cooperation was also weakened. In other words, the strand which viewed civil society mainly through its role as a weapon against authoritarian regimes was not explicitly interested in civility and its links with democratic values and political culture.

The limitations of the vision of civil society as the antithesis of the state, together with the growing concern over the level of trust, solidarity and democracy, have reinforced the presence of modern liberal conceptions of the civil society which tend to stress not civil society's opposition to the state but the distinction between civil society and the state and tend to perceive civility as one of the underlying values of well-functioning democratic systems. Liberal theorists, who view civil society as being underpinned by the value of civility, also identify democratic and emancipatory civil society as central to 'the empowerment of both individual and society' (Susen 2021: 392). According to liberal theories of civil society, civility is important for maintaining 'a healthy liberal democracy' because of its role in all democratic processes, political discourses, decision-makings and in the effective governance and administration of

a democratic society (Chambers, Kopstein 2001: 853). As the idea of civil society lies at the core of both participatory democracy and representative democracy, some theorists point to civil society's needs for protection from constitutional forms of government (Hall 2013), while others focus on values facilitated by the democratic processes, such as solidarity, consensus-building, participation, freedom and moderation (Alexander 1998). Yet, in both cases, civil society 'promotes, and is in turn maintained by civic values', among which civility is the core one (Susen 2021: 399). Liberal theories, which tend to overemphasize the empowering effects of democratic processes argue that civility, by endorsing individual self-control and discipline, recognition of the other and respect of the law, contributes to the development of civil society and helps to create 'relatively stable, potentially empowering and socially sustainable realities' (Susen 2021: 400). The social realm of civil society, sustained by civility and the market, seen as the condition for the civil society existence, further endorses civility, which in turn, facilitates democratic, participatory processes. Hence, civility, according to liberal theories of civil society, is essential for the health of democracy because it sustains trust in the democratic institutions, encourages cooperation, tolerance, and respect for the rule of law, helps to finding common ground or consensus, facilitates open-mindedness, productive dialogues among citizens, supports the diversity of perspectives and promotes understanding between different groups and individuals (Hall, Trentmann 2005).

One of the main representatives of liberal theories of civil society who recognises the value of civility is John A. Hall, who in his book *The Importance of Being Civil* (2013) identifies civility as a systemic feature of trustful social relations conditioned by the presence of democratic and stable government. Hall, in Montesquieu's spirit, asserts that people acquired identities in the public sphere and appreciates the role of tolerance for a thriving of civil society. In Tocqueville's mood, Hall stresses the value civil society as a 'seedbed of civic virtue where the feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged and the understanding developed' (Tocqueville ([1835] 1969: 514). Hall, also like Tocqueville, appreciates the establishment of a democratic polity as the primary condition for a flourishing civil society. While realizing that civility can be endangered by the state's action, he praises the enabling role of constitutional forms of government, which by supporting the development of democratic culture, ensures the foundation of civility, that is, 'the presence of sufficient means for self-expression, as well as the ability to resist arbitrary subordination', the foundation of which civility rests (Hall 2013: 251). Hence, to cultivate fragile and never guaranteed civility, civil society needs to be placed within the framework of a democratic state able to secure material and other conditions for all its citizens to participate in public life.

Hall, while viewing the stable liberal state as the prerequisite of democratic civil society, also acknowledges that the existence of many social divisions limit citizens' ability to exercise their rights and freedoms. In this context, he advances the idea of civility as the recognition that 'difference is *shared* and the decision to live together with diversity is *mutual*' (Hall 2013: 22, italics in original). Civility, which underwrites pluralism in multicultural societies, is 'a background consensus' contingent on social trust and respect of the other (Hall 2013: 22). For Hall, the challenge for any democratic polity lies in the ability of its citizens to construct a public space that both produces some shared sense of belonging and recognises a right to be different. Hall, while embracing social liberalism normatively, being sceptical of communitarianism, and criticizing today's fundamentalist version of market liberalism, endorses policies favouring substantive equal opportunity, economic growth and relative socio-political stability because their aims of wealth, endurance and relative cohesion, can also support civility among culturally diverse populations. According to him, in today's complex societies 'total moral unity' is rather impossible, hence civility is 'desirable' as it can 'defuse tensions throughout society, thereby creating fundamental political stability' (Hall 2013: 251, 71).

Another strand of liberal theories of civil society, which also recognizes the value of civility, is the civic communitarian perspective which emphasizes the role of social capital as the main source of civility, social cohesion and cooperation. In this type of analysis, 'it has become prevalent to examine civil society in terms of the production, distribution, circulation and exchange of social capital' (Susen 2021: 391). Proponents of the civic communitarian strategy identify norms of reciprocity, networks of civic engagement and trust as the primary sources of social capital. While equating social capital with 'networks, norms, trust' (Putnam 1995: 664), they argue that a high level of social capital within a community is the basis for civility, an improved democracy, cooperation and an innovative economy. In other words, social capital is seen as being the key to democratic participation as well as to the economic success, but at the same time is also defined a social value, an individual character trait, and as an asset that tends to foster people's sociability, their ability to collaborate and effectively to pursue shared objectives. Communitarianism is criticised by contemporary liberalism and libertarianism for placing too much emphasis on community values and neglecting the rights and freedoms of individuals, individual autonomy and personal choice. Other critics of communitarianism, such as pluralists who recognize and value the existence of diverse cultures, beliefs, and values within a society, maintain that communitarianism overlooks the diversity of values and beliefs within a community, neglects to notice that community pressure to conform can limit personal expression, discourage diversity, undermine the right to dissent (Walzer 1992).

In the revised liberal communitarianism, that argues for a balance between individual rights and communal responsibilities and calls for the recognition of the existence of diverse cultures and beliefs, civil society is understood as ‘the realm of fragmentation and struggle but also of concrete and authentic solidarities’ (Walzer 1992: 97). This approach emphasizes the need for civility, respect and accommodation of differences, while at the same calling for maintaining a commitment to core principles of justice and human rights. It holds that a democratic civil society, to be capable of nurturing and protecting civility, needs to find a balance between social diversity and a sense of wholeness. In this perspective, civil society, seen as ‘a sphere of solidarity in which abstract universalism and particularistic versions of community are tensely intertwined’ (Alexander 1998 : 97), encompasses the connections between civility and solidarity and depends on their role in fostering the public sphere’s democratic dialogue with political institutions.

The renewal of interest in civil society emerged in the context of the rise of opposition to authoritarian powers, hence the initial strand’s view of civil society as a collective entity existing ‘against the state’ and underplaying the role of civility in sustaining democracy. The revival of the idea of civility was further prompted by the liberal theories of civil society which define civil society as a sphere within which civility could be cultivated and view civility as one of the underlying values of well-functioning democratic systems. Today, civility is presented with new challenges which not only pose threats to it, but which also provide us with good reasons for rethinking civility in boarder than liberal terms and for debating how we can create conditions for the endorsement of civility as the act of a respectful treating and engaging with people across deep divisions.

### **Conclusion: Why civility matters**

The consideration of the notion of civility through its historical development and acquired functions shows that the importance of civility is connected with its role as a normative guidance orienting us toward prescriptive ideals and with its role as an empirical concept with an impact on our identities and actions. With civility not set in stone and with changes in the rules of civility reflecting the broader socio-political transformations, to make civility possible, according to some, there is a need for the market support, while others called for the state’s protection and not so few for the development of ‘the art of association’, that is, for civil society (Tocqueville 1969: 517). Yet, the review of Smith’s idea that the expansion of the market endorses civility poses many questions about the role of the wealth accumulation in supporting the rules of civility, while the examination of Elias’s ‘civilized’ structures of personality prompts us to reflect on



the relevance of one's self-control in the context of today's more inclusive and informal grounds upon which people come together. However, the analysis of the perspective linking civility to civil society, which view civility as being at the core of this public realm, advances our understanding of the importance of civility for the quality of democracy and encourages rethinking of the relevance of civility for contemporary societies.

In the context of recent democratic deficit we cannot overlook the relevance of civility for the health of democracy as the cultivation of this type conduct can help us to deal with today's challenges. As political and economic instabilities and divisions devalue democracy, while technological developments deskill people from cooperative competences and undermine exchanges based on trust, civility becomes much needed as one of the essential means to help us to renew the quality of democracy and restore social cooperation and mutual trust. Because of today's democratic disenchantment worldwide, the creation of ground rules for the social practice of civility is one of the necessary steps in preventing democracy's decline. As contemporary democracy experiences problems, such as higher levels of political conflict and intolerance, and a lack of confidence in politicians and political institutions, civility, by teaching people how to be responsible and trustworthy citizens, can help them to be 'citizens for liberty', that is, to know how 'to co-operate in their own affairs' (Tocqueville [1856] 1969: 107). And since democracy 'depends upon the engagement of individuals, not only with the state, but with each other' (Hansen 1997: 289), civility, by raising responsibility and participation, is the effective means of improving the quality of democracy.

When the practice of civility becomes the essential condition of mutual respect and trust between different political actors, civility makes politics a sphere where people can preserve the distance, that is, 'the interspace' in which citizens act together without too excessive authenticity, such as nationalistic identities, and without unrestricted passions, such as populist sentiments (Arendt 1958). When politics is constituted through citizens' practices endorsing mutual trust and respectful distance, civility can reduce risks of counter-effective social identities, forces and passions; such as illiberal nationalism, populism, and extreme voices on both sides of the political spectrum. Hence, civility can lower the frequency and negative effects of ideological divisions and cultural disputes. Yet, to maintain society's ability to handle the key challenges confronting modern democracies, mutual trust endorsed by civility cannot be weakened neither by strategy of the state nor other political actors.

This brings us to the other role of civility, that is, to its special function connected with the complex and pluralistic nature of today's democracies. In the context of the increased diversity of modern societies, civility is essential as it necessities 'that in all life outside the home we afford each other certain

decencies and comforts as fellow citizens regardless of other differences between us' (Bryant 1992: 111). In culturally and socially diverse societies the importance of civility, as the act of engaging people across multifaceted divisions and as the type of interaction guided by the recognition of the other, is connected with its potential to increase our standards not only of tolerance but also of mutual respect, decency and trust. When these standards are eradicated, it is much more difficult to arrive to a consensus on shared values, on how to agree to differ over many issues, and on how to handle diversity. Moreover, paraphrasing Montesquieu ([1748]1988), it can be said that civility, by creating a space for dissent and by expanding the engagement with and respect of the other, can lower threats to ideological divisions and cultural disputes. Thus, in the context of the growing diversity, civility is relevant as it underwrites pluralism, increases prospects for harmonizing different interests and secures social collaboration.

Civility can also be of assistance in the context of other ongoing challenge faced by democracy, that is, the issue of the social and economic inequalities, or the treatment of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. If '[t]he human quality of a society ought to be measured by the quality of life of its weakest member' and that 'the essence of all morality is the responsibility which people take for the humanity of the others' (Bauman 2000: 7), it can be argued that the importance of civility for democracy is connected with its role as a normative guidance orienting us toward more egalitarian ethical principles. Although civility is not about moral questions as it is not about what is right and what is wrong, yet it is recommended as the pre-requisite of society's ethical standards (Nussbaum 2001: 335–6). Civility, understood as the treatment of others with respect and as ensuring the dignity to dependence, is as an essential introductory tool in thinking how to address the issues of social inequality and marginalization. Because civility means granting respects to the other's autonomy and because this recognition is offered across the boundaries of inequalities, this norm can be an initial step in projects of bringing change to the fate of the most vulnerable. The civility's performance in this role is in contrast to potentials of other norms or emotions motivating people to help the most vulnerable, such as altruism or compassion, which often compromise people's privacy and dignity by abolishing the distance in relations, and are hard to maintain in a long term (Arendt 1958). Hence, if the way we treat our most vulnerable is a measure of the moral standard of society, adopting the norm of civility is the first step in the right direction.

Finally, civility can also play a crucial role in the process of shaping the nature of democracy by helping us to confront and negotiate conflicts and tensions in the digital public realms. Although the digitalization of the public sphere can also have positive effects on the public sphere, as it expands the size of public forum, can be a source of information, can exposure people to different

views and can teach toleration and openness to the world (Harrel 2020), civility can be in danger in digital spaces. With the advent of the Internet and social media, which both have seen an enormous upswing in political and ideological polarisation, radicalisation and abuse of opponents, there is the growing amount of evidence of the potential threat that the digital technology poses to democracy (Sloss 2022; Zuboff 2019). For example, digital communication, which provides the relative invisibility, anonymity and distance, can put civility at risk as it tends to lead to the proliferation of statements that are much stronger than ones produced in face-to-face communication, hence to the escalation of tensions. Yet, the growing recognition of the vulnerability of civility online has encouraged the development of various proposals and numerous projects how to regulate over new technologies in order to foster and support civility on all digital platforms. For instance, the awareness of this vulnerability has led to attempts to ensure that digital spaces endorse productive dialogue, mutual understanding, and respectful interactions. Now many online platforms aim to endorse civility online by introducing special regulations to maintain respectful, not offensive or abusive language, to reduce the exploitation of user trust, to stop misinformation, and to lower the polarization of opinions, conflicts and tensions. Such applications of the rules of civility in digital spaces, together with education about the rules of online conduct, may reduce risks and challenges face by democracy in the digitalization context.

Advocating civility as the prescriptive norm which may change our actual conduct can be questioned for being overly optimistic. But it can still be argued that, as civility allows us to ‘pay attention not just to questions of how one should live, but also to how we should live together’ (Thiranagama et al. 2018: 155), we should emphasize both what is the ideal about civility and what is possible about civility. Since understanding what makes civility matters for democracy adds to our knowledge what are practical chances for empowering democracy, an inquiry to normative standards of societies, by revealing practical ways of supporting the guiding norm of civility, can positively impact on the quality of democracy.

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