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Twisted Civility: Comparing Courtesy, Coercion and Shaming in Southeast Asian Cities and Beyond

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Abstract

The literature on civility navigates the gravitational pulls of binary camps: civility sceptics tend to emphasize how it operates as an instrument of power; civility optimists tend to emphasize its emancipatory potentials. While some scholarship has attempted to reconcile these perspectives by showing how civility can be both negative and positive, such theorization tends to describe this relation in terms of ambivalence. While these approaches rightly indicate that normative judgments about civility are largely a matter of perspective, the concept of twisted civility developed here focuses on the ways in which actors become trapped by the dynamic shifts of force embedded within civility. Comparisons across seemingly incommensurate examples suggest that such multidirectional dynamics are not culturally specific but rather more generalizable. Building our theoretical conception of twisted civility from a comparative approach based on research in Kuching and Saigon, and then using the concept to consider examples from the United States and Denmark, this article also reverses the direction of theorizing typically employed in scholarship on civility. Using postcolonial Southeast Asia as the source of theory rather than its afterthought, the method here uses anthropological comparison to generate theory and to problematize assumptions that universalize Euro-American trajectories of civility.

Keywords: Civility; Southeast Asia; Vietnam; Malaysia; Comparative analysis; Civil Rights; Urban; Coercion; Shame; Democracy

Introduction: Civility Sceptics and Optimists

Through the second half of the twentieth century, and now well into the twenty-first, a persistent theme in critical theory— 'civility scepticism'—has gradually emerged in the social sciences and humanities. Writing in this theme tends toward cynicism, calling out the contradictions embedded within the idea of civility and pointing out the ways it operates as entrenched ideology in service of privileged elites. For example, inspired by the historical sociology of Norbert Elias (Elias 1982), scholars have detailed the way discourses of civility emerged historically as mechanisms of social control, and how civility masks relations of class domination (Harms 2009, 2014; Tomba 2009). Scholars have also shown how it undergirds imperialism (Stoler 2007), and perpetuates a broad range of injustices (Goody 2016; Peck 2002; White 2006. The domineering use of civility also rears its ugly head in post-colonial or neo-colonial forms of authority (Anagnost 1997), in urban-rural relations (Harms 2011; Nguyen 2021), or in relations between central states and marginalized peripheries (Duncan 2004; Scott 2009; Thongchai Winichakul 2000). This civility scepticism relies on relatively straightforward observations (sometimes theoretical and sometimes empirical) about the ways civility is hegemonic, how it often perpetuates exertions of power, and how it comes with very real costs, such as undermining the capacity for seeking justice through legal systems (Nader 1995), or silencing forms of dissent within democratic discourse (DeMott 1996). In making these arguments, civility sceptics revisit diverse theoretical refrains, ranging from Gramscian theorizations of hegemony (Gramsci and Forgacs 1999) to post-colonial critiques of western self-images (Spivak 2010) and political economic accounts of exploitation and exchange

(Kvangraven 2021). The enduring contribution of civility scepticism has been to show that civility is commonly founded on hypocritical contradictions that undermine the very proclamations it purports to defend. Civility, it often turns out, says one thing and does another.

In melodic counterpoint to this civility scepticism, however, several scholarly voices have also articulated the counter-hegemonic potential of civility, emphasizing the forms of "sly civility" that manipulate the slippery doubleness of colonial discourse (Bhabha 1985) or highlighting the role civility sometimes plays in non-violent resistance and acts of civil disobedience (Chafe 1981). As this literature on strategic subaltern uses of civility demonstrates, civility can be used by disenfranchised groups to undermine the civility claims that are often used to legitimize their disenfranchisement. By doing so, civility may allow subaltern actors to push back against gross abuses of power and counteract forces of socio-economic inequality (Harms 2016a; Thiranagama et al. 2018). Civility can also be important to environmental justice (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013), to creating the conditions for urban civic inclusion (Boyd 2006), or, as some historically inflected accounts suggest, to actually fostering the very possibility for social interaction itself (Davetian 2009). In political discourse, the same demands for decorum and civility that exclude marginal voices may be used to foster the open exchange of ideas in the face of domineering, often anti-democratic voices (Shils 1997), leading some scholars to defend it as a moral virtue necessary for protecting socially established norms (Calhoun 2000). Even scholars who have roundly criticized how civility can be used to subordinate disadvantaged groups (Scott 2009), have also shown how civility, in other contexts, can be wielded as a weapon of the weak, demanding that powerful actors might be expected to fulfil moral obligations to the less powerful (Scott 1987). Thereby, the powerful can be held accountable by the very systems of comportment they have erected to legitimize their power. As Orwell put it in his famous essay, "Shooting an Elephant," set in colonial Burma, "it is the condition of his ["the White Man's"] rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives," and so in every crisis he has got to do what the "natives" expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it." (Orwell 1946: 152) The mask of civility can legitimize power, but it confounds and complicates how systems of power construct and sustain marginalization.

In this article, we proffer a new theorization of civility that shows how both the emancipatory and oppressive potentials of civility become twisted together. The result—what we call twisted civility—then emerges from a diachronic process entangling threads of action and ideology which bind subjects of a given civility discourse together through iterations of claims about what is civil. Every new response to civility discourse ends up twisting the sensibilities of prior moments of civility to ever new projects and purposes. Dissatisfied with familiar claims about the 'ambivalence' of civility, we develop the more precise metaphor of civility as a tightly twisted thread, with competing strands that become wound together in progressive loops that draw populations and polities into the concomitant constraint and leverage of civility discourse. To present our thinking we structure our argument in three successive sections.

First, we present an extended engagement with the literature on civility. We address the tendency to resolve the tension between civility optimism and scepticism by theorizing civility as fundamentally ambivalent. While ambivalence helpfully recognizes the multidirectional effects of civility, we identify some of its limitations as an analytic, especially for the way ambivalence foregrounds emotional investments of civility. Instead, we show that regardless of how ambivalently theorists may feel about civility, the key dynamic that produces this ambivalence is the twisting of civility claims to ever new projects and purposes.

Having thus established the conceptual starting point and the terms of our thinking, the second section of the paper describes and compares how civility is employed in similarly twisted fashion in the two otherwise very different Southeast Asian cities of Kuching, Malaysia, and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam. Kuching's civility discourse of harmony can in turns be used to exclude political dissenters and twisted into a lever with which to extract public resources for civil society. Similarly, in Saigon, civility is at one moment used to manage public behaviour, and the next wielded to shame the government for failing to create civilized housing, a discourse which in turn acts back upon other understandings of how to properly inhabit the city.

Building on our comparative analysis and demonstration of twisted civility in Kuching and Saigon, our third section extends our thinking by showing the applicability and usefulness of twisted civility as a heuristic for the politics of our respective home countries. Reflexively, we examine the creative uses of civility

shaming as a strategy in the American civil rights movement and the use of civility shaming as a modality of Danish immigration debate through the controversial minister Inger Støjberg. In conclusion, we affirm that our conception of civility as twisted rather than ambivalent provides an analytic that is both more precise and more dynamic as well as less normatively committed than the framework of ambivalence permits.

Twisted Civility and the Theoretical Limits of Ambivalence

Civility is twisted. It should neither be conceived simplistically as a jackboot stomping from the "top down" nor as resistance pushing back from the "bottom up." Instead, in this article, we conceive of civility as historically entangled threads of ideology and action which bind actors to each other and also progressively loop and twist tighter together with every act of social engagement. While each thread of civility has a traceable history, they twist together into entanglements that trap the very humans who twist, turn and tug on them. The knotted strands of civility grow more tangled and tightly bound with every attempt to impose new order upon them.

While many of the approaches to writing about civility noted in the first paragraphs of this article have rightly suggested that there are different valences to civility, we argue here for an approach that dissolves the field of critiques, apologetics and ambivalent intermediary positions wrought by the tug-o-war between civility sceptics and optimists by observing how every thread of civilizing discourse will ultimately become twisted together, even if the individual threads seem to be pulled in opposite directions. While the metaphor of the tug-o-war implies that there are discrete moments in which certain aspects of civility prevail over others (e.g. Bejan and Garsten 2014), the metaphor of twisted civility implies that every tug in one perceived direction further entangles every valence of civility with its range of counter positions.

Our focus on the entanglement inherent in civility builds from but also moves beyond scholarly tendencies to account for these multiple directionalities of civility through a focus on "ambivalence" (Anheier 2011; Coleman 2008; DeMott 1996; White 2006). Our criticism of ambivalence is meant to be modest and respectful: to be clear, we understand the idea of ambivalence as an important step in theorizing civility, because it accurately stresses how there can be multiple different aspects of civility at play in any social formation. We take such an observation as an inspiration to our conception of twisted civility. However, as a theorization of civility, the concept of ambivalence lacks the conceptual precision needed for an analytical project that seeks to understand social and historical processes without casting normative judgements.

Ambivalence, even when it is used to understand and theorize civility, typically indicates something suspended in affective tension between multiple moral valuations. That is, ambivalence refers to being caught between the conflicting feelings, judgements, or opinions an actor has to a situation. While there is much merit to recognizing the sense of existential blockage produced by civility, such usage derives from the psychoanalytical tradition in which Freud (Freud 2000, 2001, 2010) uses the concept to denote a psychological state in which the subject's feelings about some object "is composed of conflicting feelings of tenderness and hostility" (Freud 2009).

To take up a classic example, familiar both to numerous student essayists and to professional scholars, Shakespeare's Hamlet is considered ambivalent because he both loves his mother as maternal figure and resents her for her part in the death and replacement of his father (Barnaby 2013). As this example would imply, ambivalence can entail painful and irreconcilable conflict, but the tragic consequences that emerge are largely the product of psychological tension between opposed affective states and normative judgements, famously expressed as the tension Hamlet bemoans in his existential soliloquy: "to be or not to be" (Peterson 1987).

A similar sense of conflicted ambivalence is expressed in a recent article discussing the challenges of civility in the United States. After laying out the position of the civility sceptics, and why there is good reason to be cynical about civility, Bejan and Garsten (2014) lay out the ambivalence even a sceptic will feel:

> *There are moments in public life, however, when even the most committed sceptic of civility will find it difficult not to wish for more of it [civility]. When negotiations over important matters in Congress*

break down over a careless ad hominem remark, or when verbal disagreements on the street or in the public sphere erupt into fatal violence, one is reminded of just how fragile the peaceful and productive practice of political controversy is. When President Obama called for more civility during his remarks at the memorial service for the victims of the shooting in Tucson, Arizona, in 2011, it would have taken a hard person to roll his or her eyes at the sentiment. To anyone who has personally borne the brunt of hateful speech, the harms feel real enough. (Bejan and Garsten 2014: 15–16).

While there is no reason to question the sense of ambivalence described in this passage, our concept of twisted civility seeks not to ask whether such ambivalence might or might not exist, but to focus on how the compulsion to change one's views about civility in such a situation is driven by the way civility itself twists the circumstances of socio-political life. The question is not why one might be ambivalent, but why someone so sceptical of a concept might feel compelled to twist their beliefs to accommodate a view they otherwise find problematic. In the case described above, intellectuals who are well aware of the dangerous valences of civility find themselves twisted to conform to an ideology they know carries connotations they generally feel compelled to resist. Their ambivalence emerges from the twisting circumstances.

Taken strictly, we suggest that it makes little sense to describe the social phenomenon of civility as itself ambivalent. Societal and behavioural phenomena do not have feelings or psychological conflicts, much less neurotically irresolvable ones. Efforts to theorize civility as ambivalent therefore imply a normative evaluation of civility rather than a theorization of its operation. In other words, to theorize civility as something "ambivalent" is to suggest that analysts should themselves feel ambivalently about civility.

Certainly, there is much to be gained by recognizing how civility engenders internal philosophical tensions, which are inherent to the concept, and it is for this reason that theories of ambivalence do have initial value. In a compelling essay on such ambivalence Melanie White notes how civility, "affirms the way that it reinforces distinctions at the same time that it seeks to ameliorate them. Civility simultaneously authorizes particular forms of conduct and specific spaces for political action at the expense of others, at the same time as it works to constrain the "strong" in an effort to balance power relations in political engagement." (White 2006: 458). While these tensions are well noted, and while assertions that civility might lead to ambivalence among people are not entirely inaccurate, we seek to propose a more detailed conception of how civility's societal effects tie into each other as elements of both the social pragmatics of civility and the political economic history that gives rise to particular traditions of civility.

When a person is ambivalent, they may simultaneously feel, in often contradictory ways, the impact of grappling with "both" (ambi) "emotional forces" (valence) associated with a situation. But they retain a sense of consciousness about the doubled effect of the conundrum (e.g., "I am ambivalent about gentrification. I like the new shops and cafes, but I also miss the old racially diverse and working-class people who have been displaced."). When a person's intentions are twisted, however, the experience is rather different: an agentive action intended to produce a certain effect is literally twisted to produce its opposite effect, often against their will (e.g., "When I said I wanted more housing, I meant low-income housing for diverse citizens. You, Mr. real-estate developer, have twisted my words to justify creating more luxury housing developments."). One may feel ambivalent about the idea of civility, for example, by imagining it as being both good and bad. Being twisted by it, however, means that one thought one was deploying civility for one purpose only to see it end up achieving the opposite.

In developing the concept of twisted civility, we wish to stress, as other authors have done, how the counterposed valences of civility are immanent potentialities within each other and diachronically contiguous, but we also wish to add that they are so thoroughly entangled that distinguishing between them becomes illusory. While actors may certainly feel compelled to choose between seemingly good and bad elements of civility, we argue that it is a mistake to imagine that an expression of counter-hegemonic civility can be fully disentangled from its hegemonic alter-ego.

Therefore, we speak instead of twisted civility to show how every attempt to tug civility in a direction normatively perceived as "good" will also always be entangled with the tightening of the forces pulling it in the opposite direction, ultimately twisting civility in a multitudinous tangle of directions. This is not caused by the way actors "feel about" or perceive civility, or even what they wish it could achieve, but by the very working of civility as an ordering of social action. As our comparisons will show, any attempt to

mobilize civility as a mechanism for establishing social order, regardless of where it is located in space and time, will set in motion the countervailing forces we have identified as twisted civility.

Anthropological Comparison, Historical Contextualization and Theorizing Civility

While our initial inquiries into the topic were inspired by the dynamic relationship between cynical and optimistic theorizations of civility, further reflection based on anthropological fieldwork and attention to historical processes makes us insist that the effect of civility is a matter of twisting and twisted social utilities encountered and applied from a multiplicity of perspectives. With civility, we will show, one set of intentions and acts designed to produce certain social effects inevitably becomes twisted by other agents and actions in ways that serve interests often wholly at odds with the original intention.

For this reason, we claim that civility is better understood by attending to the way the force of one set of civility claims begets the effectiveness of twisted civility counter claims, which can in turn beget counter-counter claims. We suggest, furthermore, that civility must be investigated ethnographically and historically, precisely because its multidirectional effects are the complicated consequences of how civility twists and becomes twisted by complicated social realities, impacted by political agents, ideological currents, historical contingencies and more.

There is another important reason for employing a comparative anthropological approach: the vast majority of theorizing on civility is written from the normative perspective of university-based authors whose default conceptions and examples derive from Europe and the United States. Because of this, assumptions about how actors can grapple with ambivalence, or calls for analysts to resolve the contradictions of civility through the "difficult work of liberal" politics (e.g. Bejan and Garsten 2014) tend to be based on the experiences of authors situated within privileged positions within liberal Euro-American democracies. Civility, however, is not confined to, much less typified by, Euro-American settings, and a truly anthropological theory of civility must begin from other contexts before assuming the relevance of its theoretical assumptions.

For the purpose of this article, we consider civility to include any formal ideological statements or assertions made about what an actor or group of actors considers to be "proper conduct" or expectations about the way individuals should interact with others within a social group. We refer, in this sense, in the broad sense to what the Oxford English Dictionary defines most generally as: "Senses relating to citizenship and civil order" (OED 2022), but we recognize that any conception of citizenship must be understood anthropologically, and not be limited to liberal democracies or even nation-states, but should instead include any socio-political grouping, such as cities (Holston and Appadurai 1999). Indeed, in some social groups, which, following Herzfeld, we might call polities, civility can mark the edge of inclusion in subgroups that might be understood by their members as existing within but also being somewhat antagonistic to the nation-states that claim sovereignty over them (Herzfeld 2021). Such "mischief-making masters of a carefully curated cultural civility" may very well promote alternative or even subversive rules of decorum that establish a perceived superiority to the political states that may claim the title of "democracies" but are recognized by many so-called citizens as instruments of oppression (Herzfeld 2021: 30).

We provide this provisional definition of civility in full recognition that it is impossible to exhaustively account for all the behaviours and sensibilities that might go into any given socio-historically located sense of civility. Our working clarification aims to clarify what catches our attention as examples of civility and is practically illustrated by the ethnography below. Our project here is to develop and exemplify a particular analytical attention to dynamic social realities which intersect with claims about what is or is not civil in a range of contexts. To do this, we decenter Europe and develop our understanding of the theoretical model for civility as an anthropological concept by assessing and then comparing how evaluations of civility become socially significant in two very different postcolonial urban contexts. By attending to the socio-political dynamism of civility, we discover a similar set of processes at play, despite the differences in the comparative cases.

We build our illustrative comparisons from our own long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Kuching and Saigon to analyse how discourses and practices of civility operate in these two very different Southeast Asian cities. This comparative approach follows a similar trajectory noted by Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller, who in their work on comparative urbanism found themselves curious about

why, despite their experiences with different cities, they "were hearing such similar statements" about urban regeneration from city leaders in very different places, a realization which in turn prompted them "to investigate whether they led to similar outcomes" (2021: 206). Similarly, we have been compelled and have found ourselves "confronted with the challenge of comparison." (2021: 206).

At first glance, the empirical particulars of our own long-term fieldwork in Kuching and Saigon make it seem daunting to compare the two cities, and the stylized comportments of their respective forms of civility appear quite different. Saigon is a major riverport with French colonial, American Imperialist, high socialist and now "late socialist" histories of governance, and Kuching is a famously diverse former capital of the White Rajahs, now marginalized by Malaysian Federalism. The differences are clear. Yet, while some scholars might call the cases incommensurable (Coté 2007), we believe that our comparison reveals similar patterns as we juxtapose the two cases. Unlike forms of urban comparison that seek to highlight connections between cities (McFarlane and Robinson 2012), track global interconnection (Brenner 2019) or follow inter-Asian connections (Roy and Ong 2011), our comparative project is based on the much more modest observation that the existence of twisted civility in Kuching and Saigon is worthy of notice precisely because the cities are otherwise so different from each other. As Çağlar and Glick Schiller note, "comparative relational methodologies and analysis necessitate a particular analytical lens rather than long-term research or a team of researchers. It requires a rejection of a presentist stance—that is, one that assumes that what is currently observed is reflective of the past and can be projected into future" (2021: 225).

Building from this insight, the analytical lens we use is to focus on civilizing discourses, and our method is to trace the twisted dynamics of civility in each case, which demands thinking about civility as diachronically mutable rather than a fixed ideology with stable meanings. While ambivalence, for example, is a noun describing a kind of static state, to twist is a verb. For this reason, twisted civility by its very nature can only be understood by tracing it as a history of actions.

In both Kuching and Saigon, civility presents as a recognizable state discourse serving clearly observable governing interests. Historicizing and contextualizing, however, reveals that these civilities are not unilaterally designed products of state rationalities, but contingent and emergent effects of political processes and political economic developments entwined with colonial influences, postcolonial imperatives, and non-state responses. These processes emerge as much from popular everyday interactions and comportments as from the courtly behaviours of elites. Yet, in the subtler ethnographic moments that only become visible through long term fieldwork civility is twisted to allow city residents to make effective claims on states by using the same stylizations and registers otherwise employed to manage subject populations. Nevertheless, residents' efforts to stake out claims also work to reproduce the very civilizing processes they see themselves as working against.

While this initial comparison lends support to the notion that there can be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements to civility across contexts, the comparison also demonstrates the temporally compounding entanglements of civility. To demonstrate this temporal compounding, we leverage the initial surprise we had when sharing our work with each other. The fact that the twisted entanglements in these two places are so similar is made more significant precisely because the histories and expressions of civility are so different in each case. The obvious differences between the cities make the unexpected similarities so much more significant. The act of teasing out the core similarity across these terrains of difference allows us to build our theorization outward from the series of unexpected convergences we saw in the way the language and practice of civility plays out in both cities.

Though this sustained comparison between Kuching and Saigon builds and exemplifies empirically what twisted civility looks like in practice we extend our theorization to look even more broadly at comparative examples from our home countries. This is a key nuance to our thinking that extends a long tradition of anthropological comparison recently revived by Borofsky and Nader (although critiqued by Candei), and going back at least to Mauss' comparative exploration of social prestations in *The Gift*, and comparative work in legal anthropology (cf. Conley and O'Barr 2004). It also seeks to engage in what Marcus and Fischer call anthropology as cultural critique, using comparative examples from fieldwork to lay bare the assumptions in those places and demonstrate how the concept of twisted civility can be of value for political analysis beyond Southeast Asia. As Goody (2016) has noted, such a comparative approach is an essential element of any anthropological approach to theory, and is an important

corrective to some of the inherently ethnocentric and possibly evolutionist implications of studies that hew too closely to assumptions promoted by Elias about the Eurocentric origins of civility and civilization. In line with Ananya Roy's call for "new geographies of theory" (2009), our approach looks first to Kuching and Saigon for inspiration about the workings of civility discourse and then uses theoretical formulations developed from those contexts to reinterpret examples from Europe and North America. Instead of taking our respective' home countries of Denmark and the United States as default sources for theorizing civility, we decenter them and only return to them after generating a specifically anthropological mode of theorizing that generates new ideas both from long-term fieldwork and from explicit comparison across seemingly incommensurate examples. In this way, the kind of comparison we enact here might be described, using Candea's phrasing, as building from "what we know in our elbows" (2018). It comprises, "on the one hand 'frontal comparisons' in which an ethnographic 'other' is contrasted with a presumed 'us'; on the other, 'lateral comparisons' between cases laid side by side, from which the analyst is absent" (Candea 2018: 16). While there may be limitations to this approach, we consider these two approaches to form "two complementary heuristics, intertwined at the heart of any anthropological argument" (Candea 2018: 16). The heuristic contrasts brought out by our two lateral and two frontal comparisons, in turn, are then brought into critical dialogue with the literature on civility, which in its wide-ranging way itself offers a further set of theoretical comparisons against which we explain the utility of a processual view of twisted civility. With that in mind, let us compare Kuching with Saigon, where it will become clear that the civilizing processes in these very different cities are similarly twisted.

Kuching: City of Unity and Politeness

In north Kuching, a large roundabout directs a steady stream of cars towards the main thoroughfare leading to Sarawak's towering Borneo-futurist parliament building. In the middle of the roundabout, an ostentatious wooden sign framed by flowers announces that Kuching is a "City of Unity." The term became Kuching's semi-official sobriquet in 2015, when the One Malaysia Foundation formally named it a "Malaysian city of unity." But this act of recognition only formalized a long-standing reputation. Ethnic amity is proudly touted by the Sarawak ministry of tourism. "There's only love, peace and harmony among us," the ministry announces on its Instagram page, implying that the city is a special place of civility and politeness.[1]

This rhetoric of unity, peace, and harmony invokes an implicit contrast to Peninsular Malaysia, also called West Malaysia, which is known for its ethnic politics (Chee-Beng 2000; Nagata 1979; Ross 2019; Rowley and Bhopal 2006). For example, while the explicitly racial 'Bumiputera' system of state-enforced policies favouring ethnic Malays (Balasubramaniam 2007) is officially promoted as a corrective to address historical disadvantages faced by the Malay population in West Malaysia, the policies have exacerbated tensions between the predominantly Muslim Malay majority, the Malaysian Chinese minority, and the marginalized Malaysian Indian population (cf. Case 2000; Shamsul 1997; Milne 1976). In contrast to this, the emphasis made on Kuching's ethnic harmony aligns with a form of Sarawakian exceptionalism articulating the state's special status within the Malaysian Federation. Special provisions in Malaysia's Constitution, for example, give Sarawak's State Legislative Assembly powers over immigration to Sarawak and elements of the legal system related to native law and custom (*adat*) (Harding and Chin 2014; Salleh et al. 2019). Sarawak differs from West Malaysia primarily because of its internally diverse indigenous population commonly glossed as Dayak, who make up 48.8% of the state population[2] (Borneo Post 2016). The politics of ethnicity in Sarawak have a decidedly different dynamic than in West Malaysia.

Sarawak's political history is also different from West Malaysia's, such that civility and harmony played a central role in political alliance-building. While the Malay Peninsula was a colonial holding of the British Empire, Sarawak became a political entity as the personal fiefdom of former British colonial officer James Brooke (Runciman 1960). Brooke and his subsequent dynasty, the White Rajahs, might be considered a unique form of crypto-colonialism (Herzfeld 2002), in that they mirrored the dynamics of colonialism but were never formally aligned with a colonial metropole. The Brookes' relative weakness

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[1]Quote from the Sarawak Tourism Board Instagram account [https://www.instagram.com/p/B6cK1Zfn9CD/]

[2]Dayak is a broad non-specific term for indigenous groups across Borneo, most numerous of which are the Iban at 28,3%.

meant that their rule relied far more on the diplomatic management of intra-Sarawak political tensions than on straightforward colonial military domination (Pringle 1970; Tarling 1992: 21). The Brookes set up a court in Kuching in which liaisons from communities all over Sarawak came to petition the rajah and build alliances (cf. Brooke 2010; Saunders 1992; Reinhardt 1970). A courtly civility developed in such a way that tensions and conflicting interest were suppressed in favour of promoting relations of light amiability and the currying of mutual favour.

This courtly civility took on specific meanings in multicultural Kuching, which before the time of the Brookes had been a minor Bruneian trading post at the mouth of the Sarawak River (Lockard 1978: 9). This position fostered interactions between coastal and upland groups, as well as fishing and mining communities. As Kuching emerged as the capital of Brooke-ruled Sarawak, however, the scale of these interactions increased tremendously as the city and its commercial harbour grew. Alongside this, modes of colloquial comportment in commercial settings facilitated interethnic interaction, most notably in the ubiquitous food and coffee shops known as kopitiams, and in the bars and street stalls, where open socialization over coffee, food and often beers emerged as a mechanism for bridging relations across ethnic, religious and gendered diversities.[3] In these spaces, it remains common for patrons to use pleasantries and impersonal joking to obscure differences of both interest and opinion. While the kind of public space produced in these spaces differs from the kind of public sphere Habermas (1991) ascribes to the emerging socialities of 17th century European coffeehouses, the kopitiams do play an important role in spatializing public life across Malaysia (Nonini 1998). Within these spaces, Kuchingite public civility emphasizes minimizing conflict via joking, pleasantries, and the general act of putting others at ease, irrespective of one's own views and opinions.

This brief historical background to the discourse of Sarawakian harmony is not meant to be a naïve justification for these ubiquitous state government slogans; nor is it intended to idealize or exotify Sarawakian politics. Rather, this contextualization through history and contemporary practice shows how certain everyday forms of harmony ideology (Nader 1990) promote a form of state legitimacy that evokes but also makes interested claims on the state's political history of managing diversity. Following Sarawak's incorporation into Malaysia in 1963, the idea of harmony has also become a boast about the relative lack of ethnic tensions compared to west Malaysia, and in some ways forms a discourse which justifies aspects of Sarawakian legislative self-stewardship within the larger federation.

A unidirectional view that reads this harmony ideology only as a top-down state discourse of power imposed on the people by state elites, however, risks losing sight of how state-government interests are primarily directing their claims outwards towards west Malaysia. The Sarawak state government is in tension with the federal government in Kuala Lumpur on several issues not least of which are disagreements about who has the power and authority to extract and license Sarawak's natural resources. The particulars of that conflict have been discussed in the regional literature (Balasubramaniam 1998; Chin 2019; Mersat 2017; Yeoh 2019), but what is relevant here is understanding how the narrative of harmonious Sarawak and its corresponding civility practices are mobilized to serve the interests of the Sarawak state government vis a vis the federal government.

One of the reasons harmony civility is so enduring is its compatibility with goals shared by people across Sarawak, who support the state's attempts to stake out some degree of autonomy vis-à-vis west Malaysia. The Sarawakian state government's interests in leveraging Kuchingite forms of harmony and civility can therefore be seen only partially as attempts by local elites to discipline their own people; they also offer a mode of pushing back against federal encroachments on the state's special privileges and unique culture. This effort by the state government relies in part on its sustained efforts in publicizing its commitment to these popular values to Sarawakian voters and West Malaysian visitors. To that end, they have constructed several monuments to these Sarawakian values around the state, systematically publicizing the state government's involvement.

Of special importance is the Darul Hana bridge which connects the commercial and cultural centre of Kuching, the waterfront neighbourhood, with the state parliament across the river. This bridge regularly

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[3]Kopitiams are a Malaysian style of cheap cafes. Typically located in shoplot storefronts with open facades leading into simple undecorated setups. They serve Malaysian staples such as sweetened coffee and Teh Tarik (Malaysian milk tea) along with simple meals of fried rice or noodles.

serves as the backdrop for government events such as campaign launches, New Year's Eve celebrations and state funded fairs. The company which built the bridge according to design briefs of the Sarawak state government claims that this structurally complex curving 2016 bridge, "symbolises the state leaders' efforts to bring balance and harmony in a multiracial and multicultural society." Importantly, the name Darul Hana is, "derived from Sarawak's full name under the Brunei Sultanate, Sarawak Darul Hana—which means 'Home to Peace and Tranquillity'" ("Darul Hana Bridge" 2018). Through the symbolism of the bridge, the state government not only portrays itself as the guarantor of harmony, but a uniquely *Sarawakian* harmony.

These efforts by the Sarawakian state government to make itself out as the guarantor of Sarawakian harmony is an appeal to Sarawakian voters. This rhetoric helps the Sarawakian state government castigate their political opponents as threats against Sarawakian harmony. These castigations are routinely wielded in tandem with governmental tools. For instance, when the controversial Islamic preacher Zakir Naik announced his intent to travel to Sarawak, the state government, in a popular move, announced it would use its prerogatives over immigration to the state to bar him entry. As the representatives of the state government explained, "Zakir's highly seditious remarks could pose a potential danger to the ethnic and religious harmony of Sarawak" (Chua 2019).

Weaponizing harmony civility against political dissenters invites cynicism. Yet, while recognizing the conservative political effects of these tactics is important, we should not suppose that this is merely an oppressive tactic of the state government. On the contrary, civility and politeness is a point of local pride and highly praised in Kuching. Kuchingites often brag about how harmonious their city is, exalt politeness above other moral virtues such as honesty or constancy, and find ways of portraying them-selves as exemplars of Sarawakian harmony civility. Interestingly, these invocations of Sarawakian har-mony civility often serve as tools for extracting political and economic resources from the state government. Several urban organizations actively strategize around their own ethnically diverse member-ship. For example, an organization aimed at preserving Kuching's urban heritage strategically recruited board members from different ethnic groups and used this to argue, as their co-chair Patricia - a middle aged Dayak woman - did effectively, for the harmoniousness of preserving, "Our shared Kuching history and to preserve our unique and harmonious way of life". Similarly, when a youth organization seeking to help artists and expand youth opportunities in Kuching was invited to participate in a banquet thrown by the Sarawakian state government, they deliberately sent people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. They fore-went their usual black t-shirts and jeans in favour of ceremonial indigenous garb and ethnic costumes. Upon learning that none of their ethnically Chinese members could make it that day Saddiq, a Malay man, even borrowed and wore a Chinese-style red silk shirt.

These organizational tactics of recruitment and self-presentation employ stylizations of Sarawakian harmony civility (clothing, rhetoric, and membership) in tacit approval and participation in the political logics of the state government. Yet, the members of the organization are not being duped by propaganda. Rather, Rancière's notion of a 'distribution of the sensible' offers a more appropriate conceptualization of how they engage with ideas of civility in terms of, "a generally implicit law that defines the forms of par-taking [in politics] by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed." (Rancière 2010: 36). Following this Rancierian logic, we see how the significations, sensibilities and affects of these civility claims are co-extensive with partaking in Sarawakian politics. Thus, sensibilities like civility are not akin to tennis balls batted back and forth between unequal opponents, but constitutive of a mutual ongoing, though asymmetrical, entwinement in the politics of Sarawak. Particularly, we see Kuchingite organiza-tions leveraging the state government's own normative language of harmonious civility to petition polit-ical action and state resources. Indeed, they often remarked on their use of civility with a mix of cynicism and conviction.

For example, members of the same youth group mentioned above express a sense of pride that the state government entrusted them with leading a Sarawakian unity campaign. Their leader Michael, an Indian Malaysian IT freelancer, exemplifies this ambivalent affect, "They accepted our idea of collecting all these stories from Sarawakians about their experiences with Sarawak unity and we're going to make a big display down by the waterfront [in front of the Darul Hana Bridge]. Maybe it's a bit, you know, sen-timental lah. but… this is Sarawak. We really are like this, sometimes lah, and I think we can really do it the right way." Michael recognizes the sentimentality of the whole thing, yet still thinks there really is

something important about all this and is fully willing to wield this civility as a tool for cajoling the state government into supporting his organization. Putting forward this proposal, they wield the sensibility of harmony civility, in which the state government is heavily invested, and thus the resources of this distribution of sensibilities become available for their project. This Kuchingite youth organization thus manages to twist the hegemonic civility discourse into a vehicle for extracting resources and political support from the Sarawakian state government. Despite its hegemonic role, the Sarawakian state government's entangled rhetorical investments are not alone in keeping Kuchingite organizations wrapped up in the twisted binds of harmony civility.

The ensnaring twists of harmony civility also play out in seemingly banal microsocial exchanges and become especially resonant when civility seems to break down. For example, a Kuchingite named Saeed told a story about an affront to civility he experienced while shopping for vintage film cameras among Kuching's pawnshops. In one smaller shop, while looking at the wares displayed in glass vitrines, his eye caught an old Kodak camera. Turning to the middle-aged Chinese-Malaysian man who ran the store, Saeed asked, "Uncle! Can I try out this camera, just quick?" The owner did not respond. Saeed changed tack, switching from the colloquial use of 'uncle' to the more formal British phrasing: "Sir, can I try out your camera over there?" The proprietor looked at Saeed, stating bluntly, "No steal, can try if you buy." Saeed took a final walk among the eclectic display of valuables, knickknacks, and antiques. As he did so, he noticed how the proprietor followed him with his eyes while an older lady, presumably the proprietor's wife, openly followed him around the store. Saeed ended up "taking [his] business elsewhere".

While seemingly banal, Saeed's dramatized description of his mistreatment at the pawn shop accentuates the norms of harmony civility to morally frame the ethnic politics of this encounter. Posting the same story on Facebook, he turns the story into a means of extolling Sarawakian interethnic harmony, "I know some people are still prejudiced, but this is Sarawak people!" Saaed implies he is being stereotyped as a lazy and thieving Malay by a rude middle-aged Chinese-Malaysian man. This stereotyping, par excellence, transgresses the expectations of friendliness and non-conflict that harmony civility relies on. But we should notice how this stereotyping is itself a coercive twisted civility. Through his accusation, the proprietor castigates Saeed for a potential breach of civil conduct – as stealing would be rude as well as illegal. In effect, the stereotyping that Saeed feels as a breach of decorum is in its own way an injunction to civil behaviour.

Even in its breakdown, harmony civility still binds the actions of these two Kuchingites and holds the ethnic dimension of their encounter up against a civil ideal of amicability. The informal pleasantness of everyday harmony has practical merit in a city as diverse as Kuching. In so far as daily commerce, photography hobbies, or any number of other uses of the city space are to proceed, this civility must be at least stable enough that one can expect to go about one's business without being accosted. In that sense, the quotidian expressions of harmony civility are crucial in that they make people pragmatically invested in civility's continued operation. Thus, even when expectations of civil behaviour are dashed, one becomes drawn tighter into the twists and counter-twists of civility.

What these tangles of Kuchingite harmony civility show is that our accounts of civility ought to be complicated in two ways. Not only does civility twist and turn according to the interests of its wielder; one minute entrenching the state government and the next extracting resources from that very government. It is also deeply embedded in the practical concerns and microsociality of urban life such that the city's inhabitants play out the twists of civility even in the face of its breakdown. Harmony civility is never simply the handmaiden of the status quo nor a promise of inclusion. While civility is clearly mobilized in service of Sarawak state government, to fully account for its practical merits, affective force and varied instrumentalizations necessitates attention to its contextually shifting dynamics and exigencies which have to do with everyday encounters as well as the pursuit of political interests. This is a pattern we see repeated, through very different particulars, in Saigon.

Civility Rules in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City)

If the keyword for Kuching is harmony, Saigon's equivalent is *văn minh*. This Sino-Vietnamese word, which can mean "civility," "civilized," or "civilization," appears prominently in state-sponsored posters, banners, and signs across Vietnam. It is especially common in public spaces. In Saigon's traffic

intersections, for example, large banners encourage motorists to navigate traffic in a "civilized manner." In parks and along sidewalks, signs affixed to the sides of garbage cans encourage the "civilized" disposal of refuse. Parking signs, posters, and public service announcements repeatedly declare the importance of "urban civility." When the term for civility appears in these contexts, it is often written in the immediately recognizable institutional font that evokes the style of Vietnamese mobilizational posters (*tranh cổ động*). Furthermore, it is often entangled with expressions of nationalism, or exhortations extolling the Communist Party of Vietnam. The website of the Communist Party of Vietnam, which has made no secret of its desire to control how Vietnamese citizens use the internet, even has a feature article entitled "Let's use social media in a Civilized Manner" (Nguyễn 2020). These messages clearly share many qualities with Althusser's (1971) description of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Like ISA, the exhortations about văn minh make demands on the bodily habitus of urban citizen-subjects in order to urge them to comply with state interests in fostering orderly behaviour. These posters assume an audience who already consider civilized behaviour to be an aspirational ideal, and the messages leverage this self-understanding to demand orderly spatial behaviour from these bodies. Through such tacit assumptions, these slogans interpellate subjects who not only "understand" the slogan but respond to it by either deliberately ignoring it or actively changing their bodily practices in concordance with the slogan's ordering demands.

In Vietnam, appeals to civility are ubiquitous. They are not limited to Saigon, and, importantly, they are not always generated by the propaganda and information arms of the central government. Civility discourse also has a long history, which can be traced to French colonial discourses of the "mission civilisatrice," anti-colonial and later post-colonial reappropriations of the term, as well as to pre-colonial discourses of "civilizing the wastelands," which have since reappeared in the language of real estate and urban development (Harms 2016a; Nguyen 2021). Although văn minh can have multiple meanings, Althusser's discussion of ISA's proves useful for explaining its effectiveness—it works because it speaks to a person's self-conception as being civilized, even if they are otherwise sceptical of state slogans, and even if their actual everyday actions repeatedly resist conforming to the demands of so-called civilized comportment. The slogan on the poster, banner, or sign does more than make a pronouncement or a demand. Instead, it calls out to the urban dweller's sense of good judgement as informed by Saigon urbanity (in effect relying, as with the Kuching case above, on what Rancière would call the subjects' inclination to partake in the aesthetics of the given distribution of the sensible). A person who in most contexts may oppose the agenda of the Communist Party, for example, may nevertheless still be interested in smoothing traffic patterns, or may enthusiastically support the idea of putting garbage into trashcans instead of throwing it onto the street.

Because civility is internalized in this way, it is typically difficult to distinguish hegemonic top-down civility imposed by the state from counter-hegemonic civility expressed as a set of bottom-up demands emanating from the people. In some ways, every act of civilized garbage disposal, every red light obeyed, or every expression of annoyance lobbed towards those who do not "act in a civilized way" (một cách văn minh), can be understood as tacit allegiance to state led discourse. But the expression of civility demands often seem to emerge from the individual self. As Foucauldian perspectives on governmentality have shown, resistance and power are immanent within each other, and the discourse of civility is a classic example of how states seek to regulate the conduct of conduct even as they incite people to express their own individualism and responsibility (Rose 1999; Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012; Zhang and Ong 2008). Civility asks people to control their selves, and self-control is one of the key expressions of governmentality.

While Foucauldian perspectives on power are useful, it is important to recognize that the state apparatus in Vietnam remains firmly controlled by the Communist Party, which actively presents itself as a unified force. There also remains a great deal of separation between popular concerns and the programmatic interests of the party in many realms. In such a context, the state appears largely as a coherent actor, with ideological messaging carefully crafted at Party Congresses and with various state media organs officially serving as the "voice of the" (tiếng nói của) Communist Party and its subsidiary organs.[4]

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[4]The state paper of record, *Nhân Dân*, is officially called "the voice of the Party, the state, and the People." another important newspaper, *Tuổi Trẻ*, is the "voice of Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union of Ho Chi Minh City" and another important paper, *Thanh Niên*, is officially the "forum of the Vietnam Youth Union."

Furthermore, many Vietnamese citizens maintain a pronounced scepticism regarding official state pronouncements and see "the state" as something both outside themselves and very real to contend with. In this context, Vietnamese citizens often actively resist overt forms of state ideology while still becoming enlisted in the less overt, more neoliberal forms of civilizing rhetoric. The twisted effects of civility under these conditions parallels what Nguyen Vo Thu Huong has called the "irony of freedom" in Vietnam, where resistance to top-down state oppression inadvertently encourages citizens to devote themselves to self-governing techniques associated with neoliberalism (Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương 2008). The twisted part is this: while new forms of self-expression are often seen as turning the state's ideology of control back on the state, these same acts of resistance can also reinscribe the hegemonic meaning of that discourse.

Any study of civility in Vietnam must thus trace how it often emanates from the state's ideological apparatus while also understanding the occasions in which it becomes twisted around to coerce the state itself, and then in turn recognizing how such acts of resistance play back into the hands of state ideology. For example, as noted above, public spaces across Vietnam are covered with the state's civility slogans. Yet, similar slogans are often reproduced by non-state actors in a wide range of privately-owned public spaces. For example, the concept of văn minh, and the exhortation to act in a civilized manner, can be found in the public-private partnership of city buses ("ride the bus in a civilized manner"), ATM machines ("withdraw your money in a civilized manner"), cinemas ("please watch the film in a civilized manner"), and other common-use spaces, such as the elevators and corridors in apartment buildings, and so on. These privatized expressions of văn minh are thus aligned with goals the state wishes to achieve, even as many private operations claim to be more successful at achieving the goals than the state.

Appeals to civility, however, can also emerge "from below," so to speak; that is from individual actors who are not organizationally committed to state institutions or wealthy elites. These counter-hegemonic twists of civility typically exhort the ruling class to behave properly. For example, in Ho Chi Minh City's master-planned housing developments, residents regularly extoll the virtues of "civilized urban living." This is one of the main selling points promised by such housing developments, which position themselves as a corrective to the corruption that they understood to have undermined the urban development of the rest of the city. For residents in such New Urban Zones, civility has become a mode of describing development priorities that follow the rule-oriented precepts of modern urban planning, in which the capricious needs of individual investors or residents are subordinate to the collective needs of the community. Along with claims that the private housing development was a place of civility came a critique of the Ho Chi Minh City government as undisciplined and unable to steward the coherent and rational development of the city (Harms 2014, 2016b).

Civility shaming is a common feature of life in new housing developments. Young Vietnamese female professionals living in New Urban Zones were particularly forceful in their critique of the corruption and toxic masculinity that had become standard in the city, and they deployed the language of civility as a way to demand that city leaders and powerful wealthy men start to act in morally responsible ways (Harms 2016a: chapter 2). These demands for civility operate, importantly, by turning the very idioms of hegemony into demands that people in positions of power act civil as well. For example, women mock wealthy men for their lack of manners, their vulgar speech, and their inability to control their appetites. In Saigon the new rich are derided as "peasants" evoking a binary coding which styles the urban as a space of civility and the rural as a space of insufficient civility (thiếu văn minh) (see Harms 2011, 2016a). If hegemonic civility discourses are typically associated with states telling their citizens "how to behave", it is striking how easily these citizens reappropriate that same discourse to demand that leaders and other people in positions of power and authority behave properly too. In Saigon too, civility twists into a mechanism for holding the powerful accountable but doing so also reproduces certain inherently elitist status distinctions.

The twists can be surprising, leading to cases in which members of the working class engage in civility shaming of other members of the working class. During fieldwork, author Harms was sitting next to a young Vietnamese technical college student on the Saigon Star bus, which plied the heavily trafficked route between the An Sương bus station in periurban Hóc Môn district, and the downtown terminus at the traffic circle near Bến Thành market, in District 1. It was and still is a busy route, and the traffic was particularly bad that day on Trường Chinh Avenue, especially on the section of road that runs behind

Tân Sơn Nhất airport, which was in the middle of a messy and poorly orchestrated road-widening project. At one point, the bus was forced to a halt by streams of motorbikes flowing out from the gates of the Tân Bình Industrial Park. There was a shift-change going on at the factory and uniformed workers were arriving and departing from the factory in large numbers: they filled the streets, and motorbikes began crisscrossing the road in literally every direction—moving backwards, forwards, and diagonally, riding up on the sidewalks, weaving around trees and road construction equipment, and darting through the gaps between traffic barriers. Up until that moment, the student had been speaking with great passion about his studies at the technical college, describing his hope of someday studying English at an advanced level, and his dream of eventually studying abroad. But the traffic outside prompted him to pause and let out a sigh. "Vietnamese people," he said, "are uncultured." ["Người Việt không có văn hóa"].

This sort of exasperated denunciation of "Vietnamese people" and how they lack everything from culture to education and civility was a common topic of conversation when engaging in discussions about everyday life with Ho Chi Minh City residents. Speaking of Vietnamese people in the third person, the speakers present themselves as detached observers of what Thongchai Winichakul, writing about similar constructions of civility (*siwilai*) in Thailand, has called the "Others within" (Thongchai Winichakul 2000). When the student explained that "Vietnamese people" are uncultured, his statement rested on a curious paradox: he claimed authority to make pronouncements about "Vietnamese people" based on his own Vietnamese identity, but he explicitly used this authority to distance himself from "Vietnamese people." Dynamics like this recall the dilemma of twisted civility. One deploys civility to put others in their place, and in the process claims to be in the position to make demands about civility while also resisting the pressure for others to make such demands about one's own behaviour.

In some instances, the tactic of civility shaming can recall the so-called hidden transcripts (see Scott 1987) of subordinated peasants whose mockery of landowners enact a moral limit to the exploitation of their tenants, or the moral critiques that peasants lob towards usurious landlords. The stingy rich are derided as uncivilized for their display of poor table manners in restaurants, mocked for poor tipping, lampooned for an inability to resist temptation; they are accused of an inability to navigate the streets respectfully in their oversized (and underoccupied) luxury vehicles. In other instances, the very same tactics of civility shaming can quickly reproduce logics of elitism that reproduce forms of distinction that have long put the subordinated classes "in their place." In the final section of this article, we reflect on the ways similar forms of twisted civility appear in other social and historical contexts beyond Southeast Asia.

Twisted Comparisons

Juxtaposing Kuching and Saigon has shown how civility discourses serve many purposes and are wielded for several, often contradictory, interests. The history of civility, it seems, is a twisted path crisscrossing coercive and emancipatory terrains. An adequate account of civility thus needs to account for the way civility twists to occupy shifting positions and coerce new targets of civility shaming. This twisting dynamic is not confined to Southeast Asia. Indeed, the pervasiveness of this twisted history becomes even more apparent when comparing the ways civility discourses have been enacted in the cases of the US civil rights movement and recent Danish immigration politics, both of which display how wielding civility becomes a key terrain of political struggles.

We insist on extending the comparative scope of this argument beyond the regional confines of Southeast Asia. It is a key requirement of anthropological theory to facilitate these kinds of juxtaposition and frame the lines of analysis and axes of comparison by which such juxtaposition becomes meaningful. It is therefore crucial, in order to justify the theoretical shift we hope to open with the concept of 'twisted civility', to demonstrate how the concept travels to different regions. While the differences between Kuching and Ho Chi Minh city are substantive in their own rights, our exploration of the concept via examples from the US and Denmark, respectively, shows not only how profoundly the empirical conditions and struggles involved differ across locales, but also exemplify how the sites of analysis, arenas of contest and modes of invocation vary contextually.

Even as we insist on the importance of demonstrating the relevance of twisted civility to the western polities we ourselves hail from, we approach these comparisons humbly as reflective extensions of insights

learned from our respective field sites. This reflexive extension of our argument bespeaks the enduring importance of self-examination in social theorizing, by exemplifying what Mahmood (2012: 33) refers to as 'denaturalizing'. Denaturalizing the sensibilities of normative civility helps us deepen our understanding of how civility twists. The example of the civil rights movement in the US shows how complex and contested the deliberations were over how to engage with the logic of civility to achieve social justice —because the leaders of these movements recognized how twisted the concepts could be. Just as compellingly, the Danish example shows how impactful civility dynamics can be even in the halls of parliamentary power.

The US civil rights movement offers perhaps the most clear and well-known example of the shifting, twisting terrain of civility. The notion of civil disobedience, for example, challenges the terms of what counts as civility yet also performs and makes demands regarding the need for heightened forms of civility. It shows precisely how civility must in some cases be resisted as a hegemonic force designed to silence democratic disagreement and also how it might be recognized in other uses as an ideal with emancipatory potential (Chafe 1981). The result is brutally twisted, but often politicized and infused with violence, and thus commonly evokes and calls out serious tension. Recall, for example, the way Martin Luther King, Jr. described the productive role of tension, which he understood as being produced by the oscillation between "negotiation" and "direct action":

> You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue […] I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. (Martin Luther King 1963: 255)

In this passage, we see how conservative demands for civility, here cloaked in the guise of "negotiation," risk obscuring how attempts at negotiation have been refused by conservative whites. Within a context in which equal rights had been denied to Black Americans, such calls for civility by White powerholders are clearly a ruse—a mechanism for precluding civil debate. In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s America, the conditions for civility had not even been met, and disobedience was necessary in order to create the tension necessary to produce the conditions for a truly civil form of negotiation, which was not only founded on civil comportment but on civil rights, founded in laws, forged through a kind of disobedience driven by a commitment to justice:

> I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law. (Martin Luther King 1963: 258)

While civil disobedience seeks to create the conditions for laws that all members of a social order can respect, scholars have also noted that social justice often requires more forceful acts of refusal (cf. Simpson 2007). Some cases show how the recourse to civility can be a mechanism for limiting political resistance, or even as "a cudgel against people of colour" (Bates 2019). This instrumentalization of civility, interestingly, has also taken part in the sometimes heated debates among scholars and activists about how the politics of respectability support or undermine attempts to pursue social justice (Cooper 2018; Gray 2016; Higginbotham 2003; Johnson 2013; Kennedy 2015). In this way, the history of the civil rights movement, as well as more recent reconsiderations of the politics of respectability it promoted, express the very real political implications of what the concept of twisted civility seeks to address: the same idioms of civility wielded for repression were twisted around in one historical moment to shame the agents of repression as uncivilized, but over time the insistence that protest must be civilized has also been used to denounce many subsequent movements for being uncontrolled.

The case of the controversial Danish populist politician Inger Støjberg offers another example of how civility can be twisted. Through two consecutive appointments as Denmark's Minister of foreigners and Integration (*udlændinge- og Integrationsminister*) (2015–2016 and 2016–2019) Støjberg became a

polarizing figure in Danish parliamentary politics by wielding civility critiques against the marginalized and racialized Danish Muslim minority. Through racist claims about Muslims being lazy and unable to work during Ramadan fasting, and by scaremongering about Muslim men being unable to contain their sexual desires, she made herself highly popular among Danish right-wing voters. She paired this rhetoric with a series of punitive restrictions on immigration and the tightening of integration laws. Her agenda, framed around the idea of 'strammer' (tightening), reinforced the civilizing logic implied by Danish integration policy, which imagines immigrants as uncivilized dangers in need of proper civilizing by the Danish welfare state. Pursuing the strammer agenda supplements this thinking with a metaphor in which tightening is understood as furthering the strict discipline immigrants are expected to submit to in order to "become Danish."

Støjberg's use of civility discourses were turned against her, however, in the spring of 2017. After tightening Danish immigrations laws for the fiftieth time, she posted a picture of herself smiling as she held a massive Danish style layer cake [*lagkage*] decorated with a large number 50 and a Danish flag. In Denmark, celebratory layer cakes decorated with miniature Danish flags are iconic emblems of children's birthdays, and Støjberg was purposely evoking Danish bourgeois domesticity to publicize her xenophobic politics. The image drew enormous amounts of criticism from Danish leftists and centrists, who used their own civilizing language to denounce her actions as disgusting [*klamt*], uncouth [*ufint*], and poorly raised [*uopdragent*]. Støjberg's appropriation of bourgeois domestic civility had dramatically backfired, leaving her open to twisted reversals of the same civility critiques she herself relied upon.

The story gets twistier. One of Støjberg's most controversial measures as Minister of Foreigners and Integration was a policy that required automatically separating arriving refugee couples. Once again, she relied on civility discourse to misrepresent this measure as 'protecting child brides'. The move was widely critiqued for violating human rights and circumventing Danish constitutional ordinances that require individual legal processing. During several rounds of parliamentary questioning [minister samråd] she gave several factually inconsistent explanations for why she had given this 'illegal command' [ulovlig instruks]. During the questioning, however, she was protected by rules of parliamentary civility, which presume that ministers tell the truth. In order to sanction her for obvious perjury, it took the election of a new Social Democrat government in 2019 and a formal Danish Parliamentary report concluding that there was "no reasonable doubt" Støjberg had knowingly acted illegally.

It took until 2021 before Støjberg formally faced a parliamentary court case—five years after her original anti-immigration actions in 2016. The ensuing impeachment case was a highly publicized affair. Every night press commentators and politicians commented on the twists and turns of witnesses, interrogations, and counter-interrogation. Unsurprisingly, these discussions operated in an explicit language of civilization, propriety, and normativity. Støjberg's supporters would decry the case and insist on the importance of defending Danish civilized norms. Støjberg's detractors would wield similar claims in the opposing cause by insisting on the importance of upholding decency (*anstændighed*) and the rule of law (*retsstaten*). For example, Muslim Danish parliamentarian Sikander Siddique argued before parliament that Støjberg's disregard of rule of law was not worthy of the Danish Parliament. Støjberg gave the civility discourse one more twist by telling Siddique, who was born and raised in Denmark, "Maybe if you live here for several years you can learn to be civilized like us." Støjberg's bravado did not save her, as on December 13th, 2021, she was condemned to 60 days of unconditional (*ubetinget*) jail time. She had wound herself so tightly in a web of civility discourse and shaming that she could not escape when the strings were pulled in different directions. Despite her jail sentence, Støjberg was able to invoke demands for 'decency' (*anstændighed*) and 'respect' (*respekt*) as she campaigned for Danmarksdemokraterne (the Denmark Democrats), the new parliamentary party she founded, drawing enough right-wing voters to upend the right flank of Danish parliamentary politics in the 2022 Danish parliamentary election. In Støjberg's case few things are as twisted as civility – landing her in jail at one turn but then back in the halls of parliament the next.

Following the twists and turns of civility is crucial for understanding political lives from Kuching to Saigon, and opens analysis of political tumult as diverse as the US Civil Rights movement and the tumultuous career of a Danish minister. Yet, while these further examples clearly support our emphasis on civility's twisted side, they also show the importance of recognizing the contingent and disputed public life of civility claims. Clearly the political objects of these varied cases are different. The US Civil Rights

movement and Støjberg speak to national level issues, one for justice and one for repression, while the Kuchingites and Saigonese address local issues of youth advocacy and urban planning respectively. As Laclau & Mouffe might say, these organizational efforts each construct a different "chain of equivalency", which in turn mobilizes different, "systems of alliances with other forces, […] among contents of the different movements" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 128, 141). In other words, the civil rights movement articulates a broader fight for justice than Kuchingites who advocate for art space and in turn engage different publics for persuasion and support. This difference is important and speaks to the crucial particulars of civility, which is always conditioned by the political context in which it plays out. The political valences clearly differ across Vietnam's single party state, Denmark's nativist welfare state, Sarawak's semi-autonomy within Malaysia's Federal politics, and the United States' unresolved history of racial injustice. However, they are all multidirectional, and they are all twisted.

Conclusion

In this article, we have built from two ethnographic cases in very different social circumstances, brought them into dialogue with each other, and have then further extended them through comparison with historical and contemporary civility discourses in the author's own home countries—all in order to demonstrate a pervasive pattern of twists and turns in the social uses of civility. In Kuching as well as Saigon, we not only describe how civility commonly appears as a hegemonic state discourse, but also show how these discourses resonate importantly with everyday microsocial practices. Whether it is the language of harmony or of văn minh, civility unfolds through continuous and iterative twisted manipulation by disempowered actors and dominant elites. Precisely because of this, it becomes a valuable tool for civic organizations to petition and shame state actors into providing resources, opportunities, or spaces of free action. Our examples from the US civil rights movement and more recent Danish politics shows similar iterative twisting at play. This happens in particularized and idiomatic ways, but the comparison shows how there is a similar process at work in all the cases: civility is not only an ambivalent either/or combination of oppression or resistance, but it becomes twisted as it becomes entangled with all its contradictory implications. In the two contexts from Southeast Asia, where overt forms of contestation are politically unlikely, twisted civility leverages the force state apparatuses impart upon particular civility discourses to make claims on the state without necessitating overt conflict. In the US and Denmark, political parties and critics brand each other as uncivilized, but in doing so open themselves up to charges of hypocrisy.

This dynamic of twisted civility draws together two distinct strains of scholarship on civility and shows how they each only represent part of the larger dynamic. A cynical and sceptical strain of writing about civility has, importantly, elaborated civility's many oppressive uses. Conversely, a more optimistic strain of writing has focused on civility's productive effects, how it might foster interpersonal dialogue, enable critiques of social injustices, call leaders to task, and so on. We have suggested that these two approaches are not best understood as two different ways of using civility, but that they should be seen as partial views —or moments captured in time—of the ongoing twisted dynamic which is central to how civility functions. Our approach, however, does not simply assert that both approaches are correct in their own way, or rest on the notion that civility is ambivalent. Rather, we insist that civility is twisted—every civilizational utterance, and every act of civilizing rhetoric is part of a cascading series of unexpected and largely uncontrollable effects.

Our main cases in Kuching and Saigon, along with the comparisons to North America and Europe, exemplify how often these dynamics recur, and invites further research into the expression of twisted civility in other cases and contexts. A cursory review of ongoing debates hints at a world filled with similar cases: Debates in academia seek on some occasions to regulate acceptable classroom discourse and on other occasions to resist administrators who try to muzzle free speech; and similar twisted logics pervade conservative paranoia about 'political correctness', urban disputes about public noise, intergenerational conflicts, and even the north American shaming of so-called "Karens". In all this, civility's curiously compelling normative effects retains a dynamic and intriguing paradox. Attempts to resist and manage the effects of civility claims often turn into civility claims of their own. When it comes to civility, the more you resist it, the more you call it into being. What could be more twisted than that?

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