

Meeting Information

- **Date:** August 26, 2026
 - **Session:** Fifth session of the seminar
 - **Facilitator/Host:** João J. Vila-Chã, SJ
 - **Topic:** *Civility: A Cultural History* by Davetian — Chapters 7 & 8; transition to *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah
 - **Attendees:** João (facilitator), Franklin, Lidia, Adrienne, Nubong, Yeping, Mohan, Oleksandr, Maduabuchi, Michał, Mark, Shiva, Dian, Xin, Ravi, En.
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Key Outcomes

The session centered on two structured presentations — Franklin on Chapter 7 and Lydia on Chapter 8 of Davetian’s *Civility: A Cultural History* — followed by wide-ranging group discussion. The core argument emerging from both presentations is that **American civility developed as a deliberate reaction to aristocratic European models**, grounded in values of equality, freedom, and directness rather than courtly refinement. Lydia’s presentation extended this into **late modernity**, arguing that civility’s foundations have shifted from hierarchy and conformity toward equality, recognition, and reciprocity, while the tension between individual freedom and communal responsibility remains unresolved. The session concluded with the group transitioning to Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart* as the next major text, with reading and presentation assignments distributed for Friday’s session.

Chapter 7 Presentation — Franklin: American Civility as Reaction to Aristocracy

Author’s Framework and Introduction

- Davetian’s background as a child of UN diplomats who traveled every three years gave him acute sensitivity to how **manners and tone shift across cultures** — even between neighboring countries like England and France.
- Concrete example cited: in England, leaving food on the plate signals non-greediness; in France, cleaning the plate honors the host — a small but powerful illustration of how civility is culturally encoded. Franklin drew a parallel from Peru, where southern families expect a clean plate and northern families expect leftovers.

- The author's **two central practical questions**: (1) Can rigorous understanding of civility's anatomy help prevent social cruelty? (2) What roles do pride and shame play in social organization and conflict?
- Davetian defines civility as "the extent to which citizens of a given culture speak and act in ways that demonstrate caring for the welfare of others, as well as the welfare of the culture they share in common" — introducing a **normative, not merely behavioral**, element.
- He agrees with Norbert Elias's concept of **configurational sociology** (social organization and human agency are intimately linked) but argues Elias neglected the **dynamic of emotional processes** connecting them; Davetian's key contribution is the inclusion of emotions.
- Unlike Elias, whose conclusions were shaped primarily by the absolutist French monarchy, Davetian broadens the scope to include **France, England, and America**, and extends the historical frame beyond the medieval period. 7

American Civility: Core Characteristics

- American civility is characterized as **informal civility** — an ethos of ease, friendliness, directness, and equality — in explicit contrast to French *expressive civility* (style, sentiment, drama) and English *restrained civility* (moderation, politeness, stoicism).
- The American Republic defined itself **against aristocratic hierarchy**; its public manners privileged equality, independence, mobility, association, and directness.
- Key foundational values embedded in American civility: **freedom, equality, fairness** — present from the republic's founding and shaping its entire civility tradition.
- Franklin's key insight: "A civility tradition that was not the outcome of aristocratic society, but a reaction to it." This reaction was not merely elite — conduct books, political figures (Jefferson, Franklin), and writers collectively spread the message to average citizens.

Tensions Within American Civility

- **Puritan moral tradition vs. economic/industrial transformation**: Early American civility was deeply religious; as commercial and industrial life grew, civility became a **social skill useful for cooperation, trust, and mobility**. Franklin argued there was a slight but perceptible victory for the economic transformation over the religious spirit by the 19th–20th century.
- **Individualism vs. communitarianism**: Concrete examples of community cooperation (towns, churches, local parishes) coexisted with strong messaging

around individual success. Franklin described this as a paradox — “socialized individualism” — where freedom, equality, cooperation, and mutual respect are held together without full resolution.

- Franklin noted that democracy does not eliminate the need for discipline or conformity to rules; **liberty did not mean the absence of norms.**

Conduct Books and Cultural Transmission

- Conduct books served as a major vehicle for transmitting civility norms — covering discipline, character, work, family, gender roles, and children’s education — similar in function to Elias’s analysis and to Manuel Carreño’s work in Latin America.
- Tocqueville’s reports were cited as external validation: “When rank is weak and etiquette is uncertain, substance, sincerity, authenticity, and directness might become more important than formal decorum.”
- Franklin connected this historical analysis to **contemporary American politics**: the “No Kings” protests during Trump’s first term reflect a centuries-old American tradition of rejecting monarchical power, now re-activated.

Critical Observations from Franklin

- Franklin expressed initial skepticism about whether the anti-aristocratic civility ethos was truly widespread or confined to elites — but was ultimately convinced by Davetian’s multi-source evidence.
- **Critique of omission — Native Americans**: Franklin identified a significant gap: the chapter presents America as a “new beginning” without acknowledging that Indigenous peoples were already present. A discussion of equality and freedom that erases the original inhabitants is internally contradictory.
- **Naming critique — “America”**: Franklin noted that in Spanish-speaking Latin America, “America” refers to the entire continent, not just the USA. The book’s unreflective use of “America” to mean the United States performs a kind of **symbolic exclusion** of other Americans.

Chapter 8 Presentation — Lydia: Late Modern Civility and the Transformation of the Self

The Late Modern Self and Shifting Foundations of Civility

- Chapter 8 is not a story of decline but of **changing foundations**: each gain in freedom creates a new problem — freedom from hierarchy raises questions of

legitimate restraint; emotional freedom raises questions of care for others; freedom from fixed roles introduces constant negotiation.

- The central question: *How can society protect individual freedom and authenticity while keeping the restraint needed for social cooperation?*
- American culture's older tensions — self-reliance and freedom vs. religious discipline and community duty — are **intensified** in late modernity, not resolved.

Authenticity vs. Politeness

- Civility is not a universal list of polite behaviors; meaning depends on **shared cultural expectations and learned habits**.
- In cultures valuing authenticity, polite behavior can appear false or hypocritical; a rude person may seem more honest. Yet Davetian insists social convention retains utility even when it does not reflect true feelings — **civility creates a useful distance between private feelings and public behavior**.
- Rights protect against powerful institutions but, when separated from responsibility, can make social relations **more defensive and confrontational**.

The Paradox of Incivility Toward Unjust Orders

- The 1960s are a pivotal moment: protest movements challenged racial hierarchy, gender inequality, and authoritarianism — and in doing so, were **uncivil toward an unjust order in order to build a more civil society**.
- Key paradox: "Sometimes incivility toward an unjust order can help build a more civil society."
- Lydia used Tarantino's *Django Unchained* as an illustration: Candyland is full of formal manners and hospitality — all operating within slavery. When Calvin Candie demands a handshake from Dr. Schultz, the gesture becomes an act of submission rather than mutual respect. Schultz's refusal — though uncivil within the system — **expresses a deeper commitment to equality and human dignity**.
- Conclusion: more self-control does not always mean more moral civilization; a society can be disciplined and formally polite while remaining cruel.

Emotional Repression and the Therapeutic Turn

- Drawing on Elias, Lydia noted that external rules become internal self-control — but Davetian adds a harder question: **can this process also create repression, anxiety, or emotional distance?**

- The Esalen Institute (California, human potential movement) symbolizes a cultural shift from conformity and self-control toward **self-expression and authenticity** as markers of personal growth.
- Key conflict: courtesy asks me to think of the other's comfort; authenticity asks me to be faithful to my own feelings. Lydia distinguished between **emotional regulation** (knowing I am angry and choosing not to express it) and **emotional denial** (being unable to recognize the feeling at all) — civility requires the former, not the latter.
- The philosophy of “be yourself” was ultimately **absorbed by consumer culture** and marketed as a product, transforming individual authenticity into a social expectation and commercial commodity.

Deformalization, Relationships, and the Burden of Negotiation

- As traditional roles (parent, spouse, child) decline, regulation moves from fixed social rules to **individual negotiation**. Giddens's “pure relationship” — justified by the meaning and satisfaction it gives to participants — captures this shift.
- Paradox: more informality does not make relationships easier; instead, individuals must interpret themselves and others, talk about needs, and negotiate boundaries. **The burden of regulation moves from social rules to individuals.**
- Deformalization does not eliminate norms — it creates **new norms**, but these may not stabilize fast enough for social interaction to remain predictable.

Rights, Recognition, and the Risk of Entitlement

- Self-actualization originally meant serious work on oneself; when the language spreads, the focus risks shifting from “what do I owe to others?” to “what do I need to fulfill myself?”
- The risk emerges when **self-recognition is separated from recognition of others** — Lydia identified this as the central problem of contemporary civility.
- Charles Taylor: recognition is not mere politeness — it is connected to identity, dignity, and self-understanding. **Misrecognition** can reduce people to stereotypes and deny their equal status.
- Habermas: liberal democracy cannot assume shared moral views, but can build conditions for **free communication, equal participation, democratic conflict resolution, and limits on power**. Civility becomes a practice of living together while disagreeing.

- The Ninth Amendment (rights not explicitly listed in the Constitution are still retained by the people) reflects the American tradition of **individual liberty as an open, expanding foundation** for questioning social convention and authority.

Lydia's Summary of the Transformation

- Traditional civility: hierarchy, conformity, restraint — provided order and predictability but supported exclusion and repression.
 - Modern democratic civility: equality, recognition, reciprocity, restraint — but with new uncertainty, weaker shared expectations, and risk of fragmentation.
 - The key shift: “I limit myself not because the other person has a higher rank than me, but because the person’s dignity, rights, identity, and well-being matter.”
 - Civility’s foundation changes, not its necessity: **democratic civility does not eliminate restraint; it changes the reason for restraint.**
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Group Discussion Highlights

Global News and Current Events (Opening)

- **Cameroon (Nubong):** A serious wave of gender-based violence — men killing and mutilating wives — has become a major public issue over the past three weeks, prompting the Minister of Territorial Administration to issue a public warning. Nubong connected this to a **lack of civility in the educational system** and the failure to instill the principle that “the other counts, irrespective of differences.”
- **Italy (João):** A parallel phenomenon — **femicide** — has become a major social and political issue, with multiple high-profile cases prompting legislative action. João questioned whether law alone is sufficient without forming a new generation through basic education.
- **China (Xin):** Acknowledged that similar problems may exist but are **filtered or suppressed by social media controls** and restrictions on platforms like YouTube, making the full picture invisible to citizens. 39
- **India (Mohan):** Modi is navigating the impact of Trump’s tariffs by seeking to **reduce dependence on the US** — sending the foreign minister to meet Putin and an envoy to meet Xi Jinping, attempting a strategic pivot while managing his ideological alignment with right-wing governments.
- **Nigeria (Maduabuchi):** Political landscape heated ahead of general elections, with three main presidential candidates along ethnic/regional lines (Tinubu — southwest, Atiku — north, Peter Obi — southeast). The EFCC discovered **bags of**

decaying naira currency hidden by politicians — cited as emblematic of systemic corruption.

- **Sri Lanka (Shiva):** Since 2022, the country has made democratic progress — moving away from 30 years of right-wing and family-based rule toward more inclusive governance, ethnic conflict resolution, and alignment with international law.
- **Ukraine (Oleksandr):** Declined to comment on the CIA visit to Moscow, citing philosophical caution: “Philosophy teaches us to be not so fast in our reasoning — it is necessary to wait.”
- **Indonesia (Dian):** Preparing a conference paper on **neurodivergence and architecture** for Diponegoro University (Semarang); full paper due in September, conference in October. João framed neurodiversity and architecture as a matter of **justice, not just civility**.

On Democracy and Its Fragility

- Mohan raised the fragility of democracy across contexts — including India, the US (post-2020 election controversies), and Britain (monarchy debates) — and questioned whether American democracy after 250 years is solid or fluid.
- Franklin responded philosophically: democracy is a recipe that only works with the right ingredients — **citizen education, republican spirit, and shared values**. Without these, the system is insufficient.
- Franklin expressed genuine puzzlement at Trump’s re-election given his anti-democratic actions on January 6, but respected it as a democratic outcome. He noted Latin American democracies are weak partly due to economic and technological peripheralization.

On Consumerism, Ethics, and American Cultural Power

- Yeping (Hu) synthesized Davetian’s argument around **two unifying ethics**: the ethic of cooperation (corporate work culture, pressure, efficiency) and the ethic of consumerism. These — not democracy — are what actually unify America and explain phenomena like Trump’s election.
- Edward Bernays (Freud’s nephew) was identified as the architect of the **social psychology of consumerism**, a force that has now spread globally.
- Yeping quoted a letter from a student after the Cultural Revolution (attributed in the text to a high school student): “*We have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways but narrower viewpoints, more degrees but less sense, more medicine but less wellness*” — noted as still relevant today, even more so.

- Michał connected the American melting pot to its capacity to integrate ~3 million migrants annually, contrasting this with the **European Union's regulatory stagnation** (2 million pages of new law per year), which he argued removes productive tension from public debate.

On Civility, Identity, and Americanization

- Adrienne reflected on how **childhood media exposure** shaped her understanding of what was “primitive” versus civilized — an early formation she had not fully recognized until Franklin’s presentation triggered the memory. She connected this to how children are formed without traveling, through media and cultural messaging.
- Adrienne challenged the group’s tendency to center America in all discussions, noting that **American culture has already permeated the world** — clothes, music, pop culture — raising the question of whether resistance is even possible or whether “we are already all Americanized.”
- As an African American, Adrienne noted that slavery was not purely a Western ideological construct — **African peoples sold her ancestors to Europeans** — and called for greater sensitivity in how “the West” is framed.
- Nubong argued that the root of modernity’s incivility lies in the **instrumentalization of reason and rejection of transcendent moral grounds**, and proposed that Levinas’s concept of responsibility toward the other offers a path toward civic moral action that can “rise beyond violence, war, and genocide.”

On Stability, Modernity, and Civility’s Foundations

- Mohan asked Lydia for criteria or guidelines for **stability** as used by the author. Lydia responded that stability in Davetian is connected to tradition and shared, predictable social norms — not the absence of change, but norms stable enough to make social interaction possible. The problem of late modernity is that **old norms disappear faster than new ones can become established**.
 - Maduabuchi questioned whether the framework of **late modernity** adequately captures American multicultural society, arguing that America has been trying to transcend modernity rather than simply inhabit it.
 - Lydia’s response: modernity in Western philosophy is closely tied to the **rise of the individual self** — the belief that personal life, feelings, choices, and happiness matter. This individualization process shifts civility’s authority away from tradition and toward personal authenticity, creating the paradox of freedom without responsibility.
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João's Closing Synthesis

- The American experience illustrates that cultural history is **perpetually in motion** — the conformism of the 1950s gave way to the counter-cultural rebellion of the 1960s–70s (civil rights, Vietnam protests), which gave way to identity politics of the 1990s–2000s, which has now produced what João characterized as a **culture of narcissism**: “what counts is how I feel about myself.”
 - The emergence of Trump is not an anomaly but a **historical manifestation of something already in the culture** — a politics of “me, me, me” that mirrors the narcissistic turn in broader culture.
 - Warning: if the conformism people nostalgically seek is conformism to a **narcissistic and ill culture**, the problem is compounded, not solved.
 - Call to action: philosophical reflection on what is truly at stake — civility, solidarity, and the nature of the self — is more urgent than ever, and must be applied locally by each participant in their own cultural context.
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Action Items & Next Steps

- **All participants:** Read assigned pages of Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* before Friday's session.
 - **Each assigned presenter:** Prepare a **5-minute (maximum 7-minute)** presentation on their assigned pages — focus on what is essential and relevant, include a personal comment or question.
 - **Each assigned responder:** Read the second set of pages assigned to them and prepare a **1–2 minute feedback** to the corresponding presenter.
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Open Questions

- Is law alone sufficient to address femicide and gender-based violence, or must it be accompanied by fundamental reforms in basic education and interpersonal formation?
- What specific criteria define **stability** in Davetian's framework, and how can new norms become established fast enough to prevent the incivility that accompanies rapid social change?
- Does the theoretical framework of **late modernity** adequately capture American multiculturalism, or does America represent something beyond or outside that framework?

- Is there a **Latin American literary tradition** that engages with the Odyssey myth, comparable to Joyce's *Ulysses* or Tennyson's *Ulysses* in the Western canon?
- What is the full significance of the **Ninth Amendment** in the context of Davetian's argument about expanding individual rights as a basis for challenging social convention?
- If narcissism is the dominant pathology of contemporary Western culture, what constitutes the **social therapy** — and how does each participant's local context shape both the diagnosis and the cure?

Washington, DC 26/08/2026

APPENDIX: AI Generated Summaries

Chapter 7: The American Experience — Democracy and Informal Civility (pages 211–268) traces the divergence of American civility from its European antecedents. Drawing in part on Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Davetian argues that American democratic culture — with its anti-hierarchical egalitarianism, distrust of formal deference, and emphasis on informality and directness — produced a distinctive civility style: more egalitarian in aspiration, more resistant to the formalism of European court culture, but also more susceptible to the loss of deep interpersonal consideration in favour of surface friendliness.

Chapter 8: Conformity, Opposition, and Identity (pages 269–342) shifts from historical narrative to analysis of late modernity, with particular focus on the United States. This chapter examines the cultural upheavals of the twentieth century — conformism in the 1950s, the counter-cultural rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of identity politics, and the emergence of what Davetian, drawing on social-psychological research, identifies as a culture of narcissism. The paradox he explores is that increased emphasis on personal rights and self-expression — historically linked to the democratisation of manners — can, when taken to an extreme, undermine the very foundations of civil consideration for others. The rise of individualism as a cultural norm creates conditions in which the claims of the self override the duties owed to the social fabric.