

# RVP International Seminar 2026

## *Self, Solidarity, and Civility\**

### Meeting Information

- **Date:** August 28, 2026
- **Session:** Sixth session of the seminar
- **Duration:** 3,5 hours.
- **Facilitator/Host:** João (Professor)
- **Attendees:** João, Lidia, Oleksandr, Michał, Franklin, Maduabuchi (Dukor), Shiva, Nubong, Mohan, Ravi Vincent, Xin, Adrienne, Yeping, Dian, En.

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### Key Outcomes

The session opened with personal check-ins and geopolitical updates — covering femicides in Cameroon, the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, and broader questions of international law — before transitioning into a structured series of student presentations on Robert Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart*. The seminar produced rich debate on the tension between individualism and community in American democratic life, the role of religion and civic participation, and the philosophical stakes of civility. The facilitator explicitly condemned Russian propaganda narratives about Nazism in Ukraine as among the most dangerous political lies of the 21st century, and framed Ukraine's resistance as a front-line defense of international law and freedom. Next session will shift to Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, with three volunteer presenters confirmed.

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### Geopolitical Updates and Opening Discussion

#### Ukraine

- Oleksandr reported that Russia continues daily ballistic missile attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure — shopping centers, logistics centers, warehouses — because Russian forces have **failed to achieve significant**

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\* Document elaborated with the Assistance of AI under the Supervision of Prof. João J. Vila-Chã. Before being distributed, the document was submitted to the revision/approval of the Participants in the Seminar.

**battlefield gains** after more than four years of attempting to capture the Donetsk region.

- Russia deliberately targets non-military objects to inflict suffering on the civilian population, hoping Ukrainians will surrender; Ukrainians are “holding on and striking back hard.”
- Kyiv and Odessa were specifically hit; Odessa is geographically closer to Crimea and thus easier for Russian forces to target, while Kyiv is proximate to Russian cities such as Belgorod and Rostov.
- Oleksandr raised the **failure of international law**: despite Ukraine being recognized as the defended party and Russia as the aggressor by all major international organizations, meaningful military support — particularly troops on the front line — has not materialized.
- The **1994 Budapest Memorandum** was cited: the USA, Great Britain, France, and Russia all took obligations to help Ukraine in the event of military aggression, but none fulfilled those duties in active ways.
- Countries singled out for meaningful support: the European Union, Great Britain, Poland, and Japan; friends were also found in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, though global support has weakened since the first year of the conflict.
- Under the Trump administration, the US has refused even to **sell** (not merely gift) missiles to Ukraine, leaving Ukraine without adequate means to intercept Russian ballistic missiles — a vulnerability Russia is actively exploiting.

### **Nazism Accusation — Rebuttal**

- Maduabuchi raised the recurring Russian accusation of Nazism against the Ukrainian government and asked for clarification.
- Oleksandr responded that the accusation is **Russian propaganda**: Ukraine’s president is ethnically Jewish; the government includes people of Russian, Jewish, and other ethnicities; there are no ethnic conflicts within Ukrainian military troops.
- João characterized this propaganda narrative as “**the most unspeakable lie of the 21st century**” — dangerous precisely because millions of people and governments worldwide have been made to believe it, including segments of African youth.
- The facilitator noted that African youth in particular are targeted, with some reportedly paid to promote these positions.

## The Bandera Question — Polish-Ukrainian Historical Complexity

- Maduabuchi's question prompted a nuanced exchange between Oleksandr and Lidia on Stepan Bandera, described as **"a deeply controversial figure"** in Polish-Ukrainian relations.
- Oleksandr acknowledged Bandera fought not only against German forces but also against Russian and Polish influence; contemporary Ukrainian supporters interpret him primarily as someone who resisted Russian domination, not as an anti-ethnic figure.
- Lidia (Poland) stated clearly: **"Supporting Ukraine does not mean supporting Bandera or Bandera's ideology."** Her support is grounded in Ukraine's sovereignty and right to self-defense, not in any nationalist symbolism.
- Lidia acknowledged historical crimes exist on both sides and should be addressed through **honest historical dialogue**, not weaponized to undermine the current solidarity against Russian aggression.
- She emphasized that Poles understand from their own history what it means to lose sovereignty to a more powerful neighbor, making Polish-Ukrainian solidarity a matter of shared experience and mutual future.

## Michał's Strategic Warning — Baltic States and Putin's Imperial Agenda

- Michał argued the conflict is not merely a local dispute: Putin's goal is the **restoration of the Soviet empire**, including Eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland.
- Putin explicitly offered Poland the western half of Ukraine at the war's outset — evidence of his imperial ambitions.
- The **Kaliningrad corridor** (connecting Kaliningrad to Russia through Baltic states) was identified as the next likely flashpoint; a recent CIA chief visit to Riga, Latvia was cited as a signal that Latvia and Estonia are next on Putin's list.
- Estonia's military is smaller than the New York Police Department (~6,500 troops), making Baltic states easy targets for conflict expansion.
- Poland received **60,000–80,000 Ukrainian refugees per day** at peak, reaching over 1.5 million, absorbed primarily by Polish families rather than government camps — described as an act of solidarity rooted in shared historical memory.
- The Wołyń massacre (approximately 150,000 Polish victims) is part of an active **reconciliation process** (exhumations, funerals, identification of graves) that must not be overridden by the urgency of the current war.

## Broader Reflections on Civility, War, and International Law

- Franklin raised the Palestinian situation, the Iran conflict, and the Trump administration's intervention in Venezuela as additional cases where **international law and civilized order** are being violated, questioning whether humanity is truly advancing in terms of civilization.
- Shiva connected the Ukraine and Palestine situations to a broader pattern of dominant superpowers misusing power against civilian populations, calling it a “contradictory situation” for supposedly intellectually developed societies.
- João drew a direct line between the discussion of civility and the question of whether freedom without force is meaningful: “**Right without power — what is it?**” if evil-doers act unconstrained.
- João warned that Putin, like Hitler, is a “mad d\*g” capable of the worst, and that the CIA visit to Moscow should at minimum have conveyed that the free world will fight back.
- The facilitator called on the **entire world** — India, China, Africa, Latin America — to stop playing an “opportunistic game” of economic benefit and instead unite against tyranny and open imperialism.

## Presentations on *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al.)

### Presentation 1 — Chapters 1–26 (Maduabuchi)

- *Habits of the Heart* is framed as a continuation of inquiry into **American civility and happiness**, examining social relationships, traditions, civil commitment, and individual freedom through the classical question: *How should one live?*
- Four representative individuals anchor the analysis: **Brian Palmer** (strong individualism; create yourself), **John Gorman** (rejects pure individualism; emphasizes community and civic-mindedness), **Margaret Oldman** (therapist; self-reliance as metaphor for individualism), and **Wayne Abraham** (breaks with inherited family connections in favor of personal choice).
- The **central paradox**: American culture simultaneously desires independence and community — these are *contraries*, not contradictions; all can be true simultaneously and none can all be false at once.
- American political culture aligns with **liberalism** (individual rights, freedom, equality before law) and **neoliberalism** (market competition, entrepreneurship, consumer choice, individual responsibility), creating tension between freedom and justice.

- The tension necessitated the writings of **John Rawls** and **Robert Nozick**, as well as the concept of **moral and social ecology** — individuals are formed through families, friendships, and schools, not in isolation.
- Tocqueville's insight: democracy depends on both constitutional institutions *and* habits of association, cooperation, trust, participation, and responsibility.

## Presentation 2 — Chapter 2: Biblical, Republican, and Modern Individualism (Lidia)

- Bellah identifies a **centuries-long conversation** about freedom, success, justice, and shared destiny, structured around four traditions: biblical, republican, utilitarian individualism, and expressive individualism.
- **John Winthrop** (biblical tradition): freedom as the capacity to do what is good and just; success measured by community equality, not private wealth.
- **Thomas Jefferson** (republicanism): political equality and civic participation — but contains the internal contradiction of universal equality coexisting with slavery.
- **Benjamin Franklin** (utilitarian individualism): success from hard work, discipline, and rational calculation — moral life shifts toward the individual through achievement.
- **Walt Whitman** (expressive individualism): authenticity, richness of experience, freedom to express the self — moral center shifts to self-realization.
- **Tocqueville's warning**: democracy is sustained by *customs* — habits of the heart. Individualism can confine people to private worlds; civic associations and local self-government provide the antidote by teaching that freedom requires responsibility to others.
- **Industrialization** weakened civic foundations: local communities were absorbed into national markets, the independent citizen replaced first by the entrepreneur, then by the **manager** (efficiency/profitability logic), and the **therapist** (applying similar logic to inner life).
- Central paradox of modern America: people are more economically interdependent than ever, yet find it increasingly difficult to see their actions as morally connected to others' lives.
- Conclusion: individual freedom becomes fragile when it loses its moral and institutional connection to others; self-realization is valuable but insufficient to sustain democracy.

## Presentation 3 — Chapter 3: Finding Oneself (Franklin)

- **Self-reliance** is the key notion — not merely autonomy or responsibility, but the imperative that *you must be the one you want to be*, with the ultimate justification coming from the individual.
- Finding oneself involves two primary detachments: from **family authority** (often expressed physically as leaving home) and from **religious/church authority** (not necessarily becoming atheist, but making faith a personal choice rather than inherited tradition).
- Most interviewees retain religiosity but reframe it as *their choice*, transforming church from tradition into self-definition.
- Self-discovery occurs primarily through **work** (job = means for money; career = competitive identity; calling = profession as service to community — but calls have largely become jobs) and **lifestyle enclaves** (voluntary cultural associations where shared passions create collective identity).
- **Paradox of private values:** if all values are self-constructed through detachment from prior communities, are those values truly valuable or merely personal ideology? The personal election becomes both strong and fragile simultaneously.

#### Presentation 4 — Chapter 6: Love and Marriage (Oleksandr)

- The chapter presents a **10-step argument:** family as institution restraining individualism → 19th-century separate spheres (male public/female domestic) → marriage as individual choice → love as self-fulfillment → risk of losing the self in intimacy → the central dilemma of combining spontaneous freedom with lasting obligation.
- Two contrasting models: **evangelical model** (duty, sacrifice, will, enduring commitment over changing feelings) vs. **therapeutic model** (autonomy, self-knowledge, personal needs, self-development).
- Communication and “working on the relationship” are presented as attempts to reconcile autonomy with commitment.
- Oleksandr’s critique: the contrast between evangelical and therapeutic models may be **too sharp** — freely chosen commitments can themselves be part of autonomous self-fulfillment.
- Main thesis: modern individualism makes love freer and more egalitarian, but by grounding relationships in individual choice and self-fulfillment, it makes it increasingly difficult to explain **why commitments should endure** when feelings and personal needs change.

#### Presentation 5 — Chapter 6 (Individualism): Four Types (Shiva)

- Bellah identifies **four types of individualism**: biblical/religious, civic/republican, utilitarian, and expressive — each with different characteristics and roles in American identity.
- **Biblical and republican** traditions maintain the balance between individual freedom and social commitment; they guide individuals through moral encouragement and community responsibility.
- **Utilitarian and expressive** individualism are more disconnected from social commitment — focused on self-interest, desires, psychological needs, and self-fulfillment.
- Locke's ontological individualism is identified as the philosophical foundation for the shift from morally responsible individual to independent self-interested person.
- **Mythical individualism** takes two forms: the **cowboy hero** (morally good but cannot belong to society; must remain outside to preserve integrity) and **Captain Ahab** (heroic but destructive self-assertion).
- Tocqueville's critique: individualism gradually destroys cultural and communal foundations; Bellah argues modern individualism challenges democratic public life and meaningful community relationships.

#### **Presentation 6 — Chapter 7: Getting Involved / Public Life (Nubong)**

- The chapter's central question: what does it mean to **"get involved"** in American civic life? The characteristically American answer is voluntary, self-chosen participation — not automatic obligation.
- Tocqueville's observation of **New England Town Halls**: individual self-interest that initially motivates civic involvement is transformed through the experience of local self-governance into a sense of public responsibility and transcendent self-interest.
- Modern Americans do participate civically, but frame their involvement in the **language of individualism** — personal satisfaction, self-development, enlightened self-interest — rather than collective obligation or shared duty.
- Bellah introduces the concept of **"concerned citizens"**: individuals who actively work to change communities through personal action, representing a hopeful counter to prevailing individualism, but still lacking a robust public language to articulate why civic participation matters beyond individual fulfillment.
- **Decline of mediating institutions** — local organizations, clubs, voluntary associations — has left Americans increasingly isolated even as they long for community and connection.

- Genuine civic engagement persists but is increasingly the exception rather than the rule, and often fails to generate the sustained public commitment necessary for healthy democracy.
- Two meanings of “getting involved”: (1) genuine concern for local community as an extension of family; (2) protection of self-interest — both coexist in American civic consciousness.

### Presentation 7 — Citizenship and the Market (Mohan)

- Case study of a **bank manager in South Carolina** who found “real joy” through YMCA fundraising — Bellah’s point: joy comes from successful handling of community need; success, service, and community are organically linked.
- Yet the two elements of the good life — individual career advancement and communitarian work — exist in **constant tension**: the manager faced a choice between community involvement and professional promotion requirements.
- Second case: an **eco-activist** whose activism created space for individual growth, contrasted with the bank manager who gave himself to community at some cost to individual progress.
- **Adam Smith’s invisible hand** is invoked: the baker bakes without knowing who will buy; market forces mediate between producers and consumers; whether that hand is profit or God is left open.
- American capitalism decides who wins and who loses — in politics as in business — through **cutthroat competition** that creates a class of those sidelined from the open competition.
- Happiness is increasingly linked to earning capacity, whether in the boardroom or in marriage.

### Presentation 8 — Religion in American History (Ravi Vincent)

- Bellah’s project is a **sociological interpretation of American religious and moral life**, tracing the transformation of religion from a publicly authoritative institution into an increasingly individualized and privatized source of meaning.
- Colonial New England (Congregational Church) exemplifies the **fusion of religion and civic identity**: the settled minister was simultaneously religious teacher, moral authority, and guardian of communal values extending beyond the pulpit into community life. 6364
- **Sheila Larson (“Sheilaism”)**: the most important sociological example in the book — symbolizes the transformation of American religion into an individualized,



therapeutic form where personal spiritual practice replaces communal religious identity.

- Anne Hutchinson (banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1637) represents early challenges to Puritan religious authority.
- **Ann Douglas** and the feminization of American religion: the shift from divine command to Christ's love, paralleling the modern shift toward hyper-grace and prosperity theology.
- **George Washington vs. Tocqueville**: Washington represents traditional religion connected to social hierarchy and institutional continuity; Tocqueville recognized that hierarchical religious order could not be simply restored in a democratic society.
- **Martin Luther King Jr.** as exemplar of a “**second language**” — public religious language combining biblical imagery with American democratic ideals, transforming the nation into a moral community rather than a collection of autonomous individuals.
- **Art Townsend's congregation** (liberal model allowing Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism to coexist) is critiqued by Bellah for lacking a sufficiently stable theological and moral foundation.

### Presentation 9 — Chapter 10: The National Society (Xin)

- Americans feel strong emotional attachment to the nation as abstract community but **deep suspicion toward government and politics** — a genuine ambivalence about public life that the chapter traces historically.
- The founding generation shared one conviction despite internal disagreements: a republic cannot survive on procedure, checks, and balances alone — it requires **virtue and genuine concern for the common good**.
- Six competing visions of the public good, in three successive pairs tied to economic crises:
  - *Establishment* (expert management from above) vs. *Populism* (inclusion and dignity; no citizen excluded)
  - *Welfare Liberalism* (active government management, redistribution) vs. *Neo-Capitalism* (free market; state intervention distorts incentives)
  - *Administrative Society* (centralized expert coordination, even outside democratic channels) vs. *Economic Democracy* (democratic participation extended into the economy itself)

- All six visions assume that an expert, institution, or market mechanism can replace the face-to-face civic life once enjoyed by independent citizens — yet each fails to fully deliver.
- The chapter ends with an open question: **can Americans become citizens again** and together seek the common good in a post-industrial age?
- Xin's personal reflection: connects the chapter's findings to **virtue ethics** — institutional design alone cannot create virtue; it can only offer or fail to offer the conditions where virtue can develop.

## **Presentation 10 — Transforming American Culture / Synthesis (Adrienne + Maduabuchi)**

- Adrienne acknowledged she read the wrong chapter but offered substantive philosophical reflections, questioning Bellah's narrow focus on **white American males** and four representative individuals as insufficient to represent America's full diversity — built also on the backs of enslaved people, Indigenous genocide, and Asian labor.
- She raised the absence of the **Gilded Age industrialists** (J.P. Morgan, Carnegie, DuPont, Ford) who actually transformed capitalism and modernity.
- Philosophical challenge: Bellah's empirical-sociological approach risks the Hegelian trap — “while it seems most full, it's the emptiest” — missing the deeper more-ness of human being. 76
- Maduabuchi synthesized Bellah's prescriptive vision: the solution lies in **rebuilding social connection** through recognition of cultural and individual differences, meaningful democratic participation, institutions encouraging trust and cooperation, economic and social justice, respect for tradition without imprisonment by it, and a renewed understanding of the common good.
- Three key limitations identified: **consumerism** (replaces relationship, citizenship, spirituality), **self-centeredness** (freedom as absence of obligation to others), and the **poverty of affluence** (extreme wealth that prevents genuine social interaction).
- Core conclusion: America's problem is not individualism itself, but **individualism without sufficient moral, social, and civic connections** — the book is essentially Aristotelian in asking what kind of people and social relationships are necessary for human flourishing.
- Maduabuchi proposed a bifurcation of American modernity into **individualistic modernity** and **multicultural modernity**, tracing a trajectory from Norbert Elias to David to Bellah.

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## General Discussion Highlights

- **Dian** raised the question of **neurodivergent individuals**: Bellah argues the individual needs community, but what if the community itself is the source of exclusion? Should the individual adapt to the community, or the community adapt to different kinds of individuals?
- **Nubong** observed that Americans possess a “poverty of moral language” when articulating why they participate in communities — reflecting **ontological individualism** (belief that the individual has primary reality and society is second-order derived), a condition now spreading globally.
- **Mohan** argued that America must **recapture biblical ethical values** — not church attendance, but the ethical content: compassion, mercy, neighborliness — which individualism has caused Americans to forget.
- **Adrienne** clarified that early Americans were not irreligious but wanted **freedom of religious choice** — the very reason they left Europe was to escape required church attendance and state-imposed religious conformity; America’s spirituality is diverse, not absent.
- **Michał** connected the discussion to Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*: “**Your worst sin is that you destroyed and betrayed yourself for nothing**” — a society where there is nothing to choose offers no freedom; as long as good and evil are recognizable, there is hope for civility.
- **Yeping** identified two languages in Bellah: the **first language** (self-interest, personal preference, self-rewarding) which dominates modern America, and the **second language** (traditional community sharing, now forgotten) — and noted that religious life has shifted from a public/civic matter to a private one, and that religious communities now function like political associations bringing only like-minded people together.
- João’s synthesis: the book is fundamentally a **diagnosis of American paradoxes of individualism** and an analysis of ongoing efforts to rebuild a sense of the common good. The philosophical message: **the self is always collectively constructed**; no man is a self-made man alone.
- João proposed a symbolic image: New York has the Statue of Liberty; **San Francisco should have a Statue of Responsibility** — and only when liberty and responsibility speak to one another does the American project approach its intended realization.

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## Division of Work for SESSION VII of the Seminar:

### READING MATERIAL:

Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Bürger, with Lawrence Frederick, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989).

### Presentation 1 (SHIVA): The Problem and Historical Genesis of the Public Sphere

**Reading:** Thomas McCarthy, “Introduction,” pp. xi–xiv; Author’s Preface, pp. xvii–xix; Part I, §§1–3, pp. 1–26

**Central question:** What does Habermas mean by the “bourgeois public sphere,” and from what earlier forms of publicness did it emerge?

### Core topics

- The public sphere as a historically specific category rather than a universal institution
- The distinction between public authority, private life, and civil society
- “Representative publicness” in feudal and courtly society
- The transition from representation before the people to public reasoning by private persons
- Early capitalism, long-distance trade, news, and state administration
- Habermas’s historical-sociological method and the normative dimension of his inquiry

### Suggested slide sequence

1. The book, its historical setting, and its guiding problem
2. Habermas’s basic vocabulary: public, private, publicity, public opinion
3. Representative publicness
4. Economic and political conditions of transformation
5. The emergence of bourgeois society
6. A diagram of the initial public/private distinction
7. The book’s central thesis and questions for discussion

### Presentation 2 (NUBONG): The Institutional Blueprint of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

**Reading:** Part II, §§4–5, pp. 27–42

**Central question:** Which institutions enabled private persons to become a critically reasoning public?

**Core topics**

- The basic social topology of state, court, civil society, family, and public sphere
- The relationship between the public sphere in the world of letters and the political public sphere
- Coffee houses in Britain, salons in France, and table societies in Germany
- Periodicals, newspapers, correspondence, and new reading practices
- Status-bracketing and the ideal of unrestricted rational-critical debate
- The tension between the public sphere's universal claims and its restricted social membership

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**Suggested slide sequence**

1. From historical genesis to institutional form
2. Habermas's "basic blueprint"
3. Coffee houses, salons, and table societies
4. Print culture and the circulation of judgment
5. Norms of rational-critical debate
6. Inclusion, exclusion, and the bourgeois social basis
7. Institutional conditions for a functioning public sphere

**Presentation 3 (ZHAO): Family, Intimacy, Literature, and Political Subjectivity**

**Reading:** Part II, §§6–7, pp. 43–56

**Central question:** How did experiences formed in the intimate and literary spheres prepare bourgeois individuals for political publicity?

**Core topics**

- The patriarchal conjugal family as an institutional setting
- The ideal of intimate humanity and the contradictions of property and authority
- The home, the letter, the diary, and the novel
- The formation of interiority, autonomy, and audience-oriented subjectivity

- Literary discussion as preparation for political criticism
- The passage from cultural judgment to the scrutiny of public authority

**Suggested slide sequence**

1. The intimate sphere within bourgeois private life
2. Family structure: ideal and material reality
3. Literary forms and the discovery of interiority
4. “Privateness oriented to an audience”
5. The literary public sphere
6. From literary criticism to political criticism
7. Critical questions about gender, property, and exclusion