Twitter Thread by Ruth Braunstein



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Ever wonder why we get stuck in endless debates about whether political protesters are being “civil” or not, and whether this should even matter in the first place? 1/

This is a question I ask in my latest article in Theory & Society, “Boundary-work and the demarcation of civil from uncivil protest in the United States: control, legitimacy, and political inequality” (https://t.co/EFMY6Q5hLd) 2/

In the article, I develop the concept of *civility contests*—everyday efforts to distinguish between civil and uncivil individuals, groups, or behaviors. 3/

Focusing on political protest in the US, I find that civility contests involve a wide range of political actors (power holders, opposing movements, the media) who seek to *control* or *delegitimize* protesters (or defend protesters’ *legitimacy*). 4/

When powerholders or political rivals question protesters’ civility, this is a way of changing the subject. Civility contests suck the air and energy out of protests, leaving less room for substantive debate. They also justify sometimes severe punitive action. 5/

Many protesters present themselves as nonthreatening in order to avoid being pulled into civility contests. Others provoke civility contests intentionally, in order to shock audiences and press for an expanded definition of appropriate political behavior. 6/

The tricky thing is that it is hard for any protesters to avoid being accused of incivility by someone. Most forms of protest could be viewed as “uncivil” if using the narrowest definitions of “civility,” insofar as they are designed to be disruptive. 7/

And most grassroots political actors (on the Right & Left) feel they need to be at least somewhat disruptive in order to get people’s attention, especially if they feel they lack other forms of power or have been ignored otherwise. 8/

But everyone’s “incivility” is not treated the same by society — groups with more social status/$$$/political power are less likely to experience negative fallout from uncivil behavior; the most marginalized groups in society will be most harmed by accusations of incivility. 9/

The concept of the “civility contest” allows us to better understand how public debates about the civility of protest can reinforce existing political inequalities, even as they may also enable some protesters to challenge existing boundaries of acceptable political behavior. 10/

Check out the full article here! https://t.co/EFMY6Q5hLd (Let me know if you need a PDF!) 11/11