

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF CIVILITY: A CULTURE-CENTRED CRITIQUE OF THE CIVILITY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

On whiteness, liberalism as an infrastructure of whiteness, the far-right inheritance of the civility apparatus, and the policing of subaltern voice

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The Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that civility and dialogue, far from being neutral civic virtues that the contemporary far right has cynically appropriated, were constituted from their origin as instruments of marginalisation, and that liberalism, theorised here as an infrastructure of whiteness, reifies a propertied and Eurocentric subject as the universal citizen while consigning the subaltern to the cracks outside the public sphere. Reading the November 2025 United States Department of Education notice that committed sixty million dollars to civil discourse alongside the June 2026 UNCIVIL audit of the private capital behind the same centres, it situates the Civility Industrial Complex within the political economy of settler-colonialism and racial capitalism. Through the structure, culture, and agency triad of the culture-centered approach, the paper traces the genealogy of the civil and the savage, the template of democracy promotion, the far-right inheritance of the apparatus, and the manufactured neutrality of the academy. It advances numbered policy recommendations organised through the same triad, and closes on communication sovereignty as the horizon of refusal.

1. TWO DOCUMENTS, ONE INFRASTRUCTURE

On the twelfth of November, 2025, the United States Department of Education entered into the Federal Register a notice committing sixty million dollars to the promotion of civil discourse on college and university campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).¹ Read as a structural artifact rather than an administrative routine, the document declares which speech the state will protect and which speech it has already classified as disorder. Its enumerated provocations, the heckler's veto, the campus takeover, the violent riot, the recent high-profile political assassination, organize themselves around a single unnamed referent, the pro-Palestinian encampment, against which the entire funding regime is constructed. Its competitive preference, reserved for institutions that house independent units devoted to civic thought, constitutional studies, American history, and economic liberty, specifies the ideological content of the viewpoint diversity the notice claims merely to protect. The civic-thought and intellectual-freedom centers favored by the notice are a documented partisan infrastructure, assembled over years through the coordinated philanthropy that manufactures the campus culture war (Kamola & Wilson, 2025; Wilson & Kamola, 2021).^{1b} A grant announcement of this kind functions as a map of legitimate and illegitimate communication, drawn by the state and underwritten by the Treasury.

Historically, the private capital sustaining this sector has remained illegible to the marginalized populations who absorb its effects. The UNCIVIL audit of June 2026 rendered that capital legible (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026).² Tracing five years of foundation grants to seventy-seven university centers and nonprofits whose missions cluster around pluralism, viewpoint diversity, the reduction of polarization, and constructive dialogue, the audit established that of the eighty-two million dollars moved by the twenty-three most committed funders, ninety-seven percent originated with foundations heavily invested in conservative and "pro-Israel" networks, and that these same foundations directed more than six dollars to conservative and "pro-Israel" causes for every dollar committed to a progressive end.³ The Lynde and Harry Bradley network, which seeded the campus civic-thought movement, simultaneously capitalized Turning Point USA, the Alliance Defending Freedom, and Project Veritas;

the Klarman Family Foundation underwrote New Pluralists and Interfaith America in one ledger and Israel advocacy and lawfare in another (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026).⁴ The donor class that finances bridge-building is, with negligible exception, the donor class that finances the political project for which no bridge is required.

97% of \$82.3M in civility grants from funders heavily invested in conservative/"pro-Israel" networks	6:1 ratio of giving to conservative and "pro-Israel" causes over progressive ones	\$60M federal allocation for "civil discourse", excluded from the audit and added on top
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Note. Grant figures from UNCIVIL Collective (2026); federal allocation from U.S. Department of Education (2025).

Fundamentally, the public notice and the private audit describe one apparatus operating through two modalities. The state supplies the coercive instrument, the threat to withhold billions and the federal pressure on named institutions; private philanthropy supplies the consensual instrument, the seminar on dialogue, the depolarization curriculum, the bridge-building grant. Theorized together, they constitute a hegemonic formation in the Gramscian sense, a configuration in which domination and the manufacture of consent are administered by complementary arms of a single structure (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b).

2. THE CIVIL AND THE SAVAGE

Civility cannot be recovered as a neutral civic virtue that the contemporary far right has cynically appropriated, because the concept was constituted as a boundary at its inception. In its dominant articulation, civil society names a social order in which citizens manage their relationships and settle their disputes through the codes of a legal system (Kumar, 1993), a definition that presupposes the propertied, literate subject of European modernity. The liberal public sphere theorized by Habermas (1989) as the space of reasoned exchange among equals was assembled through constitutive exclusions, so that every figure outside its presupposed subject entered already marked as excessive, primitive, or uncivil. Dutta-Bergman (2005) traced this architecture in an analysis of how public relations scholarship enlisted the trope of civil society as the elixir for the so-called Third World (Taylor, 2000; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003), a body of work in which civil society, celebrated as the ultimate expression of civilization, is defined explicitly against the uncivilized condition of states coded as primitive (Escobar, 1995), reproducing the colonial distinction between the civil and the savage as a technology of intervention (Said, 1979).

Theoretically, the exclusion operates through the individualist and proprietary substratum of the concept. Eade (2000, p. 11) observed of the universalizing discourse that civil society could do no wrong and there was nothing it could not do, a universalization that dissociates the concept from its location within modernity and modernization (Chatterjee, 1993). Chatterjee (1993, p. 238) held that invoking the opposition of state and civil society reproduces the history of Western Europe, and Beverly (1999, p. 120) specified the cost, in that the normative requirements of civic participation, literacy, the nuclear family, and a stable income or property, exclude significant sectors of the population from full citizenship. The citizen at the center of the concept is, as Neocleous (1995, p. 396) put it, an atomized, self-seeking individual, and the privileging of that figure encodes a Eurocentric individualism that erases collectivist forms of participation (Hofstede, 1984; Dutta-Bergman, 2005).⁵ Civil society reifies a particular European, propertied subject as the universal citizen and naturalizes that universalization as neutrality.

Liberalism reifies the subject position of the colonizer as the universal citizen, and offers that universalization as the neutral ground on which reasonable parties disagree.

This is the precise sense in which the analysis names liberalism an infrastructure of whiteness, and the precise sense in which it holds that at its foundation that infrastructure is white supremacist, in that it universalizes the subject position of the colonizer and offers the universalization as the common ground on which reasonable parties are invited to disagree. The boundary travels across registers. Within the multicultural organization, civility operates as a normative instrument recoded as professionalism and respect, deployed to construe the account of harm offered by the racialized worker as aggression and to discipline it accordingly (Kisselburgh & Dutta, 2010). At the scale of the West, the postcolonial critique of public relations identifies the same grammar, whereby the West installs itself as the unmarked universal and renders the colonized as the particular requiring translation (Dutta, 2015). The demand to be civil arrives, for tangata whenua confronting an ongoing settler structure, for Muslim communities living under the quotidian violence of Hindutva, and for the Santali Adivasi communities whose health narratives are silenced within the dominant epistemic order (Dutta-Bergman, 2004), as an instruction to mistake the architecture of subordination for the conditions of freedom.

3. CAPITAL, COLONIALISM, AND THE SUBALTERN OUTSIDE

Fundamentally, the boundary is a function of capital. Hegel, among the earliest theorists of the concept, already grasped that the completed civil society is driven by a dialectical impulse to seek new consumers beyond itself and is thereby impelled toward colonization (Hegel, 1952, as cited in Beverly, 1999, p. 121).⁶ Civil society is constituted by its consensual relationship with the flow of capital, and the bureaucratic organizations that populate it, the welfare agencies, the nongovernmental organizations, depend for their survival on the capital they attract (Neocleous, 1995). The working class, in the reading Neocleous (1995, p. 405) draws from Marx, stands outside civil society, in its cracks and crevices, bearing its burdens without its advantages, so that poverty is a product of civil society rather than an accident within it (Marx, 1975).

Consequently, the subaltern is constituted outside the public sphere of civil society, in its cracks and fissures (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). The neoliberal project carried by civil society seeks the complete mobility of capital across national boundaries, and its structural adjustment programs pursue macroeconomic stability as the precondition for transnational capital (Robinson, 1996a, p. 634). The erection of civil societies thereby provides the scenario for the oppression of marginalized voices, opening indigenous spaces to transnational corporations while excluding the dispossessed from participatory governance (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). The contemporary civility apparatus inherits this political economy, its donor base concentrated in the foundations most heavily invested in conservative and anti-BDS networks (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026), so that the centers that scale and the models of dialogue that are favored are those congenial to capital.

4. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND THE MANUFACTURE OF CONSENT

Methodologically, the most instructive precedent for the contemporary civility industry is the history of United States democracy promotion in the Global South, because that history documents the conversion of coercion into consent as a deliberate strategy of hegemonic maintenance (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b). Democracy, defined in its classical sense as political self-determination and the participation of the governed in the government (Kelsen, 1955, p. 2), is converted in the democracy-promotion literature into a rhetorical trope for intervention, a universalization that legitimizes the concept while obscuring its colonial function (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). In the cases of the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua, a single pattern recurs, in which a popular or subaltern movement gathers force sufficient to threaten an elite order aligned with transnational capital, and the response shifts from naked dictatorship toward democracy promotion, the funding of an elite opposition through programs of civil society development administered by USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy.⁷

Robinson (1996a, p. 616) theorized the shift in Gramscian terms, locating its strategic objective in the replacement of coercive means of social control with consensual ones within a stratified international system. The transition in the Philippines preserved what Robinson (1996a, p. 647) called the armor of coercion even as it staged a managed democratization, leaving the post-Marcos order indebted to the conservative military rather than to the popular movement, while some twenty-one million dollars flowed into chambers of commerce, trade-union congresses, and electoral-monitoring bodies positioned to absorb that movement into market-aligned channels (Robinson, 1996a).⁸ The purpose of this interventionism, Robinson (1996b, p. 29) argued, is to penetrate and conquer civil society in the intervened country, integrating subordinate classes into a larger hegemonic order, a project for which he reserved the term polyarchy, an elite-managed democracy emptied of redistributive content.

Dialogue performs the legitimating labor in this operation. In the dialogic theory advanced by Kent and Taylor (2002), dialogue promises participation, the acknowledgment of the values of others, truthfulness, mutual benefit, and a sincere effort to understand the interlocutor; the democracy-promotion record demonstrates that the programs conducted under the banner of participatory communication exploit, marginalize, and silence the subaltern participant while the rhetoric of dialogue supplies the legitimating veneer (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). The empirical record confirms the limit from within the depolarization literature itself, since brief cross-partisan conversation reduces measured animosity only where it avoids the actual areas of disagreement, and the effect decays within weeks (Santoro & Broockman, 2022), while a meta-analysis of seventy-seven interventions finds the effects small and unscalable and turns the field toward the elite behaviors and structural incentives that the dialogue paradigm ignores (Holliday et al., 2025).¹⁹ Read against this template, the campus civility industry resolves into a domestic polyarchy. The encampment, the divestment campaign, the labor action, and the decolonial syllabus constitute the popular movement that has gathered force, a wave that the Crowd Counting Consortium records as the largest and most sustained in the United States in response to a foreign-policy question, and one that property-damage and police-injury data identify as overwhelmingly nonviolent (Chenoweth et al., 2024); the depolarization seminar, the bridge-building grant, and the constructive-dialogue curriculum constitute the consensual apparatus through which that force is channeled and disarmed; the arrest, the suspension, and the surveillance constitute the coercive apparatus held in reserve. Reporting from campuses documents the choreography directly, with institutions arresting participants in nonviolent encampments and, in the same period, marketing dialogue and civility initiatives, so that coercion and consent issue from a single administrative hand.⁹

Depolarization is the consensual modality of a hegemony whose coercive modality arrests the encampment, suspends the academic, and surveils the syllabus.

5. THE FAR RIGHT INHERITS THE APPARATUS

Once civility is understood as a boundary technology of whiteness, the enthusiasm of the contemporary far right for dialogue ceases to read as hypocrisy and begins to read as inheritance. The far right received an instrument that liberalism had already shaped for the policing of marginalized populations and the management of dissent, dispensing only with the liberal embarrassment about the instrument's function. The Federal Register notice is the clearest available text of this inheritance, naming protest as the disorder to be remediated and reserving its competitive preference for the centers built to its ideological specification (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). The mobilization of free speech within this inheritance is itself a technology of the era of global white nationalism, in which the discourse of free expression extends protection to supremacist speech while disciplining the speech of the racialized (Vats & Dutta, 2020). The campus free-speech crisis that legitimizes the notice is itself a manufactured panic, an American obsession exported across the world (Daub, 2024) and resting on a misdiagnosis of the university as the enemy of speech (Franks, 2024).^{20 15}

In the era of platform media this repression is administered through surveillance capital (Dutta, 2021). The civility code in the neoliberal university is enforced through monitoring, the decontextualized screenshot, and the manufactured outrage event circulated by a distribution list engineered to target the dissenting academic. In Aotearoa, scholars who name settler-colonialism and Hindutva are themselves marked as uncivil, and actors who claim the mantle of free speech mobilize the machinery of civility to remove particular speakers from the public sphere (Dutta, 2021; Dutt-Ballerstadt & Bhattacharya, 2021).¹⁰ The faculty most exposed to this machinery are those already on the margins, the racialized, the decolonial, and the anti-colonial scholar whose solidarity with movements resisting an unfolding genocide is recoded as incivility (Dutt-Ballerstadt & Bhattacharya, 2021; Dutta, 2024). The instrument of this recoding is increasingly the civil-rights statute itself, turned against the speech it was written to protect in order to repress campus advocacy for Palestine (American Association of University Professors & Middle East Studies Association, 2025).²¹ The seminar on constructive dialogue and the coordinated harassment campaign are two settings on a single instrument, the first capitalizing the conversation about civility, the second filing the complaint against the scholar who declines to be civil about structural violence. The scale of this disciplining is now documented across monitoring projects and professional bodies: the Academic Freedom Index records the United States leading the world in the decline of academic freedom (Greenfield, 2026), the Scholars at Risk monitoring project catalogues a global pattern of attacks on higher education (Scholars at Risk, 2025; International Society for Third-Sector Research, 2025), and the communication discipline's own task force has traced the legislative and ideological campaigns against critical scholarship and the disproportionate risks borne by marginalized scholars (National Communication Association Task Force on Academic Freedom and Tenure, 2025). In Aotearoa, the same imperative animates the hosting of persecuted scholars through the Scholars at Risk network (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2021). Against this apparatus, tino rangatiratanga names a sovereignty that the grammar of civility is designed to render unspeakable.

6. POLARIZATION TALK AS THE ALIBI OF SUPREMACY

The keyword that binds the apparatus is polarization. Polarization discourse performs a determinate operation, inscribing a line through the center of political life, designating the two ends as symmetrical forces tearing a reasonable middle apart, and positioning the dialogue facilitator as the neutral party charged with restoring equilibrium. Polarization discourse, in this deployment, flattens the asymmetries of power it claims merely to describe (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024).²² The symmetry is manufactured. On one pole stands a movement to strip rights from trans people, to deport, to deny the Nakba, to prohibit the teaching of race, and to construct conservative intellectual infrastructure with the avowed aim of capturing institutions; on the other stands the demand that these projects be named and arrested. To represent white supremacy as one pole of a polarized spectrum is to have already reified it as a legitimate position holding the floor, and the reification is completed before any conversation convenes.

Consequently, the both-sides trope functions as a mechanism rather than a failure of perception. By declining to name whiteness as the organizing structure, polarization discourse renders it invisible, and the invisible is thereby protected. The far right finances depolarization because depolarization performs the labor of legitimation on its behalf (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026), recoding its positions as viewpoints and its opponents as the authors of incivility, and requiring marginalized populations to extend recognition to those who contest their humanity as the price of admission to dialogue. The vocabulary of equality, balance, and viewpoint diversity is itself inverted in this operation, mobilized to protect supremacist positions under the sign of fairness (Dutta, n.d.). The demand for viewpoint diversity is the academic form of this inversion, a procedural claim that conscripts the institution into platforming the very positions that organize exclusion (Siraganian, 2025), in the manner that the philanthropic invocation of balance recapitulates the logic of all lives matter (Le, 2023).¹⁶

7. COMMUNICATIVE INVERSION AND THE COMPLICITY OF THE ACADEMY

Neutrality is a manufactured product rather than the natural resting state of institutions, and the UNCIVIL audit exposes the production line (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026). When a foundation channels identical capital into Turning Point USA and into a campus dialogue center, the neutrality of the dialogue center is an achieved effect of that foundation's strategy. The neutral is the position the dominant occupy once they have financed every other actor into the role of the partisan, and those who hold access to the dominant public sphere are those who define what counts as legitimate within it (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). The doctrine of institutional neutrality performs this function in its contemporary form, operating less as a shield for the university than as an instrument for silencing dissent within it (Brewer & Young, 2025; Kapczynski, 2025).²³ This proposition is established in critical public relations scholarship, which has shown that the field functions to structure dominance within the information order (Gandy, 1992) and to conduct a diplomacy on behalf of elite interests (L'Etang, 1996).

The Federal Register notice manufactures neutrality through a complementary method, the method of definition, fixing civic thought, constitutional studies, and economic liberty as the neutral baseline and consigning the encampment, the labor action, and the divestment campaign to the category of disorder against which neutrality must be defended (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This is the operation of communicative inversion, whereby a dominant structure represents its project through the vocabulary of its opposite (Dutta, 2015, n.d.), so that a funding regime engineered to discipline dissent presents itself as the guardian of free expression and an infrastructure of whiteness presents itself as the home of pluralism.¹¹ The academy is implicated rather than exempt, since the university that hosts the civic-thought center and accepts the philanthropic and federal capital participates in the construction of the very neutrality that disqualifies its critics, a complicity that follows from the imperial location of the academic enterprise itself (Said, 1979; Dutta-Bergman, 2005).

8. COUNTER-PUBLIC SPHERES AND VOICE

The question of civil society is, in the final analysis, a question of voice (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Subaltern studies offers the alternative entry, defining subalternity by the basic lack of access to power and to the construction of the narrative of oneself and one's people (Beverly, 1999, p. 1; Spivak, 1988). The subaltern exists outside the realm of civil society and constructs identity within a different domain, the domain of community rather than that of bourgeois civil-society institutions (Chatterjee, 1993, as cited in Beverly, 1999). Against the materialist, self-seeking subject of civil society, the subaltern critique developed by Gandhi (1958) opposed an alternative grounded in self-restraint and benevolence, naming the production-based modern order the primary source of modern imperialism.¹²

Subaltern studies further locates agency in the subaltern subject, documenting resistance and political participation in peasant societies long before the emancipatory conceptualizations of civil society were articulated in the West (Guha, 1988). Multiple counter-public spheres emerge in this account, standing in dialectical tension with the dominant public sphere of civil society (Guha, 1988; Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Critical public relations scholarship has begun to register this terrain in its theorization of activist publics (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000), while the media are shown to participate in the silencing of subaltern voices rather than in the creation of public spheres for dialogue (McNair, 1996). The task is to retheorize participation through the concept of access, since those who hold access to the dominant public sphere are those who define its discursive space (Dutta-Bergman, 2005).

9. STRUCTURE, CULTURE, AGENCY

The culture-centered approach reads communication through the dialectic of structure, culture, and agency, and insists that meaning is anchored in material arrangements (Dutta, 2023). Situated within this frame, the civility apparatus resolves into a system with a determinate function, an anti-voice infrastructure. Where voice infrastructures are the durable arrangements through which marginalized populations articulate claims, secure registration, and shift the terms of their representation, the civility apparatus performs the inverse operation, absorbing subaltern voice, routing it into managed channels of dialogue, stripping it of its structural claims, and returning it to the speaker recoded as incivility at the moment it refuses management.¹³

Theoretically, the apparatus is legible across the three domains. At the level of structure, it is the convergence of two streams of capital, private philanthropy and state funding, resting on the material base of settler-colonialism and racial capitalism. At the level of culture, it circulates the scripts that reify the arrangement as common sense, the distinction between the civil and the disruptive, the both-sides frame, and the unmarked centrality of whiteness as the position from which marginalized populations are summoned to be reasonable. At the level of agency, it works to capture the agency of colonized and racialized communities, disciplining it into the etiquette of dialogue and criminalizing it where it exceeds that etiquette. The map below holds these relations together, including the convergence of liberalism and the far right upon a single funded node and the counter-current the approach exists to amplify.

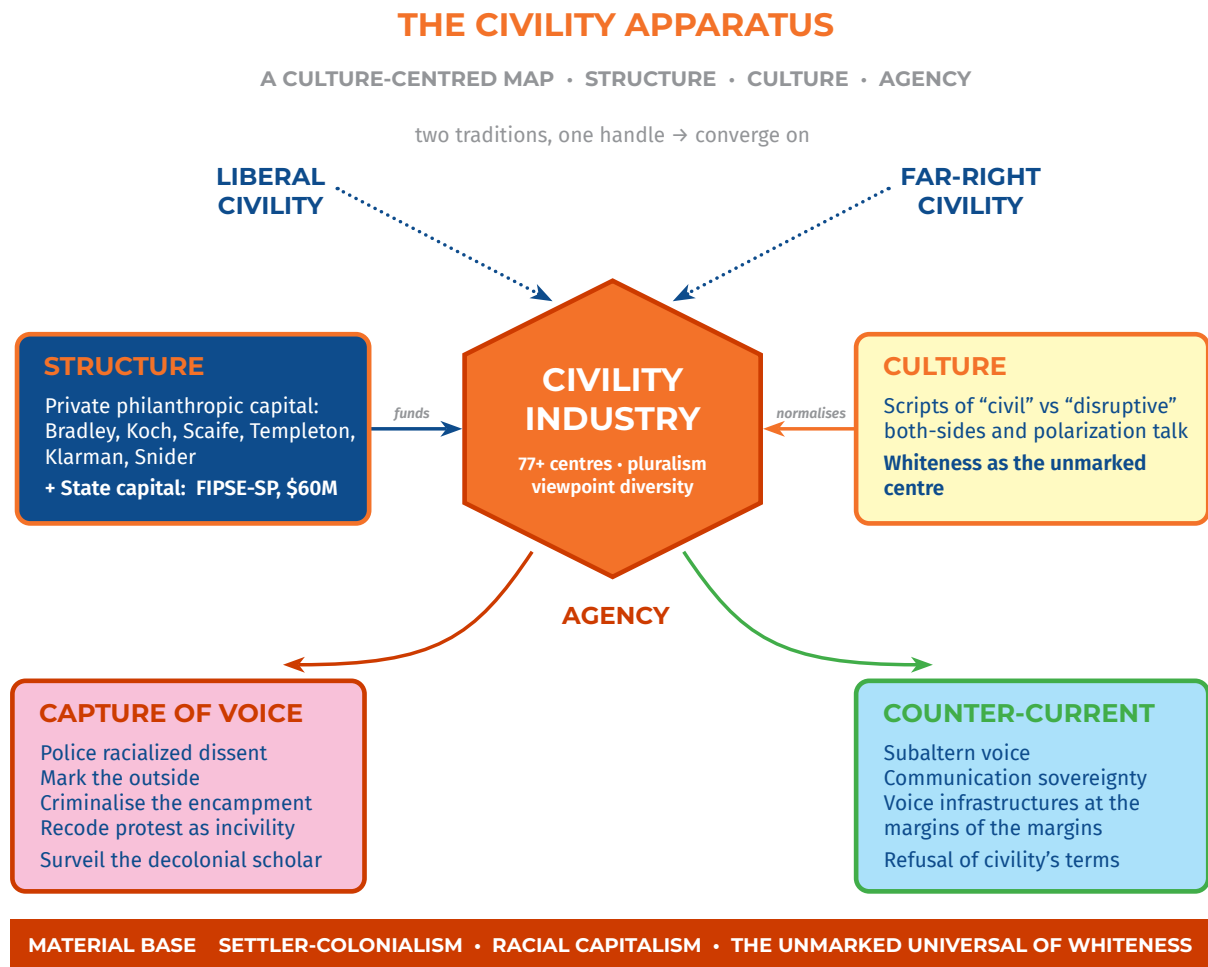


Figure 1. The civility apparatus read through the culture-centered approach. Liberal and far-right traditions of civility converge on a single funded node. Capital flows in from structure; cultural scripts normalise the arrangement by holding whiteness as the unmarked centre; agency is split between the capture of subaltern voice and the counter-current of communication sovereignty. The whole system rests on, and reproduces, the material base. Note. Adapted from the structure–culture–agency dialectic of the culture-centered approach (Dutta, 2023).

The agency of marginalized populations precedes and exceeds the dialogic forms offered by the apparatus (Guha, 1988; Spivak, 1988), and the work of a culture-centered praxis is to build the structural resources through which that agency articulates itself on terms it sets, formulating the problem from the standpoint of subaltern participants rather than from that of donor agencies (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta, 2023).¹⁴

10. DISMANTLING THE APPARATUS ACROSS STRUCTURE, CULTURE AND AGENCY

The analysis yields seven recommendations for the funders, institutions, and policymakers who would decline to underwrite the apparatus described here. Each follows from the structural reading rather than from an appeal to better manners, and the set is organized through the structure, culture, and agency triad of the culture-centered approach (Dutta, 2023), addressing in turn the material arrangements that fund and enforce the apparatus, the scripts that reify it as common sense, and the capacities through which marginalized populations reclaim voice.

STRUCTURE the material and institutional arrangements

1. **Make funding transparency a condition of legitimacy.** Centers, initiatives, and nonprofits that brand themselves as nonpartisan programs of civic dialogue, civility, or depolarization should be required to disclose their full funding chains, including the donor-advised funds and pass-through vehicles that render strategic capital illegible at the level of the grantee (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026). Universities that host such units should publish the provenance of the philanthropic and federal capital that sustains them, so that the neutrality of the dialogue center is made legible as an achieved effect of funder strategy rather than as a natural attribute.
2. **Decouple civil-discourse funding from ideological capture.** Federal and philanthropic programs should not condition support for civil discourse on the presence of units devoted to civic thought, constitutional studies, and economic liberty, a competitive preference that specifies the ideological content of the viewpoint diversity it claims to protect and installs a partisan infrastructure under the sign of neutrality (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).
3. **Reject the coding of protest as disorder and dismantle repressive conduct codes.** Institutions should decline the framing, advanced in the FIPSE-SP notice, that treats nonviolent encampments, walkouts, and divestment campaigns as the disorder against which civil discourse is to be funded (U.S. Department of Education, 2025), and should dismantle the civility codes and conduct policies that operate as instruments of surveillance and repression against faculty and students on the margins (American Association of University Professors, 1994; Dutt-Ballerstadt & Bhattacharya, 2021; Dutta, 2021).

CULTURE the scripts that reify the arrangement

4. **Abandon the both-sides frame and name the structure of whiteness.** Depolarization and bridge-building programs should cease to represent white supremacy as one pole of a polarized spectrum, should name the asymmetry of power and the structures of whiteness that the polarization frame renders invisible, and should refuse the inverted vocabulary of equality and balance that protects supremacist positions under the sign of fairness (Dutta, n.d.).
5. **Ground speech policy in an analysis of power rather than content-neutral abstraction.** The discourse of free expression is mobilized within global white nationalism to extend protection to supremacist speech while disciplining the racialized, and institutional speech policy should be built on that recognition rather than on a formal symmetry that treats all speech as equivalently situated (Vats & Dutta, 2020).

AGENCY the capacities of marginalized populations

- 6. Redirect resources toward community-owned voice infrastructures.** In place of donor-defined dialogue, funders and institutions should support culture-centered structures of communication in which marginalized populations formulate the problem and set the terms of their own representation, the material precondition of communication sovereignty (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta, 2023).
- 7. Protect academic freedom for faculty on the margins against weaponized grievance.** The contemporary far right mobilizes the vocabulary of civility, free speech, and balance as a repertoire of grievance, performing the injury of a silenced majority in order to discipline the faculty who write on whiteness, critical race theory, decolonization, settler-colonialism, and postcolonial theory (Vats & Dutta, 2020; Dutt-Ballerstadt & Bhattacharya, 2021).¹⁷ This grievance is itself a communicative inversion, in which the structure that holds power casts itself as the aggrieved party and recodes the analysis of whiteness as the real incivility, the real discrimination, and the real threat to free expression (Dutta, n.d.). The professional bodies of the academy have warned that civility, as a vague and subjective standard, is readily converted into an instrument of discipline against unpopular speech (American Association of University Professors, n.d.; National Communication Association Task Force on Academic Freedom and Tenure, 2025). Administered through surveillance capital, the campaign proceeds by the manufactured outrage event, the decontextualized screenshot, and the coordinated complaint that converts a single lecture or syllabus into a disciplinary proceeding (Dutta, 2021). Institutions should therefore treat academic freedom for faculty on the margins as a structural commitment rather than a case-by-case indulgence: they should decline to process orchestrated grievance campaigns as good-faith complaints, distinguish coordinated harassment from legitimate disagreement, refuse to subject the teaching of race and colonialism to a standard of civility imposed on no other field (American Association of University Professors, 2007), and shield decolonial and anti-colonial scholars, including those whose solidarity with movements resisting an unfolding genocide is recoded as incivility, from surveillance and removal, in keeping with the long-standing protection of extramural speech (American Association of University Professors, 1964; Dutt-Ballerstadt & Bhattacharya, 2021; Dutta, 2021, 2024; Scholars at Risk, 2025).

11. COMMUNICATION SOVEREIGNTY

The culture-centered approach answers the civility industry with voice infrastructures owned and directed by marginalized populations rather than with a superior dialogue, undertaking the patient construction of the durable arrangements through which the subaltern articulates claims on terms of its own making (Dutta, 2023). Communication sovereignty names this capacity, the right of a community to determine what counts as a legitimate claim, to refuse the etiquette that requires it to translate its survival into the cadence of those who threaten it, and to hold the structural question open against every incentive of the funded center to foreclose it. The refusal of civility's terms is continuous with the radical struggles of the Global South against an unfolding genocide, which insist on naming structural violence rather than dissolving it into managed conversation (Dutta, 2024). Civility, in its distribution, is rationed by structural position, extended to the boardroom and withheld from the picket line, the encampment, and the community refusing displacement.

The Civility Industrial Complex is the considerable expenditure required to keep the structural question foreclosed. To meet it is to articulate the uncivil proposition, which is also the accurate one, that liberal neutrality is a manufactured product, that liberal pluralism is an infrastructure of whiteness, and that the affection of the contemporary far right for dialogue is the affection of an heir for an estate it expects to inherit intact. Communication sovereignty begins where the obligation to be civil toward that structure ends.

12. THE MAINSTREAMING OF THE ATTACK AND THE GLOBAL RESPONSE

The assault on academic freedom traced in this paper is coordinated rather than incidental, and it is mounted through a convergent set of instruments. It proceeds by the legislative prohibition of critical race theory and the dismantling of diversity, equity, and access programs, by the federal capitalization of civic-thought and civil-discourse centers (U.S. Department of Education, 2025), by the criminalization of the encampment and the divestment campaign, and by the surveillance and removal of the faculty who write on whiteness, settler-colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonial theory (Dutt-Ballerstadt & Bhattacharya, 2021; Dutta, 2021). Its weapons are the keywords of liberal proceduralism, civility, free speech, balance, and viewpoint diversity, mobilized as a repertoire of grievance that casts the dominant as the aggrieved party (Dutta, n.d.; Vats & Dutta, 2020). The professional bodies of the academy have named the danger, reaffirming the protection of a faculty member's extramural speech (American Association of University Professors, 1964), of controversial material in the classroom (American Association of University Professors, 2007), and of expression against the chilling reach of campus speech codes (American Association of University Professors, 1994), and the communication discipline's task force has documented the disproportionate exposure of marginalized scholars to these campaigns (National Communication Association Task Force on Academic Freedom and Tenure, 2025).

What distinguishes the present conjuncture is the mainstreaming of this assault. Positions once confined to the activist right now arrive as federal funding priorities, as state legislation, and as the strategic philanthropy that underwrites the civility industry and the wider manufacture of the campus culture war (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026; Wilson & Kamola, 2021), and they are laundered into respectability by the depolarization sector, whose both-sides frame recodes a movement to strip rights as one pole of a reasonable disagreement. The civility apparatus performs the labor of normalization, converting the analysis of structural violence into incivility and the supremacist position into a viewpoint owed the courtesy of balance (Dutta, n.d.). The consequence is measurable. The Academic Freedom Index records the United States leading the world in the decline of academic freedom (Greenfield, 2026), and the Scholars at Risk monitoring project documents a global pattern of attack on higher education (International Society for Third-Sector Research, 2025; Scholars at Risk, 2025). A country once held up as a model of institutional autonomy now risks becoming an exporter of the repressive models it once warned against, in the way the panic over cancel culture was itself exported as a global obsession (Daub, 2024).

The response cannot remain local, because the structure is not local. The recommendations advanced here, organized through the structure, culture, and agency triad of the culture-centered approach (Dutta, 2023), require a global counterpart. They call for an international solidarity that refuses the civility apparatus its terms, that protects persecuted scholars across borders through networks such as Scholars at Risk (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2021), and that builds voice infrastructures owned and directed by marginalized populations from the Global South outward (Dutta, 2024; Dutta-Bergman, 2005). They require a defense of academic freedom that abandons the content-neutral abstraction shielding supremacist speech while disciplining the racialized (Vats & Dutta, 2020), grounded instead in an analysis of power that names whiteness, settler-colonialism, and racial capitalism as the structures the attack exists to preserve. Communication sovereignty is the horizon of this response, the capacity of communities to determine the terms of their own representation against an apparatus engineered to foreclose it.

The Civility Industrial Complex is the consensual face of an authoritarian turn whose coercive face is already visible on the quad and at the border. To meet it is to decline the invitation to be civil about domination and to build, patiently and across the borders the apparatus is designed to police, the infrastructures through which the subaltern speaks. The defense of subaltern voice is, in the final reckoning, a defense of the conditions of freedom, and it will be secured, if it is secured, by those whom the apparatus was built to silence.

NOTES

1. The notice estimates a \$60 million allocation under Absolute Priority 3, “Promoting Civil Discourse on College and University Campuses,” within a \$167 million FIPSE–SP competition, and frames the priority through the heckler’s veto, campus takeovers, violent riots, and a recent high-profile political assassination; its two competitive preference priorities reward partnerships with civic institutes dedicated to civic thought, constitutional studies, American history, and economic liberty (U.S. Department of Education, 2025, pp. 50862–50864). The figure captures public funding only and therefore sits atop the philanthropic totals reported here.
2. The audit reviewed publicly reported foundation grants of at least \$25,000 since 2020 to a pool of civility providers drawn from the sector’s own inventories, identified 23 top funders by dollar amount, breadth of providers supported, and share of total grantmaking, and coded each funder’s wider giving as conservative, “pro-Israel,” or progressive (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026). By the audit’s own account, its design, in softening the right-hand categories and broadening the progressive category, tended to understate rather than overstate the rightward tilt it documents.
3. This analysis retains the audit’s quotation marks around “pro-Israel,” following its stated rationale that the label is adopted in the sense in which anti-immigrant formations describe themselves as “pro-America” (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026). The audit characterizes roughly 60% of the organizations coded under this label more precisely as strongly Zionist, anti-BDS lawfare, or IDF-aligned.
4. The Bradley entities directed approximately \$33.7 million to Turning Point USA and \$5.0 million to the Alliance Defending Freedom alongside their civility grants; the Klarman Family Foundation paired \$7.0 million in civility grants with tens of millions in Israel-advocacy, security, and related giving (UNCIVIL Collective, 2026).
5. The privileging of the self-seeking individual encodes the individualist bias of European thought and erases collectivist forms of participation documented across non-Western social systems (Hofstede, 1984; Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Theorists of civil society thereby mistake a culture-bound construct for a universal aspiration of the human race.
6. Neocleous (1995, p. 397) observed that contemporary appropriations of the concept, in attempting to be socialist without being anti-capitalist, conceptualize away its capitalist nature; Marx located the form of civil society itself, rather than merely its content, as the object of transformation (Neocleous, 1995, p. 405; Marx, 1975).
7. The three cases, the removal of Marcos in the Philippines, the managed transition from Pinochet in Chile, and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, share a structure in which the United States, confronted with a popular movement it could not suppress, financed an elite opposition through civil society and democracy-promotion programs administered by USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b; Walker, 1987; Dutta-Bergman, 2005).
8. Under the banner of civil society building, the United States directed approximately \$21 million to the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, Philippine youth clubs, and the National Movement for Free Elections, organizations positioned to absorb the energy of the anti-Marcos movement; the transition preserved the military as the armor of coercion and left the incoming government more indebted to it than to the popular movement (Robinson, 1996a, pp. 645–647; Dutta-Bergman, 2005).
9. Reporting on the sector documents universities that arrested participants in nonviolent pro-Palestinian encampments and, in the same period, launched dialogue and civility initiatives; a Dartmouth student characterized the institutional aim as the manufacture of a climate of civility (“Constructive dialogue,” 2025; “Dialogue is all the rage,” 2026).
10. On the enforcement of civility codes through surveillance capital in the neoliberal university, and on the targeting of dissenting academics through manufactured outrage and coordinated distribution, see Dutta (2021). The repertoire includes the selective screenshot and the distribution-list-driven targeting event, mechanisms distinct from organic disagreement.
11. Communicative inversion names the representational practice through which a dominant structure deploys the vocabulary of its opposite, so that extraction is narrated as development, dispossession as participation, and the management of dissent as free expression (Dutta, 2015, 2023, n.d.).
12. Gandhi’s critique rejected Western civil society as a model for India on the ground that it rested on selfishness rather than on the values of self-control and benevolence, naming the production-based modern order the primary source of modern imperialism (Gandhi, 1958, pp. 23, 159, 241; as discussed in Dutta-Bergman, 2005). The subaltern alternative is offered here as a horizon rather than as a finished programme.
13. Voice infrastructures are the durable structural arrangements, material, organizational, and discursive, through which marginalized populations register claims and reconfigure the terms of their representation; the civility apparatus is theorized here as their inversion, an anti-voice infrastructure that absorbs and neutralizes subaltern voice (Dutta, 2023).
14. In the culture-centered approach the problem is formulated from the standpoint of subaltern participants rather than that of donor agencies, and the role of the researcher is to co-construct the structural resources through which marginalized voice is articulated and registered (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta, 2023).
15. Vats and Dutta (2020) locate the discourse of free speech within the era of global white nationalism, demonstrating that its content-neutral abstraction operates asymmetrically, extending protection to supremacist expression while disciplining the speech of the racialized. The campus free-speech mobilization in the Federal Register notice is continuous with this configuration.

16. The mobilization of equality, balance, and viewpoint diversity to protect supremacist positions is a form of communicative inversion analyzed in Dutta (n.d.), in which the vocabulary of fairness is turned against the very populations whose subordination the structure secures.
17. The grievance repertoire of the contemporary far right inverts the vocabulary of equality and free speech, casting the dominant group as the victim of the very analyses that name its dominance, and concentrating its attacks on the fields that render the structure visible, namely whiteness studies, critical race theory, decolonization, settler-colonial studies, and postcolonial theory (Vats & Dutta, 2020; Dutta, n.d.). The volume edited by Dutt-Ballerstadt and Bhattacharya (2021) documents the disproportionate exposure of faculty of color and other faculty on the margins to these civility and free-speech campaigns, and Dutta (2021) traces their administration through the surveillance infrastructures of the platform university.
18. The build-out of campus civic-thought and intellectual-freedom centers has been documented as a coordinated and partisan project rather than an organic scholarly development (Baocchi, 2026; Hayssen, 2026; Lassabe Shepherd, 2025; Ray, 2026), continuous with the right-wing political strategy that has long organized the politics of campus free speech (Hemmer, 2025).
19. The depolarization field increasingly concedes that individual-level dialogue interventions are weak and short-lived, and that durable change requires confronting elite behavior and structural incentives rather than the dispositions of individuals (Holliday et al., 2025; Markosian, 2025; Santoro & Broockman, 2022).
20. The empirical and historical literature treats the campus free-speech crisis as a manufactured panic. The trope of political correctness was a phantom enemy invented by the right (Weigel, 2016); most conservative students do not report persecution on campus (Palmer, 2026); the genuine threat to campus speech is misinformation rather than student protest (Vivian, 2022); and the panic has supplied a vernacular for a wider assault on the university (Kamola, 2025; Stanley, 2025).
21. On the turning of civil-rights law against the dissent it was designed to protect, see Fadel (2026); on the role of organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League in this campaign, see Gelman (2026); and on the scale and largely nonviolent character of the underlying protest wave, see Chenoweth et al. (2024).
22. Polarization discourse obscures the structural and elite-driven character of political conflict (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024; Moskowitz et al., 2022), and the centrist positioning of the neutral facilitator has been theorized as a reactionary centrism that treats the demand for justice and the defense of hierarchy as equivalent excesses (Huertas, 2018).
23. The doctrine of institutional neutrality, recently elevated by university administrations, has been criticized for furnishing a pretext to suppress student and faculty speech rather than protecting it (American Association of University Professors, 2025; Moody, 2026; Soucek, 2026).

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