

Incivility and Vulnerability

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Abstract: In this commentary, I explore the focus in *Recovering Civility* on instability as a threat to civil behaviour. Governments and policymakers concerned with the lack of civility in times of crisis must, it is argued, examine the myriad vulnerabilities such crises expose in already disadvantaged groups. Building trust and mutual respect among citizens will thus require first that every citizen is protected from destabilizing social upheaval by those in charge of existing social arrangements.

Keywords: Civility, Respect, Vulnerability, Crisis, Instability.

There comes a time within every generation, often facilitated by political or economic crisis, when commentators, politicians, and citizens alike raise alarm bells about a perceived upsurge in uncivil behaviour. This loss of civility takes many familiar forms: from an increase in rudeness and lack of awareness for physical boundaries, to a complete disregard for the interests or equal rights of those around us. Contrary to many popular diagnoses of incivility, however, a reduction in civic respect cannot be understood as a failure of individual morality alone. Instead, and as Matteo Bonotti and Steven T. Zech so persuasively show in *Recovering Civility during COVID-19*¹, a rise in uncivil behaviour is often a symptom of a society under intense stress, and not a sign that deviance has suddenly become commonly accepted. Laying the blame for incivility at the foot of individual citizens is thus at the same time both ethically insensitive and politically short-sighted.

Bonotti and Zech's extremely timely and valuable book aims, quite simply, to reveal the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on civility. In so doing, however, the authors also bring the extensive consequences of unstable social relations sharply into focus. Chapter 1 sets the scene, offering a concise, yet comprehensive, summary of the wide-ranging effects of the pandemic in the spheres of health, political stability, the economy, and social cohesiveness, among others. This first, largely empirical, chapter illustrates the ways in which the pandemic has impacted almost every area of our lives. Crucially, special attention is given to the vast discrepancies in levels of vulnerability suffered by individuals already disadvantaged along the lines of wealth, race, job security, gender, and disabled status². In Chapter 2, the authors conduct the difficult task of outlining the conceptual distinctions between different categories of civility³. The first, civility as 'politeness'⁴, explores those norms of civility that function to facilitate cooperation between citizens via expressions of respect. The second sort of civility can be understood

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as a form of ‘public-mindedness’, which includes both public reason constraints and the need to discourage hateful speech and dignity-undermining behaviour.

Chapter 3 examines the effects of a rapid shift in prescribed civility norms. Outside of times of crisis, the rules of civil interaction tend to emerge slowly and without that much notice. When new rules are produced in fast succession, and especially when designed in response to a threat, human feelings of fear, distrust, and resentment become rife⁵. The conflicting political and scientific responses to the spread of the virus, so this chapter shows, contributed to a particularly strained civic sphere in many societies. In recent history, perhaps the only rule-shifts that evoked such a comparable response were the increased security measures swiftly introduced to aviation in the wake of 9/11. In a similar fashion, and on a parallel global scale, individuals found that they could no longer move among others with the same ease as before. In many cases, the usual free passes enjoyed by those privileged according to wealth and status could not entirely insulate such individuals from the force of these new norms. In 2020, as in 2001, then, the reality of the shared vulnerability of humanity became almost impossible to avoid.

Chapter 4 explores four further categories of negative consequences of the pandemic, all falling under the heading of civility as public-mindedness. Included here are increased levels of hate speech, the advancement of partial and sectarian interests by political actors, unreasonable burdens or ‘strains of commitment’ imposed upon disadvantaged members of society, and the problems associated with the politicization of scientific research. This chapter offers a sophisticated overview of the very real threat that a lack of civility poses to the political and social stability of a society, neatly articulating how bad faith actors hijack legitimate public fears in order to pursue their own political gains. As the chapter also shows, even those politicians and policymakers who had the best interests of the citizenry at heart were also forced to grapple with some extremely difficult decisions, such as those that involved trade-offs between economic security and public health, or between public health and individual freedoms. The familiar patterns of uncertainty, distrust, and fear once again flow through this fourth and final substantive chapter.

The important contribution that *Recovering Civility* makes to the literature extends far beyond its analysis of the events of 2020/1. For, despite its rapid production in the early-stages of the pandemic, this work holds several key lessons that pave the way for long-term research on humanity’s response to global catastrophe. It is in this vein that I offer several friendly critical points that I believe deserve further future consideration. These comments are by no means admonishing, and instead outline the great deal of scope the book offers to understanding how humans behave in times of crisis, as well as on how states, their institutions, and individual citizens might best prepare for the next inevitable global health challenge.

My first point may be obvious when made in the context of non-Covid times, but it nonetheless deserves further unpacking. That is, that the book revealed a roughly positive correlation between norm instability and uncivil behaviour⁶. Perhaps most interestingly, while this instability is indeed a feature of all countries affected by Covid, the easy accessibility of the global news cycle means that the vast divergence in the success-rate of state responses can be observed in real-time. It is safe to say, then, that certain countries have fared better than others when it comes to securing norm stability

and compliance in response to the virus. In general, and as the authors point out, where Covid-related rules, laws, and norms are unstable, rapidly-changing, and unpredictable, defiant non-compliance and interpersonal and political distrust closely follow. Here,

[s]ince many politeness norms have become contested or are in transition, people may sometimes inadvertently come across as impolite, rude, and disrespectful: their politeness may backfire. However, this unintentional impoliteness may result not only from the use of the ‘wrong’ politeness signals but also from the decision not to use *any* politeness signals, given the uncertainty surrounding politeness norms and practices⁷.

This connection between social instability and incivility has been studied extensively in the social science literature on norm compliance⁸. While the extent to which these patterns have been a feature of the pandemic specifically will of course be up to those working in empirical research on the area, there are several useful reflections which can be made from a theoretical standpoint. For one, the idea that incivility follows from political and social instability reinforces the view that incivility is not simply a problem of individual moral failure. Instead, those concerned with reducing the ill-effects of incivility must look to the structural factors, including background culture and broad political commitments of that society, that lead to its emergence in the first place. This is not to say that individual citizens lack responsibility to maintain respectful relations with others, but that those concerned with reducing uncivil behaviour in times of crisis need to do more to address the impact that rapid social changes have on the level of trust citizens have of the government, scientific experts, and of one another.

My second point of critical reflection is in relation to the public expression of politeness, defined by the authors as “complying with norms of behaviour that aim to facilitate peaceful exchange and positive social interaction”⁹. Pinning down a reliable definition of this form of civility is famously difficult, as the authors explicitly acknowledge. In practice, predicting how one’s behaviour will be perceived by others is also notoriously tricky. Given the heightened levels of distrust and uncertainty that accompanied the pandemic and its associated rules, one’s ability to navigate civil interaction came under pressure. All of the well-worn, traditional ways of expressing respect for one’s fellow citizens had to either be adapted or replaced completely, to the extent that even the most astute adherents to norms of etiquette struggled to keep up¹⁰.

The discussion about these tensions in *Recovering Civility* is clear and well-argued, and neatly captures the experience of confusion surrounding these shifts in permitted social interaction. Perhaps underexplored in this section, however, is the force of the tension between pre-pandemic norms of civility and those that were introduced in response to the virus. For example, one of the most common points of conflict, at least in many highly-individualistic societies, comes from the clash between the norm to ‘mind one’s own business’ and the public health-related norms relating to things like mask-wearing and vaccine passports. In such societies, enforcement of these measures is broadly perceived by many as a threat to one’s privacy (or in some cases, autonomy), and so confronting non-wearers of masks undermines basic norms of civic respect. At the same time, however, the non-confrontation and enforcement of Covid-related norms of civility can also express a lack of respect towards those around us. This confusion

poses a clear normative problem for the virtuous citizen, in that respecting others often requires acting in a way that may be perceived as ‘rude’. Pragmatically, the downstream effects of one’s ‘rude’ yet respectful intervention may also backfire in the long-term by inducing a kind of reactance effect in its targets, thereby perpetuating non-compliant behaviour. While a full exploration of these tensions was beyond the scope of the book, they nonetheless suggest interesting points of departure for future research. The authors could perhaps expand this area of (interdisciplinary) research by further examining, using both normative political theory and social science methods more broadly, the structural conditions under which individual citizens best develop this ability to weigh and adjudicate the competing pressures posed by conflicting norms of civility.

Philosophers have for a long time stressed the dangers of a socially fragmented civic sphere. Quite apart from the feelings of loneliness and suspicion that a hyper-individualistic culture encourages, Aristotle famously points to the eventual *political* failures that a lack of civic ‘friendship’ gives rise to¹¹. *Recovering Civility*, as a work that examines the effects of a breakdown in civility in real-time, builds on this idea that a baseline of civic relations are a fundamental component of a free and equal society. Without a degree of shared civic-mindedness, our essentially human vulnerabilities will be exposed to threat, both from the outside and the inside. In other words, where a thread of common respect among a citizenry is lacking, individuals will not be equipped to deal with those inevitable challenges that no human society has thus far been able to completely escape, whether they arrive in the form of natural disaster, economic collapse, war, or contagious disease.

Notes

- ¹ Bonotti and Zech, 2021.
- ² Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 2.
- ³ Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 38.
- ⁴ Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 39.
- ⁵ Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 66.
- ⁶ Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 66.
- ⁷ Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 76.
- ⁸ See, for example, Brennan *et al.*, 2013.
- ⁹ Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 65.
- ¹⁰ Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p. 74.
- ¹¹ Aristotle, 2004, 1155a22-28.

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