



Societalized Politics in the German Civil Sphere: The 2015 “Refugee Crisis” and Post-Potsdam Civil Backlash

Jason L. Mast¹ · Daniel Šuber²

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Abstract

This article introduces a theory of societalized politics to investigate crisis events in the German civil sphere between 2015 and 2024, and to proffer an answer to the disputed question of the preconditions that facilitated the rapid rise of right-wing populism in the German context. Drawing on civil sphere and societalization theory, the article specifies the foundational cultural elements, or binary cultural codes (BCCs), upon which German political elites crafted meso-level narratives to contest and manage strains in the civil sphere. Through an analysis of communicative and regulative institutions’ responses to the arrival of refugees in 2015, and the publication of the Correctiv.org report and the backlash protests it inspired in 2024, the article charts the rise of the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), and explains its success as due in part to its leaders’ capacities to represent themselves and their supporters as embodying the BCC’s civil democratic signifiers. Introducing a theory of societalized politics, the analysis demonstrates a processual approach to the construction and contesting of crisis events that emerge within the civil sphere itself. The article also introduces a civil sphere theory of right-wing populism, which frames the phenomenon as the elevation of nativist, primordial signifiers born foremost of the noncivil spheres of ethnicity and religion. It concludes by arguing that while the German civil sphere is in flux, the post-Potsdam civil protests indicate a significant portion of the nation’s publics remain committed to universalistic, civil democratic principles.

Keywords Civil sphere theory · Societalized politics · Societalization · Democracy · Populism · Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) · Protests

Jason L. Mast is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Research Fellow based in the University of Trento’s Department of Sociology and Social Research.

✉ Jason L. Mast
jason.mast@unitn.it

¹ Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

² Institute of Political Science and Sociology, University of Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany

Introduction

While researching solidarity building efforts undertaken by Berlin Jews and Muslims in Berlin, Volker Heins (2020, p. 37–38) reflected that his case study had been profoundly shaped by “the European refugee crisis of 2015 and the nonroutine politics it triggered in Germany.” He noted that “this crisis almost instantly morphed from a mundane event into an evocative symbol that gave rise to radically opposed narratives of good and evil.” The events “divided not only the majority of Germans,” he continued, but “the immigrant population,” as well.

Heins’s characterization of the crisis sentiments pervading his case study presents us with a clear representation of the *societalized politics* we theorize in this article. These are nonroutine politics. Experienced as if they were triggered suddenly, societalized politics abruptly shift citizens’ focus from the mundane affairs of everyday life to the greater community as a whole. Broad swaths of the public intuit that something fundamental about the imagined community is susceptible to profound change or deeply threatened. Public discourse fills with narratives inflated with dramatic tension. The vital center appears at stake.

In January 2024, roughly eight years after the events in Heins’s study, the online independent newsroom *Correctiv.org* (Correctiv-Team, 2024) published an investigative report of the Potsdam meeting, at which figures from the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and wealthy donors and supporters gathered to develop policy proposals such as “re-migration” or the “reverse settlement” of asylum seekers, non-Germans with residency rights, and “non-assimilated” German citizens. Upon publication, the German civil sphere convulsed with protests. In this article, we introduce a theory of societalized politics to represent the contentious political and civil actions that connect these two events in recent German history.

Building on Jeffrey Alexander’s theories of the civil sphere (2006) and societalization (2018a, 2019), in the following analysis of these two contentious periods, we identify discursive representations of dangerous, crisis-inducing strains in the German civil sphere. Crafted by agents of communicative institutions, such as investigative journalists and opinion writers, on the one hand, and by agents of regulative institutions, such as party leaders and legal and governmental officials, on the other, such representations shape public understandings of what is occurring, and assert what must be done in order to resolve the “crisis.” During societalized events, in effort to shape their unfolding and control their outcomes, these agents invoke foundational culture structures, such as enduring memory cultures, narratives of collective identity, and binary cultural codes (BCCs), ones the agents believe exercise significant evaluative and constitutive power within the civil sphere. Based on the theoretical presupposition that such discursive structures contribute significantly to determining societalized events’ trajectories and outcomes, identifying their activation and the techniques by which agents seek to reiterate or subvert them is central to our approach.

In this article, we contribute by theorizing how the societalization process operates when it originates from within the civil sphere itself, and we contribute

empirically by offering a theoretically informed interpretation of the crisis dynamics occurring within the contemporary German civil sphere. By employing this cultural-analytical framework, we hope to shed light on the pressing question: How could the unexpected rise of radical right-wing populist movements in Germany occur within the short time-span from 2015 to 2018, when the AfD eventually gained entry into all of the country's state parliaments and won 12.6% of the vote in 2017's federal elections?

In comparison to other European democracies, Germany had displayed great resistance to nativist political forces and “executed containment close to perfection” (Art, 2018, p. 79), leading some political scientists to accredit it an “exceptional” (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019, p. 1) status. In the bulk of the social scientific literature on right-wing extremism, such questions are answered with reference to aspects such as certain types of “political style, behaviour, strategy or organization, or a certain electoral base” (Carter, 2016, p. 29). As the idea “that the cultural paradigm can probably inform the debate on populism much more than the rational choice and institutional approaches that dominate mainstream political science” (Mudde, 2017, p. 41) has gained acceptance (see Mast, 2021), we aim to demonstrate exactly how populist actors mobilize public support by engaging symbolic signifiers that operate on the premise of preexisting cultural structures of understanding and feeling. In the first part of the following, we expound the theoretical and conceptual foundations of our approach. In the second part, we contextualize the rise of the AfD during 2015–2018 and present our case study, in which we specify the discursive practices articulated by German political elites in the wake of Correctiv.org's publication, in January 2024, of the Potsdam event.

Theoretical Foundations

Civil Sphere Theory (CST)

Our theory of societalized politics builds on Jeffrey Alexander's (2006) elaboration of the civil sphere, in which he conceptualizes a nation's institutions, organizations, and publics as organized into multiple *noncivil spheres* such as the state, the market economy, religion, and the family. Identity and solidarity groupings such as those constituted by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality form noncivil spheres, as well. Amongst these spheres, one operates as an arena of public discourse in which the greater community's sentiments of solidarity are cultivated or made strained, and understandings of its collective identity are reiterated or contested. This is the *civil sphere*, which is a structure of feeling and a structure of understanding. In societalized politics, this sacred civil democratic space is itself the object over which antagonists struggle.

Like the noncivil spheres it abuts, the civil sphere is circumscribed by a boundary distinguishing those who are included as members from those who are not. The civil sphere's criteria of inclusion differ radically from those of noncivil spheres, however. As a structure of understanding, its criteria of inclusion rest upon a foundation of binary cultural codes (BCCs; Alexander, 2006, pp.57–59; Alexander & Smith,

1993). One side of the code consists of civil democratic signifiers that are universalistic in nature; civil democratic actors are understood to be rational and reasonable, for instance, and to be autonomous, calm and self-controlled. Any person may embody these traits; in theory, social actors who are deemed capable of and committed to shaping their practices according to their stipulations are afforded full membership in the civil sphere. Those who are deemed constituted by the opposite side of the code, or as conforming to its anticivil and antidemocratic signifiers—such as being irrational and hysterical, for instance, or as dependent and prone to excitability and passion—are excluded from the civil sphere. They must be, as their anticivil tendencies would threaten to corrupt civil sphere processes such as debating the challenges the greater community faces and contesting which solutions may move it closer to its ideal vision of its civil democratic self.

Noncivil spheres, on the other hand, are not *anticivil* in themselves. Whereas civil sphere discourse is organized around a *universalistic* structure of understanding, noncivil spheres are organized by *particularistic* material and symbolic hierarchies, ones that cultivate sphere-specific preferences, motives, and interactional patterns. For instance, according to its own particularizing logic, as a noncivil sphere, the market economy legitimates inequalities of power, status, and resources, and incentivizes particular sets of instrumental motives and actions. In the religious noncivil sphere, clergy have the power to dispense grace while members of the laity do not; or, as an identity sphere, in terms of symbolic hierarchies, one religion may be constituted as legitimate while another may be interpreted as degraded, alien, and suspicious. In the noncivil sphere of the family, parents exercise authority over children, and two-parent families may be constructed as “healthier” for the civil sphere than single-parent households. In terms of identity-based noncivil spheres such gender, masculinity may be privileged over femininity, for instance; or drawn more narrowly, a noncivil sphere of manhood may valorize as masculine certain styles of dress, personal grooming, and body shape while degrading others. Finally, in terms of ethnicity, a core-group’s ethnic heritage may become fused with understandings of civil capacities while an immigrant ethnicity may be conflated with anticivil dispositions.

In addition to legal institutions and elections, political parties constitute powerful regulative institutions within the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006, p.123). Organized to gain access to state power for their candidates and supporters and to pursue their own particular ideological ends, each political party is a noncivil sphere, as well. In this capacity, through promoting platforms of policy orientations, and performing narratives and value commitments interwoven with civil signifiers and particularistic interests, they cultivate identification and solidarity between their supporters and between its base and the party brand. Through the regulative institutions of elections, for instance, in their campaign performances, candidates condense and channel their party’s and their supporters’ sentiments into narratives expressive of the ends they will pursue if elected, be they particularistic, universalistic, or a combination of both. When a party wins an election and moves its representatives into office, it has effectively translated civil power into political power.

In democratic politics, the parties cast themselves as civil democratic agents and their opponents as the opposite, or as antidemocratic and destructive to the civil

sphere. This process sets in a motion a complex and boundary-pushing dialectical dynamic.¹ Due to exigencies born of seeking the popular vote, parties must reiterate the sentiments of their base while also articulating narratives that will appeal to those civilly-active citizens who they have not yet but may still persuade to support their cause. In this capacity, parties operate as regulative institutions by conditioning, filling in, and limiting “the kind of language that political actors can speak” within the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006, p.127). In well-functioning democracies, elections are contentious but civil; the opposing parties engage in agonistic symbolic competition without cultivating antagonistic, friend::enemy relations. In civil democratic orders, party leaders and candidates who breach this regulative symbolic boundary run the risk of casting their institution as an illegitimate collective actor in the drama of democracy (Alexander, 2006, p.123–132). Societalized politics challenge, push, and redraw this boundary, and it is these contentious processes, we argue, that are animating the contemporary German civil sphere.

Societalization Theory

Periodically, a noncivil sphere’s hierarchies and the practices they normalize become constructed as not only anticivil and unjust but as potentially threatening to the civil sphere. Alexander (2018a, 2019) introduced the concept of *societalization* to account for the conflictual inter-sphere relations and crisis dynamics such conditions may set in motion. The concept innovates within the theoretical logic of CST. Into its conceptual lexicon of civil and noncivil spheres and regulative and communicative institutions it incorporates new concepts such as steady state, semiotic triggers, and boundary intrusions. Represented by T1-T5 phases, it introduces a robust temporal dimension to CST, as well.

Alexander (2018a, 2019) explains that in the T1 phase of the societalization process, relations between the civil and noncivil spheres are in “steady state,” or operating according to routine logics of interaction. Societalization’s T2 phase begins not when communicative agents narrate strains within a noncivil sphere as potentially threatening to civil sphere. It begins, rather, when such narratives gain widespread purchase amongst elites and publics within the civil sphere and a collective understanding of impending crisis takes hold. During its T3 phase, civil agents *may* intrude into the offending noncivil sphere and impose regulative mechanisms on its elites in effort to prevent the sphere’s strains from damaging the civil sphere. Simultaneously, agents of the civil sphere’s communicative institutions narrate the regulative intrusion’s unfolding in minute detail. We emphasize “may” because civil communicative and regulative institutional responses to T2 crisis events remain

¹ Kivisto and Sciortino, (2020; p.280) express this dialectical dynamism succinctly: “A fundamental assumption of CST has always been that exclusion is not a temporary pathology or simply the consequence of the actions of evil forces appearing on the scene episodically, but rather a necessary consequence of the functioning of the civil codes themselves. In other words, whenever a code is activated to create a universalizing solidarity, this very same action implies the activation of its negative polarity. No purity can be established without an opposition to impurity, no citizen can be active and reasonable without somebody else being passive and hysterical.”

contingent on factors such as their power relative to that of the noncivil sphere elites they aim to challenge (Park, 2019). If the civil elites do, in fact, intervene in the offending noncivil sphere, then the societalization process will move into the T4 phase, during which backlash sentiments develop amongst the noncivil sphere's elites and members. In T5, the noncivil sphere's elites strike back by effectively pushing the civil regulative agents out of their particularistic sphere. As the boundaries between the civil and noncivil spheres are reestablished, relations between the two return to the steady state, or to the conditions constitutive of the T1 phase.²

In his case studies, Alexander focuses solely on crisis events in which the civil sphere appears threatened by strains that originate from within noncivil spheres. In this article, we address strains and understandings of crisis that *originate within the civil sphere itself*. Of the latter, Alexander (2018a, p.5) has written only that:

For repair to become possible when anticivil strains emerge from inside the civil sphere, rather than from without, the civil sphere has to split, one part calling another to account for endangering sacred democratic ideals, one communicative medium exposing the corruption of another, one organizational official condemning another as unfit to serve.

Societalized Politics Within the Civil Sphere—A Theoretical Intervention

With this in mind, this article introduces a societalization theory of crisis events that originate from within the civil sphere itself. The theory asserts that opposing publics are always embedded in the T1–T5 phases of the societalization process, and that, at any given moment, the publics are in different phases of the sequence. Each phase cultivates its own collective moods and senses of temporality, which

² Here, we turn to Alexander's case studies to illustrate empirically the connection between the two theories of CST and societalization. Alexander (2018a) investigated far-reaching scandals and crisis events that occurred during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, such as the church pedophilia scandal and the financial crisis in the United States, and the phone hacking scandal in Britain (for additional cases, see Alexander 2019).

In the second case, for instance, his analysis demonstrates how in the years preceding the crisis, finance and banking elites exercised their authority within the noncivil sphere of the economy with considerable autonomy. The routine reproduction of such boundary relations between the civil and noncivil sphere represent T1, or steady state. In 2007–2008, however, agents from regulative and communicative institutions such as federal regulators and investigative journalists constructed the U.S. banking industry's practice of issuing subprime mortgages as threatening not only the noncivil sphere of the market economy but the civil sphere itself. As a "societalized" atmosphere of impending crisis set in (T2), civil-regulative agents intruded into the banking industry to impose regulations that would mitigate the offending practices and prevent their effects from corrupting the civil sphere (T3). Over time, investigative journalists turned their attention elsewhere and civil-regulative interventions into the noncivil sphere retreated from the headlines. Finance and banking industry elites converted their backlash sentiments (T4) into coordinated, collective action, and successfully pushed back against the regulative elites and regained autonomous authority within their noncivil sphere (T5). With a firm boundary separating the civil and noncivil sphere reestablished, the CST model of sphere relations may be said to have returned to steady state (T1).

In this way, societalization theory connects to CST by introducing concepts designed to represent dynamism and conflict, as well as the social construction of crisis, within the latter's theoretical framework.

means that the experience of civil life differs markedly across publics. In response to narratives articulated by communicative institutions and party elites, and through the regulative institution of voting, the publics move themselves through the phases by intervening in the civil sphere to make it more closely resemble their ideal vision. They also move through the phases reactively, or in response to situations in which they feel compelled to contest the other public's attempts to bring to fruition their own civil repair projects. In this manner, our theory of societalized politics is consistent with and contributes to the pendulum theory of frontlash and backlash politics (Alexander, 2018b).

Drawing on Alexander's theory of societalization, we orient toward its T-phases as a heuristic to discern the semiotic triggers the civil sphere's communicative agents invoke and the narratives they articulate in their wake. The term semiotic trigger connotes the breaching of a civil sphere's foundational structures of understanding. CST asserts that the BCCs represent a civil democratic community's universalist aspirations. In a well-functioning civil sphere, the BCCs operate as the predominant evaluative mechanism through which citizens interpret collective events and establish their personal orientations toward them. In a democratic election, for instance, citizens will evaluate the candidates *vis-à-vis* how well they believe the figures embody the BCCs' sacred democratic signifiers. Voting predilections are also shaped by citizens' sentiments of identification and solidarity with noncivil spheres, however. Put another way, in addition to the BCCs, citizens evaluate candidates in relation to their own particularistic, noncivil interests, as well; or *vis-à-vis* their roles in the market economy, or their commitments to their racial, sexual, religious, or ethnic identities, for instance. Ideally, in terms of the structures of understanding that shape an individual's voting actions, the BCCs will exert greater evaluative power than one's noncivil sphere commitments. In *real* civil spheres, however, particularistic interests exert tremendous influence.

One of the principal indicators of societalized politics operating in a civil sphere is the splitting of the greater community into two sharply antagonistic publics along these culture structural lines, with one public fusing civil capacities with primordial, core-group identity traits, while a second public expresses commitment to the BCC's universalistic, civil democratic criteria of inclusion. As each public interprets the other's universalist or particularistic project as imperiling the civil sphere, the greater community's collective identity appears threatened and as cast in flux, a crisis atmosphere takes hold, attention turns to the civil whole, and politics turn exceptionally contentious. Both publics assert that the other is compromising democratic institutions by infusing them with antidemocratic practices and by making them serve anticivil ends. Elites, in their effort to secure civil-victory, grow accused of seeking to subvert the opposing public by mobilizing marginalized out-groups, be they immigrants, on the one hand, or far-right radicals and fascist sympathizers, on the other. Societalized politics may introduce flux within the BCCs by flipping the sacred-profane polarity of its binary signifiers, for instance, or by invoking them inauthentically. In our case, far-right actors assert that in order to save the civil sphere, citizens must temporarily suppress the evaluative power of the BCCs and instead invigorate their primordial, ethnic core-group sentiments of solidarity.

Finally, societalized discourse may grow manifest with signifiers of the apocalyptic genre.

In the following, we illustrate the BCC's presence in German civil discourse and pay particular attention to how the far-right uses the codes. Additionally, we attend to regulative institutions such as parties and elections, and the legal and investigative regulatory mechanisms elites introduce to challenge and deflate their antagonists' interventions.

The Interpretive Context: The German Civil Sphere's Enduring Culture Structures

Explaining the societalized politics animating the German civil sphere requires that we identify the preexisting cultural structures of understanding that operate as symbolic foundations upon which contemporary political and communicative elites assemble more context-specific narratives to construct events in the present. Given the theoretical origins of our intervention, our foremost interest lies in detecting not only if the BCCs are invoked but *how* actors incorporate them into their narratives. Increasingly, analysts are turning to CST to explain the rising popularity of far-right parties in western democracies (see Mast, [forthcoming](#)), and these studies provide us with representations of culture-structures exerting exceptional power in their research sites.

For reasons ultimately traceable to the nation's lead role in WWII, however, scholars have always treated the German case as an analytically exceptional. Historians and social scientists have invented tropes such as "the delayed nation" (Plessner, 1962) or "Sonderweg" to account for "Germany's fateful branching off from the West" (Steinmetz, 1997, p.252). Recently, initial steps to comparatively explore the cultural binaries that have informed the construction of Germany's national identity and civil sphere have been taken by sociologists working with a focus similar to this study (Heins and Unrau 2020, Binder, 2021; Becker, 2023). Since we attempt to expand on these preliminary studies, we shall devote deeper attention to their findings in the next step.

Memory Cultures

Mindful of the centrality of the commemoration of the Nazi past, and emphasizing the conceptual centrality of memory cultures, Werner Binder (2021) offers a detailed analysis of the cultural preconditions for the constitution of far-right movements in post-war Germany. Binder illustrates how the nation's past recourse to signifiers of core-group homogeneity established templates of civil incorporation (and exclusion) that continue to exert constitutive power over contemporary German citizens' interpretive predilections. Contemptuous of pluralism, this "primordial mode of incorporation remained important until after reunification," Binder (2021, p.184) instructs. In addition to and alongside this symbolic matrix, West Germans fused a moral-economic dimension to their identity through their collective experience of rapid economic expansion, which ultimately became signified as *Wirtschaftswunder*. This "economic miracle" resuscitated the pre-war

economic doctrine of ordoliberalism, Binder explains. Expressive of “illiberal conservative authoritarianism,” ordoliberalism asserts a narrative logic whereby a strong state should manage the market economy “as a disciplinary tool for the moral betterment of society” (Binder, 2021, p.185).

The enduring constitutive power of these memory cultures is evident in the Pegida movement, which fused themes of civil virtue with core-group identity traits and civil-health with ethnic homogeneity while simultaneously deploring as destructive Germany’s immigration policies and its embrace of multiculturalism. Additionally, in 2013, the ordoliberal moral-economic ethos animated the AfD’s identity when, in response to the global economic crisis and its aftermath, it initially institutionalized as a political party. In 2015, the AfD changed its central animating ethos to the primordialist-civility themes that had imbued the Pegida movement. Both the primordial-ethnic and the ordoliberal memory cultures are hostile to pluralism and the notion of an inclusive, multicultural civil sphere. Combined, as the far-right has made inroads in every German state (*Bundesland*) and become “one of the most successful young populist radical right parties in Europe in electoral terms” (Heinze, Höhne, and Callejón, 2023, p.1), a consideration of these culture structures is indispensable for understanding the rise of the AfD in recent German political history.

Binary Cultural Codes

While Binder builds his explanation of the rise of the far-right through the concept of memory cultures, Volker Heins and Christine Unrau (2020; see also Becker, 2023) conceptualize German civil political discourse as resting on sets of binary cultural codes, which more closely resembles the conceptual approach to specifying structures of understanding that we employ in our analysis below. Comparing contemporary German radicals to their twentieth-century predecessors, Heins and Unrau (2020) identify the discursive strategies by which far-right elites have endeavored to challenge German collective identity and subvert its civil sphere. Variably over time, post-war German civil discourse has rested on a foundation of three sets of powerful binary codes, two of which have been rooted in the uncivilizing pressures of time and space (see Alexander, 2006, pp.193–202), and one of which has distinguished abstract, universalistic values expressive of Germany’s civil democratic political culture, they argue.

In terms of the time binary, the discourse has cast post-war Germany as existing in a sacred democratic present which stands in sharp opposition to its polluted Nazi past. In terms of the space binary, the discourse has championed a free West standing in sharp opposition to an unfree East. Adjacent to these “highly specific ‘anti-past’ and ‘anti-Eastern’” sets of binaries, the authors explain, the German civil sphere has asserted a “discourse of liberty,” which itself rests upon a foundation of binaries similar, if not identical to, the BCCs that play a central organizing role in CST. The culmination of the Cold War and German reunification eroded (but did not eliminate entirely) the purchase of the noncivil or particularistic geographic and temporal binaries. On the other hand, as a post-war Holocaust trauma narrative

gained widespread interpretive legitimacy within Germans' conceptions of collective identity, the BCC's universalist signifiers began to assert greater civil evaluative power.

Holocaust Trauma Narrative

While some of these cultural resources have proven conducive for the contemporary mobilization of anticivil sentiments, we must also emphasize a particular countervailing culture structure, one that is associated with the negative implications of the German exceptionalism ("Sonderweg") thesis mentioned above. Immediately after 1945, a "coalition of silence" suppressed the commemoration of war atrocities and questions of guilt and thus pervaded West German national identity (Giesen, 2004, pp.120–23). Out of this context, born of the *sui generis* blending of motives such as accepting the role of sole perpetrator, acknowledging collective guilt, and valorizing the victims of Nazism, in the 1960s, a Holocaust-trauma narrative began to gain purchase within the German civil sphere. By the 1980s, the narrative's sentiments had grown constitutive of the general principles animating German *raison d'état* and foreign policy, and had become crystallized in collective signifiers such as "Nie wieder Auschwitz!" (Never again Auschwitz [Adorno]) or "Nicht vergessen!" ("Never forget").

Under this narrative's constitutive sway, Germans no longer thought of themselves as the war's victims but as perpetrators and as accomplices of evil. Henceforth, it grew assumed, Germans' civil selves would bear a significant dimension of historical guilt. Asserting a universalist conception of human rights as a core value, Holocaust-trauma discourse cultivated a structure of feeling amongst Germans that promoted openness and friendliness toward Jews, seekers of political asylum, and "non-German Others in general" (Heins and Unrau 2020, p.145). Ultimately, the narrative's sentiments found formal expression in the German constitution, and they have continued to exert deep and widespread interpretive validity well into the twenty-first century.³

As indicated above, rising popular support for far-right movements in Germany suggests the limits of the narrative's constitutive power. Heins and Unrau (2020, p.149) assert that "the German radical right has no chance of appealing to the wider public by conjuring up the image of a glorious past" because "the firmly entrenched Holocaust narrative does not allow for shifting the blame on non-Germans." Analysts such as Zavershinskaia (2023), on the other hand, are arguing that the "affective, antagonistic and anti-elite narratives" articulated by contemporary

³ The invention and institutionalization of the Holocaust trauma narrative at the center of Germany's collective identity has often been described as a global model for the working through of atrocious crimes and reconciliation with their victims. Representative of this posture, in an address to the Bundestag on Germany's National Day of Mourning (Volkstrauertag) on 16 November 2014, former Israeli ambassador to Germany, Avi Primor, stated:

"But where else in the world have you ever seen a nation that builds memorials to commemorate its own shame, to remember its own crimes and perpetuate the memory of its own national disgrace. Until now only the Germans have done this. Truly exemplary!"

German right-wing populists are contributing to “the semantic erosion of the liberal democratic core of the German civil sphere.” Combined, these representations illustrate the dialectical dynamism operating within the contemporary German civil sphere. Binder calls the AfD “a case of successful failure” (2021, p.200). It is to unpacking this apparent contradiction that that we devote ourselves in the next sections.

Theorizing the AfD’s Discourse

In our theoretical intervention, we argue that the answer to the mystery of the AfD’s success lies in the party’s discourse itself. Of central relevance to our argument, in their analysis of the contemporary far-right’s discursive practices, Heins and Unrau (2020) illustrate how AfD members invoke the BCC’s sacred democratic signifiers to cast themselves as civil actors. Issuing slogans like “dare to know” and “dare to think for yourself” (p.153), for instance, far-right supporters represent themselves as autonomous and critical as opposed to dependent and deferential citizens. Constructing themselves as active, they describe themselves as *fischelant* (vigilant) in safeguarding the civil sphere. They seek to establish a nation of “politically mature citizens” (p.154), they exclaim, suggesting that they are reasonable and rational in their civil engagements. Distancing themselves from the polluting signifier of “radical,” they post stickers stating “Away with the radical garbage” (pp.153–4) to frame themselves as calm and self-controlled. Articulating the discourse of liberty, they champion freedom of thought and expression. Their civil protests, they explain, illustrate their commitment to practicing their democratic capacities through active engagement with the civil sphere.

Our theory of societalized politics asserts that such coding practices indicate that far-right leaders and their supporters intuit the BCC’s constitutive and evaluative power. It suggests they claim to embody the code’s civil commitments because they believe the signifiers will legitimate them as democratic actors in the broader civil sphere. It also suggests that they assume that failing to engage in these civil performative practices will render them not merely alien but, due to the greater community’s Nazi past, as easily categorizable as a familiar reiteration of profoundly dangerous and destructive anticivil agents.

Attuned to this dynamic, Heins and Unrau (2020) intervene in CST theoretically by arguing what distinguishes Germany’s contemporary far-right figures from past ones is that, in their efforts to symbolically pollute their antagonists, they forego invoking the BCC’s anticivil signifiers and instead engage in “intemperate” speech acts (p.153) aimed at the “symbolic and moral annihilation of [their] opponents” (p.155). Their theoretical intervention stems from CST’s assumption of symmetrical coding practices, they explain. Its logic of symbolic dynamism asserts that social actors claim to embody the BCC’s sacred democratic signifiers in order to construct themselves as ideal civil agents while attributing to their opponents the BCC’s anticivil characteristics. To the contrary, Heins and Unrau argue, Germany’s contemporary far-right figures reject the “rule” of symmetrical coding by instead polluting their antagonists with signifiers rooted outside of civil discourse. Capitalizing on the

migration crisis, contemporary far-right German radicals “aim to contaminate the civil sphere from within” (p.150), they conclude.

In the remainder of this article, we frame these practices conceptually as far-right figures attempting to exploit the BCC’s democratic signifiers to legitimate themselves while simultaneously endeavoring to decenter the BCCs in order to prevent it from operating as the civil sphere’s principal evaluative symbolic structure. In addition to wrapping themselves in the BBC’s civil democratic signifiers, their strategy also consists of elevating the centrality of symbolic hierarchies governing the greater social arena’s noncivil spheres. Put another way, they “work the universalistic binary codes” while also “walking the boundaries” of the social arena’s noncivil spheres, as Alexander (2010; Alexander and Jaworsky, 2014) has represented the practices in his analyses of American electoral politics.

More specifically and foremost, they fuse core-group ethnic identity with civil worthiness and democratic capacity, and represent immigrant ethnicities as imbued with anticivil sentiments and as incapable of embodying the requisite capacities for civil democratic participation. Diminishing universalism and signifiers of “humanity,” they instead frame familial and local network ties as the civil foundations of solidarity and worthiness of inclusion. Rather than aiming to contaminate the civil sphere from within, we argue, they are attempting to decenter the BCC’s abstract, universalistic signifiers of the civil ideal and replace—or fuse—them with signifiers that are (or were) hegemonic within the noncivil spheres of ethnicity, gender, family, sexuality, and religion. Put another way, their backlash efforts aim to re-primordialize the German civil sphere.

In our examination of the T2 events of 2015, and the Potsdam meeting and the civil-backlash protests it inspired in 2024, we pay particular attention to each sides’ invocations of the BCCs and the symbolic reservoirs on which they draw to pollute their antagonists as anticivil in essence and antidemocratic in mission. The AfD has grown adept at mobilizing the BCCs to destigmatize their members and their aims. It is because the BCCs are so abstract that they can be made to represent anticivil actors and serve anticivil ends. Yet this same characteristic makes them endlessly open to contestation. Once deployed, they have the capacity to encourage neophyte supporters to interpret their new political leaders through their civil democratic terms, as well. Societalized politics represents precisely such contentious political and civil sphere dynamics.

Analysis

Societalization in the German Civil Sphere: Contesting the Meaning of the 2015 T2 Refugee “Crisis”

During the first few days of September 2015, photos of a dead child, who was a refugee fleeing the Syrian civil war, circulated widely in establishment press, on television news, and across social media sites worldwide (Slovic et al., 2017). The arresting image was soon accompanied on European news outlets and websites by others showing migrants crowded together at Budapest’s central station. On 4 September,

with refugees of Syria's civil war and other regional conflicts having amassed in Central European countries, then-Chancellor Angela Merkel suspended the EU's Dublin Regulation, which stipulates that refugees must submit requests for asylum to officials in the EU countries in which they arrive. The action allowed the refugees to migrate to Germany. By the end of the year, 1.1 million asylum-seekers had arrived, or roughly five times more than during the prior year (Kroet, 2016a).

This returns us to the "crisis" representations we described in our introduction. Interpreting Heins's (2020) descriptions through the theory we have outlined, we conceptualize the sudden shift from mundane to "nonroutine politics," the proliferation of opposing, symbolically-inflated narratives of good and evil, and the abrupt exposure of deep divisions between Germany's publics as manifestations of a T2 event in the societalized political process. In Alexander's words (2018a, p.1051), societalization can be said to occur when "a semiotic code is triggered," one that moves "public attention-space... from institutional part to civil whole."⁴ Building on this logic, through the theoretical lens of societalized politics, we identify the discursive practices of two publics contesting the civil sphere's boundaries and its terms of inclusion. While publics shared an understanding that a crisis was unfolding, they disagreed sharply over the nature of its subject and its cause.

A Series of T2 Events

Chancellor Angela Merkel constructed the events of 2015 as a "humanitarian" rather than a "refugee crisis." In an interview with the *Rheinische Post*, the Chancellor justified her decision to suspend the Dublin Regulation by appealing to universalism: "The fundamental right to asylum for the politically persecuted knows no upper limit; that also goes for refugees who come to us from the hell of a civil war" (quoted in AP News 2015). Stating that "we'll manage this" ("Wir schaffen das"), Merkel enlarded German publics as agents who would enact a "welcome culture" for the refugees.

Catherine Perron (2021) illustrates how, by invoking this phrase, Merkel and other officials from all levels of government resurrected the victim-coded narrative of "flight and expulsion" (*Flucht und Vertreibung*), which refers to the experience of Germans who, at the end of WWII, were immediately exiled from Central and Eastern European regions and forced to return to their homeland (where their

⁴ As natural as societalized events may feel, they must be constructed. Evaluated by policy and institutional capacity standards, the refugees' arrival did not constitute a "crisis" (Heins 2021; see also Choulia-raki and Stolic 2017). Yet societalized politics do not operate according to such standards. In effort to deflate a crisis-like atmosphere, elites may appeal to academic studies and investigative reports indicating, for instance, institutions' capacities to manage the influx of new clients. These representations enter a congested and contentious discursive environment, however. Studies and reports appeal to realism; their narratives are expressive of the low-mimetic genre, which means they connote events as representing just another instance of mundane, routine politics. While such narratives have the capacity to erode the constitutive power of counter-narratives articulated in registers of romance, tragedy, or apocalypticism, their performative power remains contingent (Smith 2005). Facts do not speak for themselves (c.f. Binder 2021; Eyerman 2019); presented in calm and measured tones, "facts" presented as facts rarely move publics to act according to their prescriptions, especially during periods of societalization.

reintegration efforts were often met with resistance and rejection rather than a warm welcome). Through associating the present with the migration scenario of 1945, according to Perron (2021, pp.4178–4179), Merkel and the other centrists strove to “reiterate trust,” “normalize the situation,” and “call for an empathetic attitude towards people arriving.”

Communicative institutions embraced the Chancellor’s construction of the events, with the greater share of journalists and commentators offering “single-sided, positive” representations of the migrants (Maurer et al., 2019, p.32). Even the notoriously anti-immigrant tabloid *Bild* granted Merkel’s *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture) strong support, while others signified the Chancellor herself as an “icon of openness” (Thränhardt, 2019, p.15). At the outset, Merkel’s representations proved felicitous with German publics, as well, and spurred millions of people from across political commitments and demographic categories into “practices of solidarity and gift-giving” (Heins & Unrau, 2018; Hamann and Karakayali, 2018).

Signs of potential backlash emerged as well, however, as a few critics publicly insisted that Merkel’s suspension of the Dublin Regulation without parliamentary or regulative-institutional deliberation was itself constitutionally questionable and represented a troubling breach of German (and EU) democratic conventions (Streeck, 2016). By abruptly opening Germany’s borders to the refugees, the Chancellor had abused her powers of office and thereby undermined the nation’s commitment to the democratic rule of law, they argued. Additionally, some coalition figures rejected Merkel’s “comparison of fate (Schicksalsvergleich)” (Perron, 2021, p.4173) and sought to reiterate difference between the repatriated German migrants of 1945 and those of the present.

Adjacent to these arguments, figures from Germany’s reborn and invigorated far-right argued that, due to their essential incompatibility with German culture (they alleged), the refugees threatened to categorically alter the German civil sphere and in a profoundly damaging way. Decrying Merkel’s “open doors” policy, warning of “asylum chaos,” and accusing the chancellor of “people smuggling” (Copley, 2015), in the far-right’s narrative, the Chancellor’s actions and the refugees’ presence themselves represented the crisis. Consequently, Frauke Petry, the AfD’s new party leader, demanded Merkel’s resignation.

It was a second event perpetrated on the final day of that year, and its aftermath, however, that moved a significant portion of the German public to reconsider the felicity of Merkel’s universalistic performatives. On New Year’s Eve, young men, mostly from North African nations, sexually assaulted over 1200 women at public celebrations hosted by cities across Germany (Staudenmaier, 2016). The city of Cologne signified the site of the anticivil events, while men of Arab and Muslim backgrounds, the assaulters, stood in metonymically for all of the recently-arrived refugees as well as Germany’s preexisting Muslim immigrant population.

The events that took place that “fateful night,” Binder (2021, p.194) notes, “had a huge impact on the German political landscape and Merkel’s refugee policy.” A social worker who had managed a refugee center in Cologne reported that he and his staff experienced news of the events as a “shock, which felt like the ground was pulled out from under our feet.” “The welcoming culture was contradicted,” he continued, “in that many people who had previously broadly supported it were suddenly

fearful.” The attacks initiated “a paradigm shift in society,” and identification and solidarity with Merkel’s narrative evaporated: “Right up to the refugee homes, where many people had still been helping us to advance social work and integration,” the social worker concluded (Bosen, 2020). On the fate of Merkel’s “welcome culture” and the structure of feeling it had cultivated amongst German publics, Heins (2020, p.39–40) reflects: “However short-lived” it was, as the New Year’s Eve assaults launched “a period of intense social drama in which the fundamental values of society were [understood to be] at stake” (see also Dostal, 2017, p.593).

In terms of our theory of societalized politics: one public, anxious but committed to the BCC’s universalistic principles, interpreted the refugees less as Muslims than as humans imbued with civil-worthiness. Constructing them as possessing the requisite capacities for civil inclusion, they extended their sentiments of solidarity to include the new arrivals. This collective action spurred an opposing public into a reactionary, counter-T2 of its own. Likewise anxious, the German far-right’s narratives cultivated a structure of feeling woven through with sentiments of dread, pollution, and danger. Its public representatives asserted that civil capacities are rooted in the particularistic identity of German ethnicity and this public’s specific, spatially, temporally, and experientially shaped cultural heritage. These are quintessential representations of societalized politics.

T3 Regulative and Communicative Interventions: The AfD Asserts Itself in the German Civil Sphere

According to the heuristic model, T2 events *may* move communicative and regulative institutions into action, or into the T3 phase of societalization. In terms of regulative institutions, building on the foundation established by the nativist Pegida movement, the AfD harnessed 2015’s T2-crisis atmosphere to complete its transformation from its Eurosceptic, Ordoliberal origins into an anti-immigrant, nativist far-right political party. Immediately before the outbreak of the migration events of summer 2015, the AfD dropped well below five percent in opinion polls due to communicative representations of internecine strife. After Chancellor Merkel opened the borders but prior to New Year’s Eve, support for the AfD had doubled but remained below ten percent. Once the assaults and the delayed responses of communicative and regulative agents had been fully narrated, support for the AfD rose to over ten percent. At the party convention in November 2015, in a comment that now looks prescient, AfD member Jörg Meuthen reflected that, based on signs of significant flux within political commentary and public sentiments, the party could win 20% of the German vote in forthcoming elections.

In terms of communicative interventions, in the wake of these events, the far-right endeavored to fill the civil sphere with anti-migrant backlash discourse and apocalyptic predictions about the fate of German society. In 2015, with radical forces having successfully marginalized moderates within the AfD, its new party leaders systematically escalated their rhetoric. Establishing a pattern, they issued “some outrageous statement [that] guaranteed them the attention of the media,” to which they responded quickly by claiming “that they had been misunderstood or misquoted” (Arzheimer, 2019, p.92). Within this context, figures such as the founder

of Pegida signified the refugees as “‘scumbags’ and ‘filth,’ [and] referred to them as ‘cattle’” (O’Grady, 2016), for instance.

More broadly, figures on the far-right represented Muslims as fundamentally incapable of recognizing, let alone embodying, any putative universalist criteria for civil inclusion. Fusing Muslims and their civil capacities with their membership in the noncivil sphere of their particular religion, an AfD manifesto declared, “Islam is not part of Germany.” The religion is “foreign to us and for that reason it cannot invoke the principle of religious freedom to the same degree as Christianity,” an AfD lawmaker announced at a party conference “to loud applause” (Bellon, 2016). Reducing Muslims to their religion, such discourse asserts that the religious commitment precludes a social actor’s capacity for civil democratic participation.

Constructing a plot of characters and their relations, the far-right cast Muslim migrants as alien invaders (Heins and Unrau, 2020, p.152–153) executing a strategy to replace core-groups and “Islamize” the West. Following a populist script, they cast establishment political elites as actively orchestrating this policy of replacement. Or, on the other hand, they emplotted coalition leaders as irrational figures who, having succumbed to progressive doctrines like multiculturalism, had become passive facilitators of the subversion of German collective identity.

Additionally, far-right activists introduced symbols such gallows to threaten their political opposition (“The threat was not just symbolic,” asserted Anna Sauerbrey (2024), German correspondent and opinion writer for the *New York Times*). In sum, far-right leaders combined all of this imagery and these plot elements to articulate populist narratives of core-group erasure; combined, corrupt elites, naïve publics, and anticivil Muslim immigrants were “threatening the survival of the German people” (Zobel & Minkenberg, 2019, p.27), they argued.

T3 Regulative and Communicative Interventions, Cont.: Confusion and Dissensus in the Coalition

In 2015, the CDU/CSU (the Christian Democrats and their sister party, the Christian Social Union of Bavaria) and the SPD (Social Democrats) had entered into a grand coalition with Angela Merkel as the chancellor. The T2 events described above, and the AfD’s responses to them, combined to introduce and exacerbate fissures within the coalition. As elites stopped articulating “welcome culture” discourse, and expressions of anxiety over core-groups’ future demographic superiority and civil hegemonic status mounted, the coalition’s party leaders lurched rightward. CSU leader, Horst Seehofer, for instance, responded to the AfD’s consolidation and its newfound support by endeavoring to prevent the young party from outflanking his own on the right. Adopting the AfD’s crisis narrative, Seehofer reiterated its tenets by casting the refugees themselves as a danger to German society and calling for stricter limits. Distancing himself from the coalition’s principal signifier, Angela Merkel, he threatened to leave the coalition government and, in a show of solidarity with anti-migrant EU leaders, he hosted Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, at the CSU’s fall party conference (Zobel & Minkenberg, 2019, p.28).

Splits expanded within the CDU “in a silent manner,” as well (Dostal, 2017, p.593). Attending to the stark shift in public discourse and the alternately sharp and

“silent” criticisms of coalition members, Merkel moved to the right by instituting regulative mechanisms to stanch the flow of refugees to Germany. The Chancellor made a deal with Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan to stop migration into Europe from Turkey, and revised asylum rules to hasten refugee processing and to facilitate deportations, all while suspending allowances for entry based on family reunification. Despite these efforts, and while far-right leaders were escalating their discourse by advocating German authorities “use firearms if necessary” to prevent “refugees [from] entering German soil” (Kroet, 2016b), the AfD made gains in the 2016 regional elections, and fissures within the coalition continued to expand.

Refugee backlash discourse continued to play a central role in subsequent elections. The decision by public officials and establishment communicative institutions to delay reporting on the New Year’s Eve assaults contributed to the erosion of trust in the institutions (Glucroft, 2023; Hölig, 2023). Rumors of migrant sexual assaults on German citizens proliferated online and on social media sites (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018), and an accumulation of media reports on “key events” like Islamist terror attacks in Germany and other European cities in 2016–2017 further eroded the “welcome culture’s” constitutive power. Media representations of migrants grew steadily more negative (Maurer et al., 2023, p.29). As migrants were increasingly represented as connected to crime, violence, religious fundamentalism, and as a threat to national security (Haarhoff, 2020, p.43), the signifier of the “criminal refugee” crystallized. Thusly, what had initially been successfully constructed as a “humanitarian crisis” was transformed into a “refugee crisis.”

In 2017, a significant portion of German voters embraced far-right candidates’ narratives and elected 94 AfD members into the Bundestag. Winning 12.6% of the vote, the AfD became Germany’s third most popular party and the first far-right party to win seats in the nation’s parliament since WWII.⁵ Roughly a year later, in 2018, publics voted AfD representatives into every German state parliament (Landtag). While disproportionately manifest in the eastern states, polls indicate that the party has extended its reach and cultivated support amongst a wider swath of the German public. In 2023, the AfD rose to over twenty percent in the polls, making it into the second most popular political party in Germany.

Political scientists have explained the electoral success of the AfD by showing how the intra-party radicalization of the AfD in 2015 converged with the elevation of the immigration issue to the top of the political agenda since Merkel’s unexpected move (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019, p.24–25). Additionally, sociologists have shown how “new affective publics” consolidated as increasingly the “migrant question” became framed as the “mother of all problems” (Heins, 2021, p.503; quoting Horst Seehofer) and corresponding negative stereotypes flourished. Still others have shown how right-wing populist groups activate “certain emotion norms in line with their goals” (Freistein et al., 2022, p.2). These studies draw to the fore the analytical

⁵ Washington Post correspondent Kate Brady (2024) noted that “large demonstrations against the AfD were last seen in 2017 and 2018 after the party was elected to the Bundestag.” In January 2024, reporting on the protests immediately following Correctiv’s investigation into the Potsdam meeting, she commented that the “turnout this weekend eclipsed the scale of those [prior] protests.”

necessity of explaining the AfD's successes in federal and state election since 2016 by going beyond oversimplified accounts of fearmongering.

Analysts have argued that the Holocaust trauma narrative, and the hegemonic status it has achieved in the German civil sphere, has precluded radicals from demonizing marginalized out-groups and blaming them for the nation's social, political, and economic strains. Yet, despite its leaders' propensities to cast im/migrants as strains on Germany's public institutions and as a threat to its civil sphere, the AfD has managed to persuade significant portions of the German public to identify with its messaging. Put another way, as Zobel and Minkenberg reflect (2019, p.27), despite its leaders calling for German authorities to shoot refugees at the border, "even if these were women and children," such "provocative remarks [have] not hurt the AfD electorally." In this context, what explains the AfD's capacity to cultivate in Germans sentiments of identification and solidarity with the party's discourse and politics? In the following, we address this question by examining the semantic interplay between opposing contenders in the events following the publication of the "Potsdam event" in 2024. Foremost, we attend to the binary cultural codes and narratives these contenders activate in their efforts to define themselves as the true representatives of civil values and to cast their opposition as guided by anticivil motives and as engaging in antidemocratic practices.

Potsdam and After

The Potsdam Event

In November 2023, at a hotel on the outskirts of Potsdam, AfD members, including Roland Hartwig, the "unofficial general secretary of the party" and personal aide to its leader, Alice Weidel, joined high profile activists such as Martin Sellner and others from the nativist Identitarian movement, chairs of sympathetic civil organizations, as well as businesspersons, professionals, and cultural elites, to discuss a "master plan" for deporting from German soil asylum seekers, non-Germans with residency rights, and "non-assimilated German citizens" (Correctiv-Team, 2024).

In cooperation with other organizations, agents of a civil communicative institution named Correctiv.org gained access to correspondence circulated in preparation of the meeting. Correctiv.org placed an undercover reporter in the hotel, who attended the proceedings, spoke with "several AfD members at the hotel," and documented the event visually with a camera. Polls taken during the preceding months were indicating that the AfD had become the second most popular political party in Germany, just behind the CDU/CSU (or at around 22 percent). Correctiv.org reported that the Potsdam meeting's attendees were optimistic about the party's trajectory and confident that forthcoming elections would lift AfD representatives into public office and thus give its leaders access to formal mechanism of state power.

Speakers at the meeting outlined the regulative mechanisms they would institutionalize once in office in order to enact its "master plan" of "reverse settlement." One introduced strategies for delegitimizing elections, while another discussed plans to delegitimize, defund, and censor communicative institutions such as

public service broadcasters. Still, others advocated plans for pressuring “undesirable” groups to leave through informal strategies of intimidation by, for instance, making immigrant-owned restaurants “as unattractive as possible for their clientele.” That is, they described how they would use the powers of public office to act back on the civil sphere; they would use the regulative mechanism of law to deport, in their estimation, polluting and anticivil immigrants who their political opposition had “welcomed” in to the German civil sphere. Combined with anti-immigrant discourse, this new regulative structure would normalize within the civil sphere informal practices of coercion aimed at pressuring migrants and ethnic non-Germans to leave the country. Casting their mission in societalized terms, an organizer asserted that the movement’s capacity to enact the meeting’s central platform of re-migration would determine “whether or not we in the West will survive” (Correctiv-Team, 2024).

Return to T2 Eventness

Publishing the results of its undercover investigation to its website on 10 January 2024, Correctiv.org framed their findings as irrefutable evidence that the AfD’s invigorated efforts to cast itself as a legitimate political party motivated by civil sentiments and committed to democratic principles were inauthentic. Invoking the BCC’s anticivil signifiers, the investigative report stressed the “secretive” nature of the meeting: “Here, protected from the public eye, they have no problem proclaiming their racist ideals.” The Potsdam meeting, Correctiv.org concluded, proved that their party’s backstage machinations were far more radical and antidemocratic than their representatives claimed in their public-facing, frontstage campaign performances (Tables 1 and 2).

The report’s publication moved a significant portion of German publics into T2 eventness. Inspired to present themselves in person and to join together collectively, an estimated 1.4 million people gathered in public spaces in about 100 cities and towns across Germany (Sparrow, 2024). Attesting to the intuitive sense of outrage societalized events cultivate in actors, metaphors of nature and natural phenomena abound in the emergence of T2 eventness. “Triggered” by the Correctiv report, “a wave of protests against the far right has swept across Germany,” a journalist narrated. A German who attended two protests in Berlin reported that she felt “relieved” that her country was “waking up;” as if having arisen from state of slumber, she and her fellow protesters were seeing clearly the civil sphere’s imperiled new reality.

Table 1 Correctiv’s BCCs coding of the AfD as an anticivil organization, one that had constructed its relationship with the German people based on anticivil terms

Anticivil relationships	Civil relationships
Secretive	:: Open
Deceitful	:: Truthful
Calculating	:: Straightforward
Conspiratorial	:: Deliberative
Antagonistic	:: Friendly

Table 2 Correctiv constructed the AfD as a profoundly anticivil and antidemocratic institution

Anticivil institutions	Civil institutions
Hierarchy	:: Equality
Exclusive	:: Inclusive
Personal	:: Impersonal
Bonds of loyalty	:: Contract
Factions	:: Groups

Representing the T2's structure of feeling, the protester exclaimed: "I no longer have this feeling of powerlessness that I had during the last years while watching the rise and success of the AfD" (Grieshaber, 2024). Another commentator (Sauerbrey, 2024) asserted that "Germany, at last, has woken up," and that civil democratic Germans ...were experiencing a "new sense of urgency."

Representations expressive of the Holocaust trauma narrative abounded in the Correctiv report as well as amongst the protesters' signage and discourse. Constructing the semiotics of social spaces, Correctiv (Correctiv-Team, 2024), for instance, emphasized that the organizers decided to stage their meeting "less than 8 kms away from the villa where the Wannsee Conference took place – the meeting where the Nazis coordinated the systematic extermination of the Jews." Articulating the Holocaust trauma signifier "Nie wieder Auschwitz!" (Never again Auschwitz), protesters chanted "Never again is now," and held aloft banners reading "Now we can see what we would have done in our grandparents' situation" (Brady, 2024).⁶ Banners reading "Against Hate" cast the Potsdam figures as motivated by irrational and hysterical sentiments rooted in their passionate commitments to core-group particularities.

Other banners established that the Potsdam participants threatened still another sacred institution: "Defend Democracy," they read, emplotting the far-right figures as agents intent on subverting the nation's democratic commitments. Attending one of the initial protests in Potsdam, Chancellor Olaf Scholz asserted that "their" remigration plan was "an attack on our democracy and, in turn, on all of us." Such simple representations can exert significant constitutive power. Scholz's narrative amplifies sentiments of solidarity and mutual identification between the protesters, and fuses the Chancellor himself in solidarity with them. It casts his audience as protagonists who embody Germany's civil-democratic ethos, and the Potsdam participants as antagonists who aim to destroy all that the protagonists hold dear. Connoting these few dramatic elements, the narrative activates registers of the romance genre, which inflates the protesters' motivation to act in defense of their sacred civil sphere (Smith, 2005).

⁶ The discursive complexity within the German civil sphere is expressed in Josef Schuster's intervention. President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Schuster sought to preserve the semiotic autonomy of the Holocaust: "The industrial mass murder of European Jews is unique in history in its coldbloodedness and madness," he cautioned. He added that nonetheless, the "meeting in Potsdam between AfD officials and the Identitarian Movement is without question evidence of a brutality in thinking that is directed against the foundations of our democratic society" (Brady 2024).

Post-Potsdam Parliamentary Debates

In the following, we present the results of an exemplary case study of contentious civil sphere dynamics that unfolded in the public and parliamentary debates of the German Bundestag in the aftermath of the publication of the *Correctiv.org* report, or between January and March 2024. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of parliamentary documents issued by the *Deutsche Bundestag*, selective policy documents, local and national press reports, and discursive contributions that gained widespread media attention during the timeframe in focus, such as the public announcements promulgated by the presidential office and statements made by delegates to regional parliaments. The contents were coded in a manner consistent with the core theoretical frameworks of CST and societalization theory.

Focusing our analytic attention on parliamentary debates has its advantages. In the parliamentary arena, efforts to exclude or scorn the substantive petitions and oral statements of any elected party are formally prohibited. Like coalition party members, representatives of radical parties enjoy the right to speak and engage in contentious debates without interference (Heinze, 2022, p.3). As a discursive arena, the parliamentary debates enable us to identify the agonistic structure of the debates at a moment of crisis. We begin by noting that the parliamentary debates reiterate the binary structures invoked when Chancellor Merkel's announcement of an open immigration policy in 2015 shifted the country from T1 into T2 crisis politics, and which also animated civil discourse during the T3 phase that followed.

Coalition Leaders Claim the "Center"

As noted above, representatives of the government like Chancellor Scholz cast the Potsdam participants as standing in metonymically for the AfD and far right more broadly, and their program as threatening the foundations of German democracy and its publics' commitments to an inclusive civil sphere. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier reiterated the narrative in the parliamentary debates, asserting that Germans were "living in exceptionally difficult times" (Steinmeier, 2024a), and that "this is not about right or left now" but about "the very foundation of our co-existence. It is about drawing a line between democrats and those who despise our democracy and are attacking it" (Steinmeier, 2024b).

The strains the Potsdam meeting had introduced into the civil sphere transcended particularistic commitments such as partisan identity or ideology, he argued. Articulating the experience of eventness, and bracketing the current moment from mundane, routine civil life, the meeting had ushered Germany into an "exceptional" time. In asserting that the antagonists threatened "the very foundation of our co-existence," he represented the far-right as destabilizing the structuring interpretive sentiments governing Germans' commitments to an inclusive civil sphere. Connnoted but left unspoken, the proposals espoused at the meeting sought to decenter universalist signifiers (BCCs) and replace them with ethnic core-group, primordial criteria of inclusion and exclusion. In addition to changing the semiotic content by which inclusion is determined, the antagonists were plotting to restrict and narrow the civil sphere's boundaries. To counter this effort, Germans must reiterate the existing

boundary by “drawing a line” which includes the civil public, which is committed to democracy, and excludes the far-right antagonists, who are “attacking” the foundations of their civil and democratic commitments.

AfD Leaders Strike Back

In the remainder of our analysis, we focus on the counter-codes and narratives AfD representatives articulated in parliamentary debates between the publication of the Correctiv.org report and April 2024, or roughly ten weeks later. Recognizing the return to T2 eventness, rather than attempting to deflate the “democratic drama,” the AfD chose to contest the meaning of the crisis by denying their own culpability and attributing its cause to the practices undertaken by the communicative institution of Correctiv.org and the political maneuvering of the governing coalition. Illustrative of the far right’s symbolic acumen, our analysis proffers answers to the question of how the AfD has been able to cast itself as a legitimate civil democratic institution while simultaneously engaging in excessively polluting, anticivil, and boundary-pushing discursive practices.

The AfD Counter-codes the Correctiv Report

Instead of rejecting the narrative in its entirety, AfD leaders embraced a core dimension of its plot by asserting that indeed, Germany’s democratic system was endangered and under attack by anticivil forces. They were not the antagonists, however. Rather, AfD leaders and their supporters embodied the BCC’s civil democratic commitments in an authentic way, they counter-narrated; they, and not the coalition members, were the true protectors of civil values and democratic practices, they insisted. AfD leader Alice Weidel and other AfD speakers, for instance, recast *Potsdam* as representing not a “secretive” but a “private” meeting (Eigenmann, 2024; Deutscher Bundestag 20/151). Connoting the polluting signifier of East Germany’s former state security service (1950 to 1990), Weidel casts Correctiv.org as an anti-democratic agent—“Hilfsstasi” (Deutscher Bundestag 20/150)—engaging in “secretive” practices. Through infiltrating and spying on the private meeting, Correctiv.org had revealed it was guided by antidemocratic motives, AfD critics argued: in its actions, the communicative institution aimed to delegitimize and silence a community that was exercising its core democratic right to freedom of assembly and association, and practicing its right to free expression.

Weidel’s counter-narrative reverberated across regional parliaments. Almost a week later, in the Hesse state parliament, for instance, AfD delegates introduced a petition in which they called for stronger protections of fundamental democratic rights against attacks orchestrated by opposition parties who, motivated by particularistic interests, eschew the law in order to accumulate power (Fraktion der AfD Hessen, 2024). Other AfD delegates reiterated the stigmatizing signifier by asserting that Correctiv was a “criminal association” financed by taxes (Deutscher Bundestag 20/151). Additionally, they signified communicative institutions supportive of the anti-AfD protestors as propagators of “lies” and “fake news” (Deutscher Bundestag

Table 3 The AfD invokes the BCCs to code itself as a civil democratic institution

AfD claims to embody these BCCs	Anticivil institutions are:
Open	:: Secretive
Trusting	:: Suspicious
Critical	:: Deferential
Honorable	:: Self-interested
Truthful	:: Deceitful
Deliberative	:: Conspiratorial
Rule regulated	:: Arbitrary
Committed to Law	:: Power

Table 4 The AfD invoked these BCCs to code Correctiv and the coalition supporters as anticivil actors undertaking antidemocratic practices

Correctiv and Coalition Supporters embody these anticivil signifiers:	Civil democratic institutions are:
Secretive	:: Open
Suspicious	:: Trusting
Self-interested	:: Honorable
Deceitful	:: Truthful
Conspiratorial	:: Deliberative
Arbitrary	:: Rule regulated
Power	:: Committed to Law

20/149), and as engaging in antidemocratic practices designed to suppress the rights and voices of dissenting individuals (Deutscher Bundestag 20/150).

Returning to the theory of societalized politics and the central role the BCCs play in them, this discourse illustrates the AfD invoking the binary codes of liberty and democracy. The analysis also demonstrates *how* the AfD employed the BCCs. The AfD was open, not secretive; trusting, not suspicious; critical, not deferential; honorable, not self-interested; truthful, not deceitful; and deliberative, not conspiratorial (Tables 3 and 4).

The AfD Counter-codes “Re-migration”

Additionally, AfD delegates endeavored to normalize and thus symbolically deflate the Potsdam meeting’s most polluting signifier, namely, the policy initiative of “re-migration.” Articulating BCCs signifiers connoting enlightenment discourse, figures such as Parliamentary Secretary Bernd Baumann and Deputy Federal Spokesman Peter Boehringer counter-coded the term as “reasonable” (“vernünftig”) and “lawful” (Deutscher Bundestag 20/152). Baumann defended the policy by coding the proposal as rule-regulated as opposed to arbitrary, as well. Those who refused to follow the rule of law, he continued, represented “adversaries to the Constitutional State” (Deutscher Bundestag 20/147).

AfD representatives also reiterated the policy's presence in coalition leaders' discourse, as well: "From Merkel to Scholz, there have been calls for all foreigners without the right to remain to be deported; this is called remigration," AfD delegate Christian Wirth declared, adding that term is defined in "the Federal Agency for Civic Education [Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, J.L.M. & D.S.]." "The AfD demands nothing else," he asserted (Deutscher Bundestag 20/153). AfD delegate Thomas Seitz joined the discursive effort by quoting directly Chancellor Scholz who stated in an interview with *Spiegel International* in November 2023 that "We Have to Deport People More Often and Faster" (Deutscher Bundestag 20/151).

The theory of societalized politics argues that such coding practices aim to legitimate the AfD as an organization composed of rational and reasonable actors dedicated to the rule of law. By associating the Potsdam platform with similar policies articulated by the coalition government's leaders, and by pointing to the signifier's presence in German legal statutes, the discourse routinizes the policy initiative and reframes the Potsdam meeting as representing not anticivil plotting but as just another instance of "politics as usual."

The AfD Counter-codes the Protests

In effort to counter-code the protests themselves, Alice Weidel invoked signifiers associated with far-left, anti-fascist resistance movements such as *Antifa*, announcing that, indeed, "Germany is burning." However, the crisis was not due to the revelations published in the Correctiv.org report, she argued. Deliberately disregarding the *anti-right-wing* impetus of the ongoing mass protests, the AfD leader alluded to a different set of movements that had for months protested the coalition government's handling of the German economy. Initiated by representatives of professional and trade groups such as farmers, manufacturers, merchants, and freight carriers, the protesters were expressing their frustration over the failure of the government and its "obstinate ideologues" to address their true concerns (Deutscher Bundestag 20/150), she asserted.

By casting the coalition government as the main antagonist, and misleadingly representing the protesters as motivated by economic interests, Weidel argued that the moment did not constitute a crisis of the civil sphere, at all. Rather, the protests were channeling frustrations emanating from within the noncivil sphere of the market economy, and expressive of public anger over state officials' incompetence, she narrated. Weidel's bold and sweeping counter-plot likely appealed to her base, but failed to persuade many Germans who were swept up in the moment's eventness.

The AfD Counter-codes the Signifier, "Fascists"

Immediately following the publication of the Correctiv.org report on 10 January, coalition figures, and especially members of the Greens and the Social Democrats, did not hesitate to signify AfD party delegates outright as fascists. The practice represented a vigorous reiteration of the Holocaust trauma narrative, and forcefully reasserted its terms of civil-evaluation within the German civil sphere.

Endeavoring to disarticulate the deeply-rooted trauma frame, AfD members countered by casting centrist politicians as the embodiment of the narrative’s villains. In their sentiments and their actions, coalition members were “totalitarian,” anticivil “fascists,” or the semiotic equivalent of Nazi perpetrators, AfD figures asserted. They, on the other hand, represented the narrative’s victims, they argued. Representatives Martin Reichardt and Tino Chrupalla, for instance, sought to subvert the Holocaust trauma’s principal signifier, “Nie wieder ist jetzt” (“Never Again is Now”), by asserting that it signified the AfD and its supporters’ victimhood. Others emphasized the names that centrist representatives called AfD members, such as “rats,” “bowflies,” and “piles of shit” (Deutscher Bundestag 20/150). The racists Nazis signified their victims similarly, they argued, adding that recourse to such naming devices “diminished” and “relativized” the Holocaust. In a curious way, AfD member Gottfried Curio’s remark in late February best illustrates the dialectics of semantic inversion, or practices that undoubtedly erode the meanings of sacred signifiers: “The fascism that returns will say: I am anti-fascism” (Deutscher Bundestag 20/155) (Table 5).

Conclusion

Analysts (Heins and Unrau, 2020; Becker, 2023; Zavershinskaia, 2023) have alluded to the BCCs operating in German civil discourse. Still, others (Binder, 2021) have contested the constitutive power they exercise in the context. In this article, we have provided a detailed illustration of the BCCs operating as structuring, foundational cultural elements within the German civil sphere. Representing agents of the far right invoking the BCC’s civil democratic signifiers, we have shown not only that the codes operate within the national community but *how* they are put to use by its public representatives. In so doing, our analysis indicates that one of the reasons the AfD has dramatically expanded its base of support is due to the symbolic acumen of its leaders and their capacities to persuade publics that they embody the code’s

Table 5 AfD delegates constructed the government coalition parties people as embodying the BCC’s *anticivil, antidemocratic* signifiers, while presenting themselves as defenders of civil values

Anticivil / antidemocratic motives (Coalition)	Civil / democratic motives (AfD)
Fascist / oppressive	:: Defending freedom rights
Totalitarian / silencing dissent	:: Defending dissenting minorities
Unlawful	:: Lawful
Irrational	:: Rational
Secretive	:: Open
Conspiratorial	:: Deliberative
Distorted / ideological	:: Critical
Passive	:: Active

sacred democratic signifiers while simultaneously articulating highly inflammatory anticivil narratives.⁷

The constitutive and evaluative powers embedded in the BCCs are variable and contingent. They operate within a greater social arena congested with the particularistic symbolic hierarchies and narratives that lend discursive form to the arena's multiple noncivil spheres. We have shown how AfD leaders wrap themselves in the BCC's civil democratic signifiers while also decentering the code by asserting that core-group identity traits represent the true and authentic indicators of a person's fitness for inclusion in the nation and for membership in its civil sphere.

Democratic discourse is always woven through with civil, noncivil, and anticivil signifiers and narratives. In their discourse, public representatives and influential opinion makers alike “work the abstract, universalist civil binaries” while simultaneously “walking the boundaries” of the noncivil spheres with which their audiences identify and feel solidarity. Analysts have shown that Germany's memory cultures (Binder, 2021), binary structures of time (fascist::democratic) and space (East::West) (Heins and Unrau 2020), and the Holocaust trauma narrative operate variably within the national community as meso-level cultural forms that reiterate the BCC's universalizing force or alternately work against it.

One of the defining characteristics of the AfD (and of societalized politics more generally) is the far-right party's compulsion to inflate and champion alternative cultural codes hegemonic in the noncivil spheres of ethnicity and religion. While our analysis indicates that the AfD has accrued legitimacy within the German civil sphere through its recourse to the BCCs, we cannot demonstrate in concrete terms that new supporters are responding precisely to this discursive practice. In a well-functioning civil sphere, the universalistic signifiers asserted by the BCCs exercise considerable evaluative and constitutive force. In the German case, the AfD's success indicates that some publics are being persuaded to base their determinations of others' fitness for inclusion on nativist and primordial terms. It remains unclear if this development has been facilitated by the AfD's claims of embodying the BCC's democratic signifiers or despite or regardless of such practices. In terms of maintaining the integrity of an inclusive and vibrant civil sphere, the best scenario is the former, and that AfD supporters evaluate the party's representatives based on their civil democratic terms. If this proves to be the case, then over time, to maintain public support and expand its base, the party will purge itself of members who articulate explicitly racist and Islamophobic narratives. CST is not a teleological theory of

⁷ We cannot demonstrate a strong causal relationship between the use of the BCCs and voting patterns, of course. We have shown, however, that prior to 2015, the AfD centered its discourse on ordoliberal themes and the moral hazard of debt relief, both of which are well-suited to representing and channeling sentiments of economic grievance. While the party's efforts found some support amongst publics in former eastern states, it was not until 2015 and after, when leadership shifted the party's ethos from ordoliberalism to nativist, anti-migrant discourse, and cast itself as carriers of the BCC's democratic, civil signifiers, that it gained degrees of success at the ballot box that had eluded it prior. Additionally, subsequent to this shift in discourse, the AfD made gains not only in its eastern strongholds but in western states, as well.

progress, however.⁸ Publics may be sympathetic to the AfD's explicitly nativist and core-group hegemonic discourse, and their civil sphere may grow increasingly constricted or even collapse.

Such discourse is not in itself a mortal danger to the civil sphere, however. Across democratic orders with vibrant civil spheres, contentious politics is replete with it. It is part of the frontlash/backlash dynamic constitutive of democratic societies (Alexander, 2018b). Danger emerges when such discourse facilitates the institutionalization of particularistic and primordial hierarchies within the civil sphere's communicative and regulative organizations. In terms of the contemporary German case, practices such as enforcing immigration laws and promoting integration capacities such as basic command of the native language are not in themselves antidemocratic. The German civil sphere may become imperiled, however, if particularistic and primordial identity traits are not only articulated in civil discourse but, through the election into public office of candidates who champion them, they become translated into the laws and norms governing its communicative and regulative institutions. Some of the proposals AfD members and sympathizers expressed at the Potsdam meeting indicate avenues by which the German civil sphere could grow imperiled and its government could institutionalize antidemocratic laws and procedures.

As we have shown, in recent years, the German civil sphere has been wracked by a series of T2 societalization events. Prior to Correctiv.org's reporting on Potsdam, despite periods of internecine strife, the AfD managed to extract value from the crises and expand its reach during the T3 phase of societalization. Variably moving right and co-opting AfD frames, coalition parties, on the other hand, failed to coalesce into a unified front, one that called the far-right to account "for endangering sacred democratic ideals" (Alexander, 2018a, p.5), and thus failed to move the societalization process into phases T4 and T5. The citizens who took to Germany's streets to protest the AfD's policy initiatives, however, indicate that the nation's civil sphere remains manifest with universalistic structures of understanding such as the BCCs and the Holocaust trauma narrative. Likewise, the protestors indicate they retain a tremendous capacity to cultivate and act collectively on a universalistic, emotive structure of solidarity.

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⁸ As Kivisto and Sciortino (2020; 269) put it, "That civil sphere actors include both civil and uncivil members is not an occasional pathology. Nor does it represent a state of backwardness that is bound to disappear. CST is an explicit critique of any attempt to read history as an inevitable progressive movement toward more extended and deeper civil solidarities."

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