Since its inception, modern civil society has had to negotiate a fundamental tension between the homogenizing force of the democratic nation and the reality of pluralism, whether viewed as an end in itself or as the inevitable effect of individual freedom. Against the background of democracy’s ambivalence, our research revolves around the question of how a sense of self and bonds of belonging are formed, when and why they are torn, and how concepts of civility and manners, of trust and civic virtue foster or threaten the “unsocial sociability” of citizens. From their earliest formulations, democratic citizenship rites and concepts of civility have reflected this ambiguity. On the one hand, they demand some renunciation or sacrifice of prior allegiances to family or region, religion or estates; on the other hand, the idea of civil rights allows for and encourages expressions of “democratic individuality” that give rise to an intricate structure of difference within which cultural tensions can be negotiated. Indeed, the challenge for any democratic polity lies in the ability of its citizens to construct a public space that both (re)produces some shared sense of belonging and recognizes a right to be different. Our research thus engages and contributes to recent controversies about the relationship between the universal and the particular. We aim to call attention to the mutual constitutiveness of the universal and the particular, of "inherited traditions" and "universal human principles." Such reflections on the entangled nature of these concepts may help us to put into question essentialist and binary definitions of the particular and the universal. With this in mind, scholars in the humanities might be well advised to resist the temptation to unambiguously classify specific ideas and practices as either particular or universal. Instead it might prove more fruitful to uncover traces of the particular in languages of the universal and vestiges of the universal in ideas of the particular.

Drawing on philosophy, history, sociology, law, literature, anthropology, and political science, the interdisciplinary research projects within the “Diversity and Civility” program examine past and present processes of constructing identities within diversity in Germany and Europe. Historically, Germany, since the wars of religion until the end of the Cold War, has confronted ethnic, political, and ideological differences in ways that have served to demonstrate the ambivalent and potentially murderous dynamics of modernity. Today, at the heart of Europe and its project to create a common, democratic space across its numerous divides, Germany continues to participate in the cultural and political struggles over the meaning of civility. Although these questions are particularly pertinent to German and European modernities, our research program addresses what seems to be a growing uncertainty about the viability of a liberal democracy — in Quebec, Canada, and beyond.