

The frames that privileged Americans use to justify their faith in people suggest a final lesson. Given that trust of others and trust of oneself depend so heavily on the resources and opportunities at one's disposal, the problem of mistrust can only be addressed adequately by including efforts to redress injustice and inequality. It is not enough to blame negative campaign rhetoric or the nihilism of popular culture. African Americans are not less trusting than white European Americans because they watch the wrong kind of television. They are less trusting because they have fewer economic resources to risk and are more in danger of being victims of violent crime. Those who generalize from their experiences in safe, affluent suburban families may not always recognize the importance of social circumstances in promoting a willingness to trust.

—Robert Wuthnow

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The Moral Effects of Associational Life

It is a staple of liberal democratic theory that voluntary associations are central to political freedom, political stability, and political legitimacy. In recent years, this classic focus on the political functions of civil society has been supplanted by preoccupation with the moral effects of associational life. Scholars and social commentators have taken up the theme that civil associations shape people's moral dispositions, and that this has direct and indirect consequences for democratic public culture and politics.

It is important not to mistake this aspect of civil society for the whole. Not all groups have a formative influence on the moral dispositions of members, nor do all the social and political functions of associations depend on their moral effects. Still, the moral valence of associational life, and the capacity of civil society to produce virtuous (as well as competent) citizens, is a real concern. The oft-repeated view is that voluntary associations must assume the work of character-formation and community-building, compensating for what are seen as either the natural limitations or perverse failings of public institutions. The cultivation of

democratic virtues must go on within the dense networks of civil society. But these pronouncements are shadowed by fears that civil society is itself in a weakened condition, as grim surveys of group membership report a decline in "social connectedness."

We may dissent from this analysis—as some of my colleagues do elsewhere in this *Report*—and insist on a broader accounting of the groups that contribute to social capital or democratic vitality. Still, there is no denying the pervasive *sense* that dis-association is widespread, along with the belief that it is linked to the decline of "basic values." Once the preserve of conservatives, the claim that "in the modern world we need to recapture the density of associational life and relearn the activities and understandings that go with it" is echoed across the political spectrum.

Points of Disagreement

That said, there is little consensus about the specific promises or failings of civil society. I want to survey these disagreements. They are honest disagreements,

deeply rooted, and no project of civic renewal can hope to overcome them. But it is always useful to clarify our differences and to recognize the critical points at which we are speaking at cross-purposes.

First of all, people disagree about what moral dispositions are vital to liberal democratic citizenship, about the rank order of these virtues, and about which ones are in shortest supply. The catalogue of virtues ranges from the modest law-abidingness and habits of cooperation that hold any society together, to willingness to work to support one's family, to the self-control to

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refrain from violence and public shows of disrespect. Most lists feature specifically political dispositions. But which ones? The catalogue ranges from tolerance to the wherewithal to exercise one's rights, to the more stringent political competencies required for democratic deliberation and, if not full-blown "civic magnanimity," at least a minuscule concern for the common good.

Given the range of virtues judged wanting, it is hardly surprising that there is little agreement on the second matter: designating which associations do the work of cultivating moral dispositions, or should. Invocations of civil society are typically vague, and indicate little more than a general thesis in favor of a strong role for mediating institutions as supplements or replacements for the tutorial role of government. Strategies of avoidance are commonplace. The question of identifying formative groups is evaded if civil society is defined very generally as "the realm of concrete and authentic solidarities where we become sociable or communal men and women." Hard questions are also evaded if civil society is defined narrowly in terms of beneficent, internally democratic, civic-minded groups, or religious groups with suitable tenets of faith (as opposed to "cults").

Even if we had consensus about what moral dispositions are vital to civic renewal and which formative groups are promising schools of virtue, this would not produce agreement on the contentious subject of the genesis of associations and government's role in creating and sustaining some, regulating and outlawing others. One view has it that moralizing, socializing groups arise spontaneously, define their own goals, and are accountable only to themselves. Whether the analogy is to free-market forces or organic growth, the process is seen as unplanned and undirected. Associations perform vital mediating functions and may even cultivate specifically civic virtues, but unintentionally, so to

speak, and without the guiding hand of the state. On this view, the spillover effects of moral education from one association to another and from there to public life are spontaneous as well.

On another view, civic renewal depends on the conscious reproduction of democratic citizens. For censorious advocates of associations as "private boot camps for citizenship," the internal lives of groups should mirror public norms. The logic of congruence demands more than assurance that secondary associations are free of force, fraud, and the most egregious private despotisms. Civic habits are developed through practice, the argument goes, and democratic practices—egalitarian forms of authority, openness, rules of fairness, and so on—must be brought home to us at every opportunity.

Both positions are consistent with public encouragement of associations, and with government subsidy and support. For obvious reasons, advocates of congruence are more inclined to insist on strong government intervention in associational life. Recall that the U.S. Supreme Court has found constitutional grounds to intervene in the membership practices of the Jaycees and other voluntary associations. Today, race and gender antidiscrimination law is generally applicable, and due process is the rule if not the practice in most groups.

Nonetheless, proponents rarely recommend enforcing strict congruence "all the way down." They stop at advocating government favoritism for congregational churches over hierarchic ones, for example, or legally mandating worker control over other forms of management on the grounds that participatory workplaces are essential arenas for cultivating a sense of political efficacy. We normally recognize the hubris of thinking that government can fill the alleged social void and generate, by incentive or fiat, groups that will inculcate virtue and promote democratic norms. We also recognize the danger that politics will colonize and courts constitutionalize every aspect of social life.

Finally, there is very basic disagreement when it comes to diagnosing the perceived breakdown between civil society and democratic government. Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus staked out one position twenty years ago, when they designated government an overbearing "Leviathan" that crowds out social groups and takes over their traditional functions, creating a "mass society" of isolated, anomic individuals. From this perspective, the critical need is to connect people to social formations in which moral dispositions and communal attachments are developed, and where the exercise of virtue is tangible. The axiom that "psychologically and sociologically ... any identity is better than none" indicates that a fear of atomism and anomie eclipses any fear we might have about the bad tendencies of groups. Associations will



*Promise Keepers rally
Charlotte, North Carolina, 1996
Photograph by John D. Evans*

perform not only a moralizing but also a mediating role, enhancing public as well as associational life.

A contrasting diagnosis argues that the problem is not atomism or a "missing middle" but the multiplication of groups that don't mediate but balkanize public life. On this view, liberal democracy is not too controlling but too self-effacing. Committed to freedom of association, it is home to every imaginable association—authoritarian, elitist, hierarchic, sexist, racist, blindly traditionalist, and paramilitary. It is too hospitable to communitarian enclaves—whether Amish or Hasidim, armed Freemen, or walled and gated residential communities. It gives scope to fierce group loyalties that look on democratic dispositions and engagement in mainstream civic and political forums as unwanted, oppressive assimilation. From this perspective, the critical need is to loosen rather than strengthen the hold of gripping affiliations so that members have the psychological latitude to look beyond their groups and identify themselves as members of a larger community. Civic renewal, it is argued, requires a stronger assertion of liberal democratic values in both public and private life.

A dose of sociological and psychological realism suggests that both diagnoses have merit. Processes of

connection and disconnection go on simultaneously in our wildly pluralist society. Anomie, aggressive self-interest, and powerful solidaristic group attachments coexist. Thus, we are right to look to associations to *integrate* radically disconnected individuals into formative groups, to *chasten* arrant egotism, and to *loosen* the hold of gripping, sometimes coercive subcommunities. I return to these themes in my conclusion.

The Variability of Moral Effects

If we think that civic renewal turns on our habitual dispositions, then we must focus attention on the experience of men and women personally and individually, both within and outside associational life. Whatever its formal purpose and authority structure, the moral experiences an association provides any given member will depend in part on the vicissitudes of his or her own development and life history—that is, on the moral dispositions, ideological expectations, and experiences of affiliation that the individual brings to it. The effect of membership may be to reinforce moral qualities developed in the course of earlier attachments, or else to compensate for an absence of liberalizing/democratizing experiences. An association may

actively inhibit democratic dispositions and cut members off from other connections, or it may have little or no constitutive effect.

Thus, it is difficult to assess the moral valence of associational life, even on willing members. We cannot shepherd adults into presumptively benign groups, and if we *could* compel association, there is no assurance that model arrangements would effectively influence dispositions in intended ways—not if we begin with people as they really are. Moreover, the moral valence of associational life is variable because associations themselves are hybrids. We cannot anticipate a group's moral effects on the basis of its formal purpose or organization or ideology. The "face value" of associational life can be misleading.

A few illustrations from the terrain of civil society indicate why the moral valence of associational life is often indeterminate.

■ Consider the 900,000 religious fellowship groups and 250,000 secular support groups in the U.S. that Robert Wuthnow has made vivid. Do they fuel narcissism or cooperation? They seem to reinforce self-involvement, since members talk mainly about their own lives, the solution to problems is self-transformation rather than collective action, and the measure of virtually any event is how it makes us feel. "Caring" is defined minimally as hearing one another out nonjudgmentally—hardly an onerous responsibility. In any case, these associations are typically too fluid to create sustained obligations.

On the other hand, these groups provide the experience of reciprocity. Even if members mainly take turns speaking about themselves, they do take turns, and they are expected to take a turn at encouraging others. These groups encourage members to overcome humility and passivity, which are *not* democratic virtues. And they accustom members to treat one another identically and with easy spontaneity, which is a good definition of civility in everyday life in America. They create the expectation that our pain and indignation at day-to-day unfairness and abuse will not be met with indifference, and thus may cultivate the iota of trust necessary for democratic citizens to speak out about ordinary injustice.

■ Here is a less subjective example of the complexity of associational life and its variable moral effects. The 150,000 homeowners associations around the country are run by elected boards of directors that assess residents, enforce internal regulations, and assign owners votes in proportion to their proprietary share. Do these associations transform neighbors into shareholders preoccupied with efficient management and value, generating an arid "corporate culture" at home? Or should we see homeowners associations not as cold contractual arrangements but as elective communities based on covenants? They are not anti-worldly

utopias, obviously, but they do provide the experience of co-ownership of common areas, rule-making, and self-governance in a distinctive social environment. Or should we see homeowners associations as democratic communities along the lines of mini local governments, whose small scale is an invitation to effective participation? If so, should we require them to extend voting rights to all residents rather than to unit owners only?

The various faces of associational life are not mutually exclusive. For an individual member, the homeowners association may operate mainly to increase appreciation for community and self-government. Or a member may see him- or herself principally as a shareholder/investor in common property, with a stake in good management and a "maintenance-free lifestyle." Or membership can provoke resistance to community, and contrarian insistence on privacy rights, private ownership, and unfettered personal liberty. The moral valence is variable. It is changeable for members themselves over time.

■ One last bit of terrain. A Montana Militiaman is described as "alive with conspiracies. They whirl in his mind and welter in his heart, and they fill him so full

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of outrage and nervousness that he cannot ever stay still." Should we therefore commend the seventeen states that outlaw paramilitary groups outright? Or should we take some comfort from the fact that this conspiracist is securely ensconced in a remote compound?

One leader believes that it is better to have "kooks and nuts" inside the organization than out of it on their own:

"Out, they're liable to do most anything at any time without anybody knowing it except them. If they decide they want to go out and blow somebody up, okay, they go out and blow somebody up. But if they're part of a group . . . well, then there's a good chance someone in the organization will know about it and they're going to take steps to bring this person under control."

Raphael Ezekiel reports that the "scared, stranded" youths who join white racist groups have typically dropped out of school years before graduation. They have no prospects of work and no attachments. They are not driven by hate to join groups that mirror their beliefs; they are simply available. Sheer lack goes some way toward explaining why membership may be easy for them: recruits "have little in their heads to *inhibit* their adopting these [Nazi] legends . . . nothing from family or

environment got in the way." Once they become involved, however, "the white supremacist movement—for a while, at least—is a lifeline for these kids."

Hate groups and paramilitary associations seem uncomplicatedly loathsome, obstacles to civic renewal. The fact that membership fulfills the "need" for a sense of belonging is irrelevant to moral development if belonging fails to provide some compensatory experience—to cultivate self-worth, say, or to contain aggression. But in fact, members "derive a degree of self-confidence and dignity from the suggestion that they are engaged in a heroic struggle for the sake of a larger entity, the reborn family of Whites." Many are able to capitalize on their only experience of social union and move on to other, more benign associations.

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In practice, the life cycle of membership in these groups is typically brief. As one Klan leader on his way out of the movement explained,

"I've let a lot of things slide, you know ... you put the Klan first. And I'm tired of me suffering, my mother suffering. ... We don't *own* nothing. We don't *have* nothing. And as you know, most Klan leaders. ... are self-employed or don't work at all."

Another member observed,

"Girls that will put up with this are hard to come by. ... I thought I had one, this girl here I dated for three years ... but you know, when she'd want to do something on the weekend I'd say, 'Well, we got a rally.'"

He left for love.

For those who do not experience alternative social pushes and pulls, exit is a matter of anomie drift. Unemployed and socially unattached, they are rarely recruited into other associations more congruent with public values. Yet the dispositions of these former members may make them effectively unavailable for recruitment into benign associations in any case.

I am not recommending hate groups. I use this example to highlight the dynamic interaction between associational life and the vicissitudes of personal moral development. Membership does not occur in a psychological or social vacuum, and whether and how experiences of association come together in the lives of individuals is key to the moral effects of associational life. The example also serves notice that the moral effects of association may be negative—to contain viciousness, for instance.

A School of Virtue?

Once we highlight the dynamics of membership—the interaction between associational life and the vicissitudes of personal moral development—certain limitations of standard accounts of civil society as a school of virtue emerge sharply.

First, these accounts tend to operate on the assumption that the effects of an association on individual members can be predicted on the basis of a group's formal purpose, structure, or ideology. By now, the limitations of this assumption are familiar. The internal culture of most groups is rarely unitary—homeowners associations, for example, provide ample opportunity for both self-government and proprietary self-concern. The moral deficits of members, and the roots of their moral fragility, are varied and unpredictable. So it really should not be surprising that what works as an effective school of virtue will vary, too.

Another misleading feature of standard accounts is the "transmission belt" model, which says that the moral effects of membership spill over from one sphere to another. The term "mediating" is meant to convey the idea that associations or informal social networks are not just internally cooperative, for example. Rather, cooperation begets cooperation—larger-scale social connectedness that ultimately benefits democratic public life. This is a doubtful general proposition. (Unregrettably, since the logic of the "transmission belt" applies to vices.) After all, it is simply not the case that labor in an authoritarian workplace produces incorrigibly submissive characters, or that observant Roman Catholics are ritualistic, orthodox Jews legalistic, and followers of charismatic ministers enthusiastic in every domain.

In fact, the experience of pluralism—of participating in various spheres of public and associational life—cultivates a capacity to differentiate among these spheres and adjust our conduct to them. So even if we are subject to (or inflict) prejudice, arbitrariness, or deference in one domain, we may be able to exhibit an iota of tolerance in public arenas, say, or fairness in hiring. Which is why fear for the effects of association on members' overall disposition and conduct (liberal suspicion of traditionalist groups, for instance) may be exaggerated.

Finally, it emerges from my examples that standard approaches are too quick to say that the business of civil society is to cultivate and diffuse liberal democratic virtues rather than to temper and contain illiberal, antidemocratic vices. We should always be open to improvement, but sociologists remind us that deviance is as much a part of social life as the reproduction of norms. Surely it is important that groups provide relatively benign outlets for ineradicable viciousness, intolerance, or arrant self-interest, and that antidemocratic dispositions be contained when they cannot be

corrected. In some instances, only a fine line separates the respects in which associations function as "safety valves" from their posing a "clear and present danger." But for the most part, the negative uses of pluralism are crucial. Groups that are home to authoritarianism or deference, intolerance or arbitrariness are ineliminable. Democracy generates them and freedom of association protects them. Of course, we should fight these impulses in ourselves and challenge their appearance in public life. At the same time, we can recognize their moral uses. Without these groups there would be fewer sources of the "primary good" of self-respect and less containment of irrepressible vices.

The Moral Uses of Pluralism

Nothing in the existence of a plurality of associations per se insures that the moral effects I have described will actually be felt in individual lives. The moral uses of association depend, in addition, on *making the experience of pluralism available* to men and women personally and individually. Very simply, the possibility that membership provides a beneficial experience of cooperation, of moral reinforcement or reparation, or of grim containment, is enhanced when there are ample opportunities for diverse and shifting involvements.

Government has a predominantly enabling role in facilitating the moral uses of pluralism: by creating a climate conducive to the formation of associations and to the possibility of shifting involvements among them. Tax policy can play an important part here, and so can a policy of doing as little as possible to inhibit schism within established groups. Courts decline to intervene in the internal disputes of religious associations over leadership, discipline, doctrine, and membership, a posture favorable to the reform and creation of religious groups. The same spirit should guide courts and legislatures with respect to secular voluntary associations. This is not a matter of favoring novelty and fickleness over establishment and commitment. It is simply to say that forming, joining, splitting, and leaving associations are as personally significant as communitarian "belonging"; indeed, they are typically a prelude to it. Liberty and discontent produce associations, after all, including "traditionalist" ones. The objective is to create conditions for the independence and proliferation of groups, indirectly increasing the likelihood that individuals will find their way into associations where there is a "fit" with their moral needs.

Less obviously, pluralism is served when there is a strong background of public institutions and democratic political culture that impresses on us our identity as members of a larger political society. For example, public policy encourages both shifting involvements and appreciation for political community when it

insures that our rights, welfare, and public standing are unaffected by our associations or by changes in affiliation. It can do this by disconnecting health care benefits and pensions from specific places of employment, for example, or by insisting that even self-contained religious communities (like the cultish Alamo Foundation or the Amish) pay members minimum wages for their work and contribute to Social Security, so that economic dependency does not make leaving inconceivable. Homeowners in residential associations resist what they call "double taxation," but municipalities should require them to pay property taxes in full as well as internal assessments, dispelling any thought that they are separate enclaves and that membership substitutes for local citizenship.

In outlining an indirect role for government in supporting the moral uses of pluralism by individuals, I do not mean to reject entirely direct public encouragement and support for associations judged particularly beneficial to civic renewal. Government has a role as tutor and promoter, and we can expect public officials to single out exemplary groups for recognition. Yet I doubt that this is more effective than indirect reinforcement of pluralism and shifting involvements. Besides, an articulated public policy of civic renewal through associations carries the danger of creating expectations—peculiarly sensitive and ambitious expectations—that we cannot afford to have disappointed.

We should recognize that the civic-minded groups most likely to benefit from a public imprimatur are unable to reach everyone, least of all the most isolated and anomic. They are unlikely to operate on a scale capable of turning around the wholesale perception of civic decline, especially among American Jeremiahs. Public efforts to create or support exemplary associations have their place. But they should not eclipse sustained commitment to insuring the vital overall conditions that encourage pluralism and shifting involvements.

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