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CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

Alexis de Tocqueville, on his visit to the United States in 1831, was struck by this country's rich and variegated stratum of civil associations—a stratum that Europeans might fail to appreciate, he noted, "because we have hardly ever seen anything of the kind." Cooperative associations seemed to define the very essence of American life. "Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England," observed Tocqueville, "in the United States you will be sure to find an association."

Social historians in our own day have explored the conditions under which civil associations flourished in the early years of the republic. Theda Skocpol, looking back to the period of Tocqueville's journey, notes that religious as well as political movements helped spur the growth of associational activity. So did the creation of public institutions and government services—Skocpol's favorite example is the U.S. Post Office. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, new civil associations were formed by people engaged in "pressing national debates about the morality of social life—about slavery, and then, after the Civil War, about the coming of industrialization and what that meant for citizens in local communities."

It is generally agreed that a nation benefits from having an extensive and active *civil society*. Benjamin Barber captures the present-day scope of this concept when he writes of all "those domains Americans

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*Volunteer reading coach and student at John Hope Elementary School
Photograph by Simon Kornblit/Hands On Atlanta*

occupy when they are engaged neither in government (voting, serving on juries, paying taxes) nor in commerce (working, producing shopping, consuming).” Thus understood, civil society extends from churches to soccer leagues to reading circles to social movements. It encompasses highly organized national federations as well as informal neighborhood crime watches; it includes associations as large as the AARP and as small as the family. Its activities produce an amazing array of goods—from community safety to companionship to medical care to spiritual guidance. And in producing these goods, it generates such valuable byproducts as social trust, political competence, and civic spirit.

This last point is central to a number of recent studies of civil society. Robert Putnam’s famous essay “Bowling Alone” argues that “the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions . . . are powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement.” Political activity, social and economic cooperation, and neighborhood comity are all promoted, on this view, by the interactions of individuals in their clubs, leagues, organizations, and families.

But contemporary accounts of civil society’s importance are marked by anxiety as much as celebration. “Bowling Alone,” as its title suggests, portrays a significant decline in our associational habits. Citing surveys that track levels of political participation, group membership, and even informal socializing over the past quarter century, Putnam argues that “Americans who came of age during the Depression and World War II have been far more deeply engaged in the lives of their communities than the generations that have followed them.” His diagnosis of civic decline has become a subject of vigorous debate, not all of which is accessible or comprehensible to non-sociologists. But if Putnam’s diagnosis is sound, we must be concerned about depleting our stock of “social capital,” defined

as the “norms, networks, and social trust” essential to a flourishing democracy.

Discussion of civil society is not limited to empirical debates over trends and countertrends in associational life. It is also about the optimal relation between civil society and the state, or between civil society and the marketplace. It is about the value of localism as opposed to the claims of national identity. It is about the best ways of cultivating certain democratic skills and civic virtues, and about the lost authority of institutions and communities that formerly established and enforced social norms.

Last year, in connection with the deliberations of the National Commission on Civic Renewal, the Institute assembled a scholars’ working group to address these and other issues bearing on civil society. The six essays that follow have been adapted from a series of papers by participants from a variety of disciplines—history, sociology, political science, and moral philosophy. (The working group’s research will be more fully represented in a book-length collection to be published next year.) The Institute gratefully acknowledges the support of the Public Policy Program of the Pew Charitable Trusts, which has funded the Commission and its associated activities.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

Sources: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Book II (1840); Theda Skocpol, “National Community and Civil Society,” *Newsletter of the National Commission on Civic Renewal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1997); Benjamin R. Barber, “The Search for Civil Society: Can We Restore the Middle Ground Between Government and Markets?” *The New Democrat*, no. 7 (March/April 1995); Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995).

The Foundations of Trust

It is no secret that public trust in politicians and the political system has declined markedly in recent decades. According to national surveys, many Americans no longer trust elected officials to keep their promises or to look out for interests of ordinary citizens. The proportion of those who say they have "hardly any" confidence in the people running the executive branch of the federal government rose from 18 percent in 1973 to 35 percent in 1994. Over the same time period, the number expressing low confidence in leaders of Congress increased from 15 percent to 40 percent.

But Americans are not only losing faith in politicians and other leaders. They are also less willing now than in the past to believe that *people in general* can be trusted. For example, the proportion agreeing that "most people can be trusted" fell from 55 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 1994, while the proportion saying "you can't be too careful in dealing with people" rose from 40 percent in 1960 to 61 percent in 1994. Taken at face value, these surveys point to growing fears—about crime, hatred, and selfishness—and to rising cynicism about human nature. Viewed more closely, they suggest that Americans are losing the capacity to work with one another, to cooperate and to give each other the benefit of the doubt.

Of course, questions can be raised about these findings. It may be that the surveys are biased, eliciting responses that oversimplify people's own understandings of trust. It may be the case, too, that people have good reasons for exercising caution in their dealings with others. Still, if trust is declining in the United States, then one of the ways to renew civil society may be to understand better the conditions that facilitate trust and the ones that erode it. In what follows, I consider both the relevant survey data and the results of interviews in which people spoke in detail about their civic activities and beliefs, including some of their views about trust.

What Surveys Show

Though newspaper articles about trust tend to report aggregate measures, the evidence indicates that some groups in our society are more trusting than others. For example, Robert Putnam finds higher levels of trust among people with higher levels of education. Whites

are more likely than blacks to give trusting responses, and people who hold memberships in voluntary associations are more trusting than non-members.

Eric Uslaner's analysis of the data suggests that the standard survey question about trust can almost be thought of as a measure of optimism: people who have more advantages in life and who are more confident about their futures have more reasons to be optimistic and thus are more likely to give trusting responses. By implication, trust may be declining because many Americans do not feel as confident about the future in terms of economic opportunities as they did a few decades ago.

Two other interpretations of trends in levels of trust also find support in the available data. First, some of the erosion in social trust is attributable to political scandals specifically, as well as to declining confidence in public leaders more generally. For example, National Election Survey questions about trust in people show abrupt declines during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the Vietnam war and Watergate were raising public concern about national leaders. Other surveys conducted in those years show that large numbers actually believed their trust had been shaken by Watergate. The National Election data also show that some of the decline in generalized trust can be explained statistically by the decline in confidence in government officials.

The other interpretation of trends in generalized trust comes from looking more closely at its relationship with education. In 1973, the largest differences in trust were between respondents who had graduated from high school and those who had not. By 1994, this difference had shrunk, but that between college graduates and high school graduates had increased. High school graduates in 1994 were about as likely to be trusting as those without high school degrees had been in 1973, while college graduates in 1994 resembled high school graduates in 1973. In addition, the 1994 data show that college graduates were significantly less likely to trust than were respondents with graduate degrees, whereas in 1973 this difference was not significant.

These results confirm what other studies of college effects have long suggested: Higher education appears to be a measure of *relative standing* in the society, more so than a cognitive experience that shapes people's attitudes absolutely. As the proportion of Americans

with college and postgraduate degrees has expanded, the large number who have high school degrees or less have become more disadvantaged, and their declining sense of their own opportunities appears to be reflected in a lower likelihood of giving optimistic responses to questions about trust. This is not to deny that even the most privileged in terms of education

Many people's willingness to trust others seems to be a reflection of whether or not they believe they can trust themselves.

have also become somewhat less trusting. But it does appear that trust has fallen partly because people with the lowest levels of education have become more similar to one another in their views about trust, while there are greater differentials between these people and those with higher levels of education.

A second data set that permits further analysis of trust comes from a 1982 survey which asked adults in a representative national sample how they perceived themselves. One of the questions asked people to rate themselves on a seven-point scale anchored at one end by the word "dependable" and at the other by the word "undependable." This question is conceptually interesting because, as I shall suggest below, many people's willingness to trust others seems to be a reflection of whether or not they believe they can trust themselves.

The variables that are significantly associated with describing oneself as dependable are essentially the same as those that in other surveys correlate with saying that most people can be trusted. Having a college degree, being white, having an above-average family income, owning one's home, and scoring higher on a self-esteem scale are all associated with higher probabilities of regarding oneself as dependable (as is civic participation, as measured by volunteering to help the poor and writing letters to public officials). I take these findings as added evidence that trust is influenced by personal circumstances. If generalized trust has been declining, the reason may not be simply that people believe others are having more difficulty living up to their agreements, or even because their faith in politicians has been shaken. It has probably declined partly because people are less confident in their own capacities to hold up their share of the bargain. We shall have more opportunity to consider this possibility in looking at the qualitative data.

The final survey from which I have been able to draw observations on trust is my own 1992 national survey of 1,000 members of small support groups, from Bible study circles to twelve-step and self-help groups. This survey, unlike those that measure trust in

unspecified "people," asked respondents about trust in a specific context, focusing on the trust that respondents place in fellow members.

The results show that the intimate and encompassing interaction characteristic of support groups—in which people may eat together, sing, pray, and help others in their community—is associated with higher levels of trust. Other factors that did *not* show significant relationships with trust were engaging in sports activities together (contrary to arguments about the beneficial effects of bowling leagues), discussing social or political issues, having elected officers, having an agenda or schedule, and having business meetings. In short, informal interaction was conducive to trust, but formal structure was unrelated to trust.

The study also suggests a reason why trust may be declining in the wider society. People in heterogeneous groups—especially ones that included diverse political views and mixed religious views—were less likely to

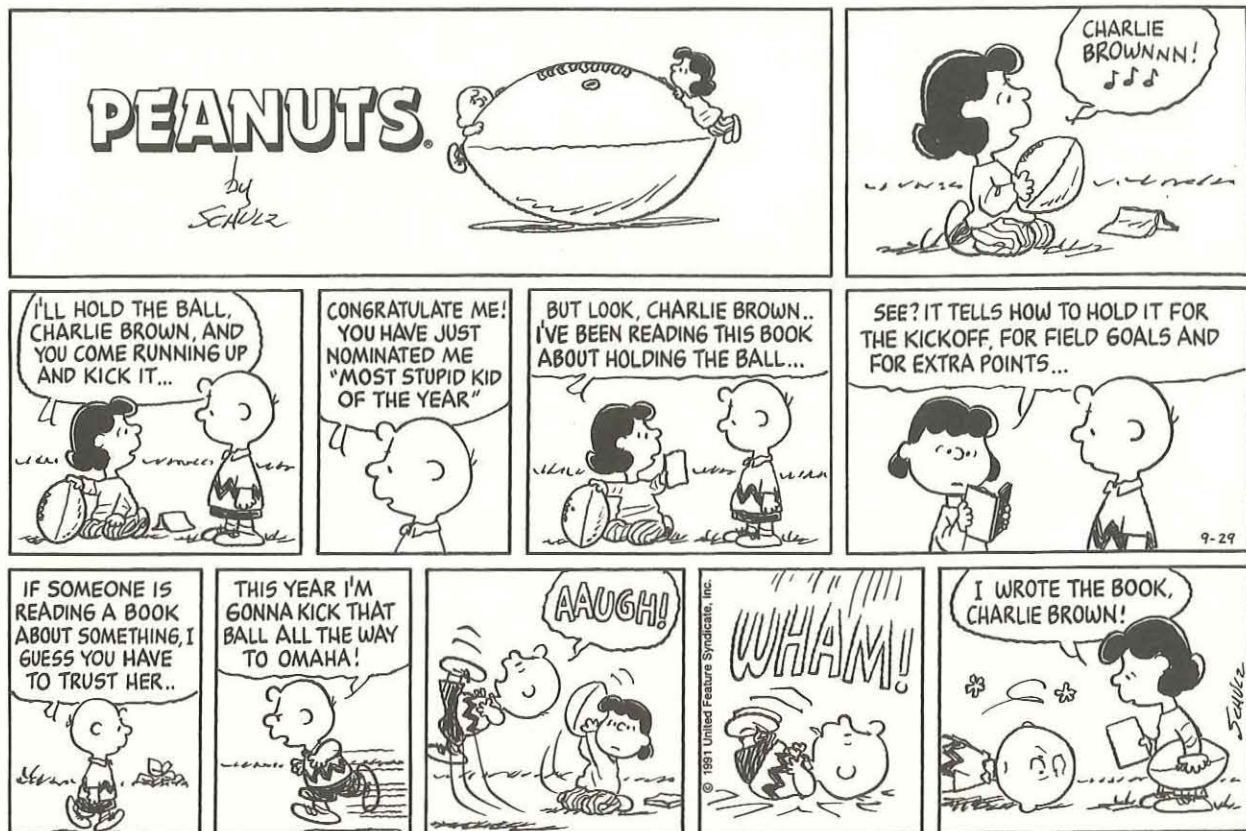
The intimate interaction characteristic of support groups is associated with higher levels of trust.

rate their groups high on trust than were people in homogeneous groups. From this finding, it may be reasonable to suspect that trust among the public at large has suffered as a result of acrimony between political or religious factions; it may also have been influenced by the growing diversity of the population in ethnic identities, lifestyles, and values.

In sum, the various surveys show that opportunities to realize one's expectations are conducive to trust, whereas inequality and disadvantage are not. Perceptions of one's own reliability are an important consideration, and social interaction appears to enhance trust. The data also indicate that trust is always conditional: Nobody trusts everyone all the time. It is thus important to turn to qualitative data to see how people understand the conditions under which they can and cannot trust others. The goal is to identify the different kinds of mental frames that people bring to bear in deciding when and whether to trust.

Trust from Within

For some people, as the surveys suggest, trust in others depends on a prior belief in their own trustworthiness. As one man put it, "I feel if I can be trusted, I can trust other people. Throughout my lifetime I've found that to be true, that if you are up and above and honest with people, they will return that respect." His statement focuses more on himself than on any particular



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characteristic of others. It is also significant that he associates trustworthiness with being *honest*, rather than with being dependable—making good on everything he promises. This allows him to see being trustworthy as entirely under his own control, rather than subject to contingencies that might prevent him from fulfilling other people's expectations.

Such seemingly minimal conditions can nevertheless become problematic. In other research, I have found that people are not at all sure (or in agreement) about what it *means* to be honest. For many, honesty is largely a subjective self-assessment that says, in effect, you are honest if you feel that you are honest. In the absence of clearer external standards, many people feel that they are operating largely within gray areas, especially in business or in their professional lives. As a result, they wonder whether or not they are truly honest.

Generally, respondents who emphasized certain characteristics of their own as the condition for trusting others relied on one of three frames. The first is illustrated by the man we have just been considering. It is aptly described as a frame that emphasizes *self-knowledge*—believing, for example, that you are honest,

civil, and capable of judging people. Others felt certain that they could keep their mouths shut when they needed to, or that they would not make a promise they could not keep.

A second frame emphasizes *personal experience*. For example, a 44-year-old newspaper editor attributed his trustfulness to his growing up in a neighborhood where people knew one another and helped one

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another. This man did not simply generalize from his childhood experience by assuming that virtually everyone he runs into in his present life can be trusted. Rather, he observed that his experiences had shaped him so that he is simply a trusting person.

The third frame explains trustfulness as a *leap of faith* on the part of the person doing the trusting. Unlike the

first two, this frame implicitly assumes that trust may not be rational (at least not in terms of what one knows about how people behave), but argues that being trusting is still a good way to live. One woman who works as an artist told us that she trusts most people, even though she has been "burned" a few times and is not naive. She explained her reason for trusting in terms of a faith commitment that causes her to focus on an inner self: "What I'm seeing is what's going on inside that person, I behold the Christ in you, the good stuff that connects us all, that's in all of us. That's where I

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connect into people." But other respondents defended their leap of faith on pragmatic grounds; they said they were simply happier or found they could get along better if they decided to be trusting.

Objects of Trust

In contrast to those who made trust depend on something in themselves, most of the people we talked to focused on attributes and conditions of those who would or would not qualify as objects of trust. The most common of these conditions was also the most straightforward: people said they would trust others if those others had already proved to be reliable. In other words, trust depended on a rational assessment of someone's *performance* in the past and the likelihood that the future would hold similar performances by that person or by similar persons. This kind of trust, it should be noted, is highly contingent on the kind of people toward whom it is directed. Whereas a frame that emphasizes one's own trustworthiness suggests an inclination to trust most people under most circumstances, this one is more limited.

Another frame that permits people to say they can trust others emphasizes *resources*. Objects of trust who have sufficient resources to carry through on their promises and to behave reliably are said to be trustworthy; in contrast, people with limited resources should perhaps not be trusted. A 43-year-old woman who manages a small company illustrated this frame when she said that her employees can generally be trusted because her firm supplies them with the resources they need to fulfill their responsibilities. She generalized from this example, saying, "If you give people responsibility and try and give them as many tools as you possibly can, they won't disappoint you."

Significantly, this is a frame that may influence people's judgments of political leaders as well as workers or friends. One of our respondents, a draftsman in his fifties, had concluded that public officials were unreliable, and produced this explanation of their failure to perform up to the public's expectations: "I think they honestly believe that when they get in there they're going to be able to do all these things for you. My feeling is once they are elected and they're in the office, they learn the reality of those offices and they find out that things aren't as easily done as they think they are." Like many of the people we talked to, the draftsman denied that his qualified trust in politicians should be taken as incipient cynicism. He said he was merely being realistic in his expectations of what officials could and could not do.

The main alternatives to frames that emphasize reliable performance are frames that emphasize something about the *self* of the person being trusted. These frames come in several variants. One of the most common argues simply that you can trust people better if you know them well. It says nothing about whether or not these people have performed reliably in the past—only that you know them well enough to assume that they are people of character, people who are somewhat like yourself in their values and their respect for common norms of decency.

Some respondents were more specific about what it is in other people that makes them seem trustworthy. One frame (which was hinted at by the woman who focuses on the "Christ" in other people) draws a distinction between an inner self that is presumed to be more trustworthy and an outer self that may be more calculating, devious, or unreliable. The people who can be trusted are those who have been willing to disclose something about this inner self.

This emphasis on self-disclosure means, perhaps obviously, that people are more likely to trust those with whom they have developed some intimacy. Yet this frame (like the one that emphasizes resources) sometimes figures in people's judgments of political leaders. For example, some of our respondents focus less on the official acts of politicians than on biographical details, body language, reports of affairs, and the use or absence of certain words. They are very much aware of their leaders' personal foibles, and base their opinions on characteristics that may have little to do with performance in office.

Alternatives to Trust

Though the people in our study often expressed concern about mistrust, many of them had found ways to negotiate their lives without being immobilized by it. They did so by relying on other mechanisms, such as laws, regulations, and markets, to minimize risk. For

example, the head of a baby-sitting cooperative in New Jersey told us that although her organization had 200 members, only 8 families regularly used it. The reason, she thought, was that most of the members did not trust the other members well enough to feel comfortable leaving their children with them. Although

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she tried to build trust by having parties and other "get acquainted" meetings, most of the members said they didn't have time for such activities. Because they enjoyed upper-middle-class incomes, they used for-profit day care centers instead.

In a case like this, one could say that trust was being redirected from neighbors to for-profit day care centers. But this is not how the woman herself saw it. In her view, trust is "a personal thing." Like many of the people we interviewed, she makes it conditional on knowing something about the private life—the inner self—of another person. It seems better to her to say that people have *confidence* in day care centers. Trust is not at issue; confidence rests on knowing that these centers are licensed by the state, are governed by a number of laws and regulations, and must do their jobs well if they are to stay in business.

Political mistrust can elicit a similar response: Americans mistrust individual politicians but find other ways to get on with their lives. Some say it is healthy to be skeptical toward politicians, because critical questions get raised or because mistrust prevents politicians from assuming too much power. For many of the people we interviewed, mistrust was more of an irritation than a profound complaint because they felt the political system should not be doing very much anyway. Some believed that private volunteer organizations were better suited to solving social problems. Following the 1996 election, during which high levels of mistrust toward the leading candidates were registered, the stock market soared to record highs; analysts attributed the increases to investors who saw that a divided government incapable of inspiring confidence would do little to upset their expectations.

Implications for Civic Renewal

The foregoing nevertheless suggests that trust is important enough that people are prepared to talk about it, generally in more complex ways than have been captured in public opinion polls. For most people, trust is not simply a matter of making rational

calculations about the possibility of benefiting by cooperating with someone else. Social scientists who reduce the study of trust to questions about rational choice, and who argue that it has nothing to do with moral discourse, miss this point. In interviews, people bring moral frameworks directly to bear on their thinking about trust, talking about how it is simply good to trust others, how trust depends on moral character, and how you have a moral obligation to fulfill the expectations of those who have placed trust in you. Even if trust is taken as nothing more than an expectation of how someone will behave, it is invariably conditioned by assumptions about one's own honesty, whether or not promises are morally binding, and how much the behavior of individuals is likely to be shaped by their moral commitments.

Our surveys suggest that deliberate repair work needs to be done to restore trust that has been damaged by broken promises, disrupted relationships, and fragmented self-images. Clearly, it is not enough to argue

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that trust will be restored simply by getting people to join bowling leagues and other civic organizations. Many of the respondents who are active in such organizations said that they had to work hard at building and maintaining trust. Rather than simply happening as members interacted, it required confrontations, staff meetings, bull sessions, phone calls, and mediation.

People also talked about constructing rules within civic organizations that served as heuristics for making decisions about trust. These rules were often quite explicit: Members did not have to rely on implicit norms about whether or not to trust someone who failed to show up for meetings or who took handouts but did not look for a job. Because these are gray areas, organizations created local understandings about how to regard such behavior. Consequently, participants did not have to trust a "generalized other," but could respond according to the rules they had learned in these organizations. The baby-sitting co-op provided detailed information to members about what to expect and what not to expect; garden club members developed a voucher system to avoid confusion about who owed favors to whom; a homeless shelter adopted a rule that in effect told volunteers to trust whatever clients told them the first time, but to ask more questions on subsequent visits. In these ways, the presence of civic organizations helped to define the conditions under which trust could be exercised.

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

Robert Wuthnow, professor of social science at Princeton University, is the author, most recently, of *Poor Richard's Principle: Recovering the American Dream through the Moral Dimension of Work, Business, and Money* (Princeton University Press, 1996). Sources: General Social Surveys and other national surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago; Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995); Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America" (The Ithiel de Sola Pool Lecture, American Political Science Association, 1995), *P.S.: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 27 (1995); Putnam, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," *American Prospect* (Winter 1996) [<http://epn.org/prospect/24/24putn.html>]; Eric M. Uslaner, "Faith, Hope, and Charity: Social Capital, Trust, and Collective Action," unpublished paper, Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland (1996); Self-Esteem Survey, Gallup Organization (1982); Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (Free Press, 1994); Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harper & Row, 1974); Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (Free Press, 1994); Adam Seligman, *The Problem of Trust* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Russell Hardin, "The Street-Level Epistemology of Trust," *Politics and Society*, vol. 21 (December 1993).

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

People disagree about what moral dispositions are vital to liberal democratic citizenship.

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 anomic 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.

—Nancy L. Rosenblum

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American Civil Society Talk

Over the past few years, the United States has seen a striking revival of interest in civil society as the source of trust, the key to social integration, and the basis of strong democracy. It is instructive to compare this turn in American thought with an earlier revival in the 1950s. At that time, concerns about "civic culture" were driven by fears of American weakness in confronting a totalitarian state. Now it is dissatisfaction with the social and cultural effects of modernization that motivates civil society talk. Models of social integration, civic engagement, and associational life which were once taken for granted are being strained

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by new forms of social diversity, by institutional transformation, and by technical, economic, and cultural change. These strains have occurred, moreover, just when the need for an active civil society seems particularly great. Neither the centralized state nor the magic of the marketplace appears to offer effective, liberal, and democratic solutions to the problems of post-industrial societies in an era of globalization. And so, despite its troubles, "civil society" has become a slogan for the 1990s because it seems to represent an alternative center for political and economic initiatives.

Unfortunately, the idealized, one-dimensional version of the concept that is being revived is hardly up to the task. This version narrowly equates civil society with traditional forms of voluntary association, emphasizing informal modes of socialization that are said to foster civic virtue and the moral "habits of the heart" necessary to make democracy work. Such a concept is both theoretically impoverished and politically suspect; it blocks efforts even to articulate, much less resolve, the critical problems facing democratic polities in the coming century. We cannot assume, therefore, that American civil society talk necessarily presages a new era of civic renewal. It matters very much *which* concept of civil society we use and seek to foster.

Earlier Traditions

In nineteenth-century sources, "civil society" is a rich and multi-leveled idea. It is characterized by social interaction, of course, but also by individual self-development and ethical choice. It is pluralistic, offering space to groups with different worldviews and interests. It cultivates public discussion through its use of communications media (at that time, print). And all of these values embodied in civil society—individuality, plurality, publicity—are protected by a system of rights and the rule of law.

Twentieth-century European analysts of civil society, beginning with Antonio Gramsci, added three crucial components to this understanding. The first was an emphasis on the cultural and symbolic dimension of civil society—its role in the formation of values, action-orienting norms, meanings, and identifications. From this perspective, civil society does not only transmit or inculcate established practices or beliefs. It is also a site of social contestation, wherein collective identities, ethical values, and alliances are forged. In this conception, then, the discourses and culture of civil society are politically relevant and multiple.

The second major contribution of twentieth-century analysts was an emphasis on the most dynamic, creative side of civil society—informal networks, initiatives and social movements, as distinct from more formal voluntary associations and institutions and from class organizations (political parties, unions). Social movements articulate new social concerns and projects; they generate new values and collective identities. In struggles over democratization, they seek to reform not only the polity, but also the institutions of civil society itself.

The final key contribution in this century has been the communicative, deliberative conception of the "public sphere," developed primarily by Jurgen Habermas and his followers. The public sphere is where people can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers, and learn about facts, events, and the opinions, interests, and perspectives of others. Discourse on values, norms, laws, and policies generates politically relevant public opinion. These discussions can occur *within* various units of civil society (thus, we can speak of multiple "public spheres" or "civil publics"). But there is also a larger public sphere that mediates among the various mini-publics that emerge within

and across associations, movements, religious organizations, clubs, local organizations of concerned citizens, and informal social networks in the creation of public opinion.

Habermas also recognizes *institutionalized* civil and political publics, such as legislatures and constitutional courts. Public opinion is meant to influence the debates within these institutions, and to bring under informal control the actions and decisions of rulers and lawmakers. Openness of access and parity of participation (equal voice) is the ideal underlying every institutional arrangement claiming democratic legitimacy. All citizens affected by public policy and laws should have the right to articulate their views, and all participants should be able to do so on equal terms.

This concept of the public sphere is the normative core of the idea of civil society and the heart of any

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conception of democracy. The political legitimacy of modern constitutional democracies rests on the principle that action-orienting norms, practices, policies, and claims to authority can be contested by citizens and must be affirmed or redeemed in public discourse. As Claus Offe has recently argued, unconstrained critical discourse in the public sphere (secured by rights) is the form of institutionalized "distrust" that is actually crucial to maintaining trust—belief in legitimacy—in constitutional democracies. I would defend an even stronger claim: the modern form of democracy can be *defined* as the deliberative genesis and justification of public policy in political and civil public spaces.

Without the concept of the public sphere, civil society talk becomes hopelessly one-sided and analytically useless. Relying, as we shall see, on notions of "trust" and "social capital," it cannot articulate the complex relation between social and political institutions.

Voluntary Association and Democracy

In his extraordinarily influential book *Making Democracy Work*, Robert Putnam argues that democratic government is more responsive and effective when it faces a vigorous civil society. A civic culture of "generalized trust" and social solidarity, peopled by citizens willing and able to cooperate in joint ventures, is an important prerequisite of a vital democracy. Such a culture—which Putnam found in northern Italy—is best nourished by voluntary associations that cut

across social divisions, that are egalitarian rather than hierarchical, and that treat citizens as participants rather than clients. It is these associations that are most likely to foster wider social cooperation, to reinforce norms of reciprocity, and thus to "make democracy work."

The indicators of democratic health that Putnam cites are similar to those mentioned in the "civic culture" studies of the 1950s: the number of voluntary associations, the incidence of newspaper readership (a sign of informed interest in community affairs), electoral turnout, and a range of civic attitudes including law-abidingness, interpersonal trust, and general cooperativeness. These habits and normative orientations, as well as their transmission over time, are analyzed as forms of "social capital"—defined as the social stock of trust, norms, and networks that facilitate coordinated actions.

In Putnam's historical chapters—his rich descriptions of the emergence of civiness and what it needed to take root, at least in the north of Italy—he acknowledges other contributory factors to civic culture apart from the dense networks of associational life. For example, he mentions the importance of institutions and institutionalized norms, such as the professionalization of public administration and credible state impartiality in the enforcement of laws, for the maintenance of social trust. Strong and autonomous courts, reliable administrative state structures, and *confidence* that legislative processes and the administration of justice will be impartial, seem to be essential background conditions if networks of civic associations are to succeed in generating solidarity outside the bonds of kinship.

Thus, on the descriptive level, at least, Putnam's book can hardly be charged with reductionism. Yet the concluding theoretical chapter, "Social Capital and Institutional Success," is open to such a charge. This important chapter asks how "virtuous circles" generate, generalize, and transmit traditions of civic engagement through centuries of radical social, economic, and political change. Putnam dismisses the classic Hobbesian solution—that the state secures people's trust in everyone's willingness to cooperate equally by enforcing cooperation for the common good. The use of force is expensive, Putnam observes, and impartial enforcement is subject to the very dilemma it aims to solve: what power will ensure that the sovereign does not defect? Nor can institutional design ensure impartiality, since trust and generalized reciprocity would seem to be prerequisites for establishing impartial institutions in the first place.

Putnam accordingly turns away from state structures to "soft" sociocultural solutions. Dense networks of civic involvement are both a sign and a source of social capital. Participation in voluntary associations promotes cooperation and generates social trust, thus



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Photograph by Ron Stathis

allowing dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. Dense networks of associations entail repeated exchanges of what he calls "short-term altruism" and "long-term self-interest"—I help you out now in the expectation that you will help me out in the future. These rational exchanges, and the direct experience of reliability, repeated over a period of time, encourage the development of a norm of generalized reciprocity. Apparently such experiences produce "moral resources" which can be transmitted over generations and whose supply increases through use.

That voluntary association is *evidence* of social cooperation and trust is both undeniable and almost tautological, but why is it construed as the only significant source of social capital? Why are democratic political institutions, the public sphere, and law absent from the theoretical analysis of how social trust is developed? The answer is obvious: once the state is defined and dismissed as a third-party enforcer, once law is turned into sanctions that provide for a certain level of social order but no more, once institutions are dismissed as irrelevant to social trust because their genesis already presupposes social trust, and once a vital civil society is reduced to the presence or absence of intermediate voluntary associations, no other source of social trust is conceivable.

Because it operates with an overly narrow conception of civil society, Putnam's theoretical analysis (unlike his descriptive history) screens out the role of law and political institutions in fostering civiness, as well as the reciprocal influence of civil publics on the state and on civil institutions. And this failure to include publics and networks of communication in the conceptualization of civil society is one of the main drawbacks of the theory as a theory of democracy.

Voice and Democratic Competence

We have seen that for Putnam, democracy relies on the social capital generated by egalitarian, participatory associations. Too little, though, is said about why *these* associations, rather than hierarchical ones, are critical to the creation of social capital. One explanation might be that norms of reciprocity are more likely to be respected between agents of equal status and power. These norms will obviously be central to an analysis that emphasizes the strategic benefits of cooperation and the cultivation of trust.

A better explanation, I think, would be that participation as equals in the exchange of opinions and in collective deliberations over associational affairs is what allows people to develop interactive abilities and democratic

competence. But this argument cannot be made without complicating Putnam's theoretical framework, since it calls attention to the voice people have in an association's internal public sphere. Hierarchical, authoritarian associations are not necessarily inferior to egalitarian ones when it comes to generating loyalty and skill in strategic action. But I suspect that only associations of equals, following the relevant norms of discourse and deliberation, can develop the communicative competence and interactive abilities important to democracy.

This is not to say that the state should *require* civil associations to be organized democratically. I agree with Nancy Rosenblum's argument, elsewhere in this issue, that the plurality and multiplicity of civil associations have "moral effects" that help foster and maintain a liberal, tolerant civil society. But I am also convinced that democratic competence *cannot* be learned in hierarchical settings. Moreover, I suspect that the presence of democratically structured associations is what renders benign the effects of membership in hierarchical, authoritarian groups on the larger society. If *all* the myriad associations of civil society were structured hierarchically, I doubt that either democratic competence or even liberal tolerance among citizens would be widespread. But without the normative concept of the deliberative public sphere understood as a core principle of civil society, such arguments cannot be made, much less tested, and the advantage of egalitarian over hierarchical associations remains unclear.

The Metaphor of Social Capital

A second difficulty follows from Putnam's emphasis on voluntary association and his use of the concept of social capital. His analysis fails to explain how the trust produced within voluntary associations becomes generalized; that is, how intergroup trust becomes trust of strangers or institutions outside the group. Instead, Putnam asks us simply to accept that willingness to act together for mutual benefit in a small group translates into willingness to act for the common good. In other words, his analysis offers no mechanism for explaining the emergence of those goods to which the term "social trust" presumably refers.

At fault here, I believe, is the use Putnam makes of the concept of social capital. This metaphor allows the theorist to finesse the issue of generalization and to blur the distinctions between at least five very different things: individual trust, general norms of reciprocity, belief in the legitimacy of institutionalized norms, confidence that these will motivate the action of institutional actors and ordinary citizens, and the transmission of cultural traditions, patterns, and values. It does so by suggesting a false analogy between

direct interpersonal social relations and economic exchanges on the market.

Capital accumulated in one context can of course be invested in another place: it can easily be saved, inherited, and exchanged, regardless of its particular form, because there is a universal equivalent for it—money—and an institutional framework for the exchange—the market economy. Interpersonal trust, on the other hand, is by definition specific and contextual—one trusts *particular* people because of repeated interactions with them in specific contexts in which reciprocity is directly experienced. Interpersonal trust generated in face-to-face relationships is not an instance of a more general impersonal phenomenon. Nor can it simply be transferred to others or to other contexts. Indeed, it is entirely possible that without other mechanisms for the generalization of trust, participation in associations and membership in social networks could foster particularism, localism, intolerance, exclusion, and generalized mistrust of outsiders, of the law, and of government.

Interpersonal trust involves not only the experience of reliability of the other but also the moral obligation of the trusted person to honor the trust bestowed upon her and the mutual expectation that each understands this principle and will be motivated to act accordingly.

The metaphor of "social capital" suggests a false analogy between direct interpersonal social relations and economic exchanges on the market.

The principle of reciprocity must be institutionalized, on the one side, and the aspiration/motivation to be trustworthy must have become part of one's identity, as it were, on the other. But in order to see what role institutions might play in this process, one must, again, understand law and the state as something more than a third-party enforcer. At the very least, the two-sidedness of law—law as sanction *and* law as institutionalized cultural values, norms, rules and rights—would have to be explored. Only then would it be possible to reflect on the role of law and rights in establishing universalistic norms as functional equivalents for personalized trust, and in substituting confidence in abstract institutions (backed up by sanctions) and belief in their legitimacy, purpose, and particular norms, for direct interpersonal ties.

For example, legal norms of procedural fairness, impartiality, and justice that give structure to state and some civil institutions, limit favoritism and arbitrariness, and protect merit are the prerequisites for society-wide "general trust," at least in a modern society. So is the expectation that institutional actors will live up to

and enforce the norms of the institutional setting in which they interact. Rights, on the other hand, ensure that trust is warranted insofar as they provide individuals the opportunity to demand that violations of legitimate reciprocal expectations be sanctioned.

It makes little sense to use the category of generalized trust to describe one's attitude toward law or government. One can only trust *people*, because only people can fulfill obligations. But institutions (legal and other) can provide functional equivalents for interpersonal trust in impersonal settings involving interactions with strangers, because they establish action-orienting norms and the expectation that these will be honored. What Durkheim once called "professional ethics" would seem to be especially critical here. If one knows one can expect impartiality from a judge, care and concern from a doctor, protection from police, objectivity and veracity from a journalist, concern for the common good from legislators, and so on, then one can develop confidence (instead of cynicism) that shared institutionalized norms and cultural values will orient the action of powerful others. But confidence of this sort also presupposes public spaces in which the validity of such norms and the fairness of procedures can be challenged, revised, redeemed or reinforced through critique.

Although I have said that Putnam's narrow theoretical framework prevents him from articulating these complex interrelations, *Making Democracy Work* is open to a more sophisticated interpretation. After all, the book traces the effects of institutional reform in Italy: the devolution of important powers from a centralized state to newly created regional political public spaces, closer to the populace and open to their influence. Moreover, many of the vital elements of a richer society-centered analysis are at least mentioned in the text. In claiming that dense networks of civic engagement generate greater trust, participation, and stronger democracy, Putnam implicitly relies on the concept of the public sphere. Indeed, Putnam's own research suggests that well-designed political institutions are crucial to fostering civic spirit because they provide enabling conditions—a political opportunity structure—that can become an incentive for the emergence of civil actors and a target of influence for them once they do.

New Elements of Civil Society

I conclude by examining one other feature of American civil society talk: the distinction made between local, "secondary" associations like the Elks Club—which are said to be in decline—and the new "tertiary," mass-membership organizations, from the National Organization for Women to the American Association of Retired Persons. Putnam and others have argued that whereas the traditional groups offered opportunities for face-to-face interactions,

these new associations rely on abstract impersonal ties of people to common symbols, texts, leaders, and ideals. According to the theory of social capital, associational membership should increase social trust. But apparently membership in tertiary groups does not yield the kind of social connectedness that generates social capital. Here, then, is one source for the rhetoric of civic and moral decline.

Other evidence, however, does not support this conclusion. For example, a recent study by Sidney Verba and his colleagues indicates that the falloff in voter turnout is not part of a general erosion in voluntary

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activity or political participation. They report *increases* in certain forms of civic activism, such as membership in community problem-solving organizations. Meanwhile, some older types of associational membership and activities have been expanding, both numerically and qualitatively. And different loci and sorts of social activity are serving purposes similar to those of traditional forms of secondary association.

The political engagement of contemporary citizens is episodic and increasingly issue-oriented. Membership in political parties, labor unions, and traditional voluntary associations may have declined, but the willingness of Americans to mobilize periodically on local and national levels around concerns that affect them cannot be deduced from this fact. The allegedly uncivic generations of the 1960s and 1970s created the first consumers' movement since the 1930s, the first environmental movement since the turn of the century, public health movements, grassroots activism and community organizing, the most important feminist movement since the prewar period, the civil rights movement, and innumerable transnational organizations and civic movements, all of which have led to unprecedented advances in rights and social justice.

This highly civic activism is not the product of disassociated individuals mobilized by direct mailings or glib leaders. It draws instead on myriad small-scale groups different in kind from Putnam's preferred intermediary organizations but most certainly involving face-to-face interpersonal interaction and oppositional public spheres, as well as more generalized forms of communication. In other words, the forms of association out of which mass mobilizations emerge nowadays might not involve organizations with official membership lists, but they can and often do involve discussion groups, consciousness-raising

groups, self-help groups, and the like—surely signs of the ability to connect and act in concert.

The real question for analysts of civil society is *why* certain forms of civic activity appear when they do. Surely the “political opportunity structure” afforded by the state and political culture, legal developments, and the organization of economic life, along with the nature of other dimensions of civil society, would have to be analyzed in order to arrive at an answer. Such an analysis may well conclude that institutional redesign of various aspects of the political (and economic) system is necessary to strengthen new sorts of civil sociality.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that a narrow conception of civil society obscures and miscasts important problems, not that these problems do not exist. There is no question that established modes of civic engagement, political participation, and social integration are all in crisis today. But the dichotomous thinking that opposes civil society to the state, duties to rights, custom to code, informal to formal socialization (as the source of trust), and status to contract leads to an over-hasty conclusion (that social capital has disappeared) and a set of false policy choices.

Such considerations do not replace a society-centered analysis with a state-oriented one. Rather, if we had a rich conception of civil society that included the civil public sphere, we could fruitfully consider the reciprocal lines of influence between it, the state, and the economy. This perspective could point us to an important range of questions begging for serious research. For example, what is an optimal relation (or division of labor) among the state, civil society and the market under contemporary conditions? What institutional reforms or redesigns are necessary to accomplish the material goals of the welfare state without destroying incentives for individual and group initiative or responsibility? What type of federalism can encourage democratic participation and citizen initiative without feeding into parochialism and local intolerance? What legal paradigm could guarantee the basic rights of civil society without sacrificing public to private autonomy? What conception of constitutionalism could protect the plurality of forms of life within civil society from intolerant majorities without reifying “difference”? How can the media of communication, which are crucial to the generalization of norms of reciprocity, be more receptive to civil input without allowing the power of money to control the agenda of debate and to silence others? And what effect does the ever more prominent role of money in politics have on the vitality of civil and political institutions?

Civic renewal requires us to ask how the state, law, and the professions might pre-structure the terrain so

that the autonomy of civil society, the vitality of civil publics, and civiness may be strengthened. In particular, it requires us to ask how the state can be made more receptive to organizational initiatives and public expression from within civil society. The rhetoric of civic and moral decline does not address such questions. But they should be at the heart of democratic theory.

—Jean L. Cohen

Jean L. Cohen, associate professor of political science at Columbia University, is the co-author (with Andrew Arato) of *Civil Society and Political Theory* (MIT Press, 1992). Sources: Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1963); Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton University Press, 1993); Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995); Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone Revisited,” *Responsive Community*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1995); Robert Putnam, “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America,” *American Prospect* 24 (1996); Antonio Gramsci, “State and Civil Society,” in *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers, 1971); Alain Touraine, *The Voice and The Eye* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Alberto Melucci, “The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements,” *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1985); Alberto Melucci, “The New Social Movements: A Theoretical Approach,” *Social Science Information*, vol. 19 (1980); Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT Press, 1989); Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun (MIT Press, 1992); John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason,” in *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993); Margaret Levi, “Social and Unsocial Capital: A Review Essay of Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work*,” in *Politics and Society*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1996); Theda Skocpol, “Unraveling from Above,” *American Prospect*, vol. 6, no. 1 (March/April 1996); Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Harvard University Press, 1981, c1970); Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, no. 2 (1981); James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Harvard University Press, 1990); Mark Warren, “What Should We Expect From More Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics,” *Political Theory*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1996); Claus Offe, “Trust and Knowledge, Rules and Decisions: Exploring a Difficult Conceptual Terrain,” paper delivered at “Democracy and Trust” conference at George Washington University, Nov. 7–9, 1996; Nadia Urbanati, “The Art of Tolerance,” *Dissent* (1993); Henry E. Brady, Kay L. Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Harvard University Press, 1995); Michael Schudson, “What If Civic Life Didn’t Die?” *American Prospect*, vol. 6, no. 1 (March/April 1996); Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton University Press, 1982); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jean L. Cohen, “Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements,” *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1985); John Dryzek, “Political Inclusion and the Dynamics of Democratization,” *American Political Science Review* (Sept. 1996).

Will the Circle Be Unbroken? The Erosion and Transformation of African American Civic Life

Scholarly and popular debates about restoring America's civic health are fraught with contradictions. While social, political, and economic changes over the past decades have undoubtedly altered the meaning and nature of civil society in contemporary America, just how and to what degree these changes have affected the nation's civic life remains largely unsettled. Misconceptions and contradictions abound particularly when we consider the nature and meaning of civic life for African Americans.

Historically, political behavior in the black community has been characterized by a set of distinctive attitudes and participatory norms. Scholars have consistently shown, for example, that African Americans have higher levels of mistrust toward government institutions than are found in the mainstream

in inner-city communities may have disrupted the ties that kept black civic life intact for generations.

Social and Political Participation

In theory, confidence in governmental institutions makes for a strong democracy by encouraging citizens to participate in the workings of the polity. But for blacks, distrust in government has had a paradoxical link to civic engagement. Political scientist Richard Shingles and others have shown that black political activism is motivated primarily by feelings of black solidarity. These feelings, in turn, are stimulated by a combination of confidence in one's own political efficacy and cynicism towards government. This combination of efficacy and mistrust is particularly important in motivating blacks to participate in modes of political action that require a great deal of personal initiative. As Shingles explains, cynicism and feelings of competence create a "mentally healthier and politically more active black citizenry."

Research during the 1950s and 1960s showed that, controlling for education and other indicators of social class, blacks engaged more in social and political activities than did whites. Two main explanations were put forward at that time: blacks "over-participated" either because they needed to compensate for their exclusion from mainstream society by joining numerous groups, or because they were a part of an "ethnic community" that nurtured norms of community involvement. The compensation theorists described greater-than-white participation as "pathological," "excessive," "exaggerated," and "a mark of oppression," while the ethnic community theorists acknowledged (at least indirectly) that greater levels of black participation engendered social capital and should not be viewed as aberrant behavior.

By the 1980s, however, blacks no longer outparticipated whites in social and political activities. In fact, Sidney Verba and his colleagues show that the average numbers of political acts for blacks and whites today are nearly identical. While whites are involved more in some activities (voting, contributing money to cam-

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population, yet this has not always been a sign of civic decay. Social movements, a vital though largely overlooked component of American civil society in general, have been especially important for African Americans, most obviously, though not exclusively, during the activist 1960s.

This essay aims to assess the current state of black civic life by examining survey data on social and political activity. Using the 1960s as a benchmark, I examine both the nature and intensity of black participation at the height of the civil rights movement, and compare patterns of participation then to patterns in the contemporary period. In addition to looking at trends in various formal modes of political participation—campaigning for political candidates, contributing to political campaigns—I explore changes in group membership and participation in community-oriented activities. Finally, I consider patterns in organizational life across social class, and speculate on how poverty

paigns, contacting elected officials, affiliating with a political organization), blacks participate more than whites in others (campaigning for political candidates, protesting, and engaging in informal community activities).

These divergent patterns in participation suggest that participatory norms operate differently in the African American community. These norms embrace what Aldon D. Morris, Shirley J. Hatchett, and Ronald E. Brown describe as the "orderly and disorderly" sides of the political process. By "orderly and disorderly" they mean that blacks have been socialized into employing political tactics that lie both within and outside of normal political action. Boycotting, picketing, and joining protest marches are just as legitimate as tools of political expression as voting, campaigning for candidates, or contacting an elected official about a problem.

Oppositional Civic Culture

This participatory norm of mixing protest and system-oriented participation has been sustained historically by what I have described elsewhere as an oppositional civic culture. Black mainstream institutions—churches, social clubs, masonic orders, community organizations, schools—have traditionally nurtured norms that both legitimized the civic order and, subtly and at times overtly, served as sources of opposition to white supremacist practice and discourse. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba have shown how social institutions and system-supporting attitudes contribute to a society's civic culture, and hence to its stability. A sense of obligation to the polity, for example, is transmitted through a complex process

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that involves the "family, peer group, school, work place, as well as the political system itself." But while the culture and institutions of marginal citizens perform this civic role, they also transmit values that counter the dominant society's ideology of subordination, and they employ these values to justify and legitimize oppositional movements. As Aldon Morris explains, "the groundwork for social protest has been laid by the insurgent ideas rooted within churches, labor unions, voluntary associations, music, informal conversations, humor, and collective memories of those elders who participated in earlier struggles."

These oppositional norms have deep roots in African American politics and society. They operated during

the "racial uplift" and anti-lynching crusade of the National Association of Colored Women at the turn of the century; they sparked the boycott of segregated streetcars in southern cities after the 1896 *Plessy* decision; they stirred the demand for black citizenship rights through the Niagara Movement and the founding of the NAACP; they stimulated the black nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association after World War I; and they fostered A. Philip Randolph's campaign to unionize Pullman Porters as well as the 1941 March on Washington movement, which he organized but later cancelled after Franklin Roosevelt abolished racial discrimination in government jobs and contracting during World War II.

Such moments of political activism could not have taken place without a vibrant associational life in black communities. For example, it was the women's convention of the all-black National Baptist Convention that provided the early leadership and the networks for the secular-based black women's club movement. Middle-class organizations like the black college sorority Delta Sigma Theta mobilized on behalf of women's

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suffrage. Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, whose founding was inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois' call for "race leadership," developed citizenship schools in the urban South and with its slogan "A Voteless People is a Hopeless People" registered hundreds of blacks during the 1930s, decades before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) launched their citizenship schools in the 1960s. Working-class masonic organizations provided the organizational infrastructure for local chapters of the Garvey movement and served as a mechanism for recruiting men for the Pullman Porters' Union.

When opportunities for participation in electoral politics expanded with the northern migration of African Americans, black civil society continued to accommodate both system-oriented politics and protest in its tactical repertoire. Chicago provides perhaps the best example of an equilibrium between the two. Blacks in Chicago became an important and significant component of the Democratic party machine during and after the New Deal; they were also an important part of the city's Republican machine before the New Deal. In both cases, blacks were elected to Congress, the state legislature, and city council. But

black electoral success and political representation did not preclude the employment of "disorderly" tactics. In their landmark study of black Chicago, St. Clair Drake and Horace A. Cayton documented the various forms that the "organization of discontent" assumed in Chicago's black belt during the 1920s and 1930s. These included picketing and boycotting department stores and trade unions that refused to hire blacks, filing lawsuits against realtors who practiced discrimination through racially restrictive covenants, and organizing tenant strikes against high rents.

Forms of Participation in the 1960s

The unique participatory norm that combines system-oriented participation with protest strategies is evident when we consider patterns in black participation during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Although this era is an atypical period in black political history, it nonetheless provides a benchmark for exploring changes in black participation since the passage of the Voting Rights Act and other measures that promoted black inclusion in American politics and society.

Figure 1, taken from the 1966 Harris-Newsweek Survey on Race Relations, shows the frequency of participation in eleven modes of political action. These modes include system-oriented activities like asking others to register and vote, working for a political candidate, contributing money to a political candidate, or con-

tacting a public official. They also include protest activities like boycotting a store, marching in a demonstration, picketing an establishment, or taking part in a sit-in.

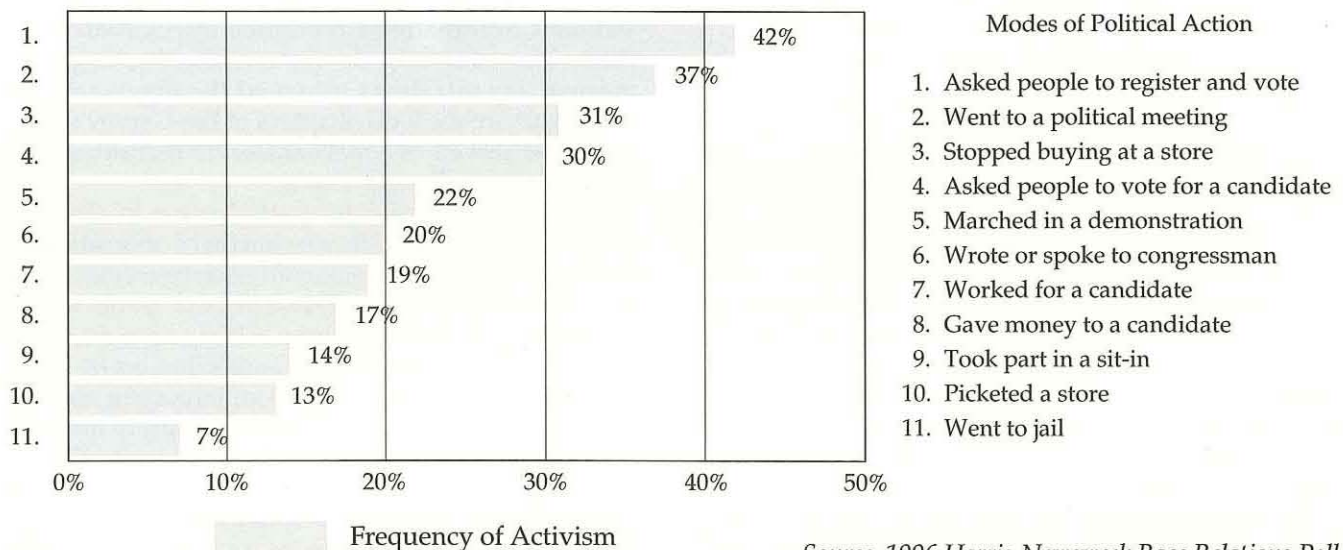
Political scientists who study participation usually consider system-oriented and protest activities as separate participatory spheres. But to explain the relative frequency of activities in this sample of blacks in the mid-1960s, we must attend not to the distinction

Black electoral success and political representation did not preclude the employment of "disorderly" tactics.

between protest and system-oriented activities, but rather to the distinction between activities that require high levels of individual initiative and resources, and those that do not.

System-oriented activities, such as asking people to register to vote (42%) or asking others to vote for one candidate over another (30%), required just as much energy as participation in consumer boycotts (31%)—and, in this historical context, less personal risk as well. Similarly, activities that required more energy (and in some cases more risk) included both system-oriented and protest activities; about an equal number of blacks reported marching in demonstrations (22%), writing or

Figure 1
Frequency of Black Political Activism
During the Civil Rights Movement



Source: 1966 Harris-Newsweek Race Relations Poll

speaking to their congressional representative (20%), working in a political campaign (19%), and contributing money to a political candidate or party (17%). Other activities represented more aggressive modes of action and were exclusively protest-oriented. They entailed even greater personal costs to actors, as indicated by the small proportion who engaged in sit-ins (14%) or pickets (13%), or who had gone to jail as part of their activism (7%).

Changes and Continuities in Black Civic Life

With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and, especially, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, it appeared for a time that system-oriented activities would predominate in African American civic life, partly as a response to black electoral success. By 1984, levels of protest among African Americans had declined significantly—about 15 percent of respondents to the National Black Election Study reported participation in protest meetings and demonstrations that year, compared to 22 percent in the Harris-Newsweek sample in 1966. Only 8 percent of respondents in 1984 had picketed or taken part in a sit-in, representing a decline of almost 6 percent. And the number of those who participated in boycotts of business or government agencies was 23 percent lower than in the mid-1960s.

More recent findings, however, have found both higher levels of participation and a new focus for black

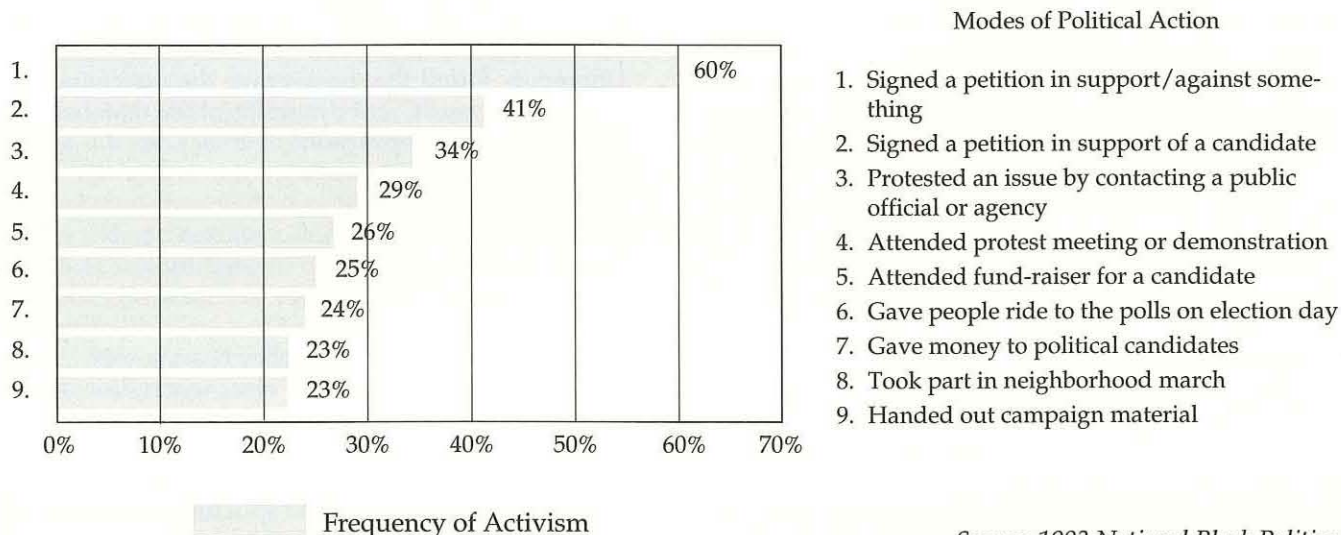
activism (see Figure 2). The 1993 National Black Politics Survey (NBPS) asked whether respondents had acted on such issues as neighborhood crime, drug trafficking, or school reform. In connection with these “quality of life” issues, about a third of the 1993 sample reported attending a protest meeting or demonstration—a 14 percent increase in protest from 1984 and a 7 to 15 percent increase from 1966. If we compare the 1966 Harris-Newsweek question on marching for “Negro

Some of the participatory energies that were once devoted to smashing Jim Crow have now been deployed to address quality-of-life issues.

rights” with the 1993 NBPS question on participation in neighborhood marches, the frequencies are nearly identical. It appears, then, that some of the participatory energies that were once devoted to smashing Jim Crow during the 1960s have now been deployed to address quality-of-life issues in black communities.

Admittedly, protest activism in the 1990s does not involve the sort of high-risk, nationally coordinated campaigns that were mounted in the 1960s. What these patterns do confirm, nonetheless, is the endurance of the participatory norm that has characterized black civic life for over a century. In the National Black

Figure 2
Frequency of Black Political Activism
in the Post-Civil Rights Era



Source: 1993 National Black Politics Survey

Politics Survey, respondents were just as likely to attend a fund-raiser for a candidate (26%), give rides on election day (25%), or donate money to candidates (24%) as they were to attend a protest demonstration (29%) or join a neighborhood march (23%).

Yet the apparent stability of this participatory norm may mask other trends in African American civic life. This becomes clear when we examine changes in group membership among blacks in four educational

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the widening class divisions in
African American civic life.*

categories—grammar school, some high school, high school, and more than high school. With the exception of blacks in the high school category, participation in organizations declined overall between 1967 and 1987. Unexpectedly, the *greatest* decline occurred among blacks in the highest educational category, from an average of about 2.5 memberships to about 1.6 memberships. This decline occurred with respect to both “expressive” organizations (sports clubs, social clubs, fraternal groups, and veterans groups) and “instrumental” groups (political groups, work-related/professional groups, unions, school groups, nationality groups, and service organizations). Still, it remains true for African Americans, as for other groups, that levels of associational membership are higher among better-educated people than among the less educated. Blacks in the two lowest education categories (grammar school education or less; some high school) are substantially less engaged than the black population at large.

Patterns in participation across social class grow more complicated when we examine community-oriented activities—working with others on local problems, contacting a local official about a problem, and helping form groups to solve a local problem. These participatory acts entail neighborly activities, the type of participation that promotes and sustains social connectedness, trust, and networks. Findings by Nie and his colleagues suggest that little had changed for blacks or whites between 1967 and 1987. In fact, in the general population there was an *increase* in community-oriented activities. More Americans reported working with others on local problems (4% increase), contacting a local official (10% increase), and helping to form groups (3% increase) in the later survey than in 1967. For blacks, the patterns show increases or only insignificant declines.

But a look at black community-oriented participation by social class tells a different story. Although

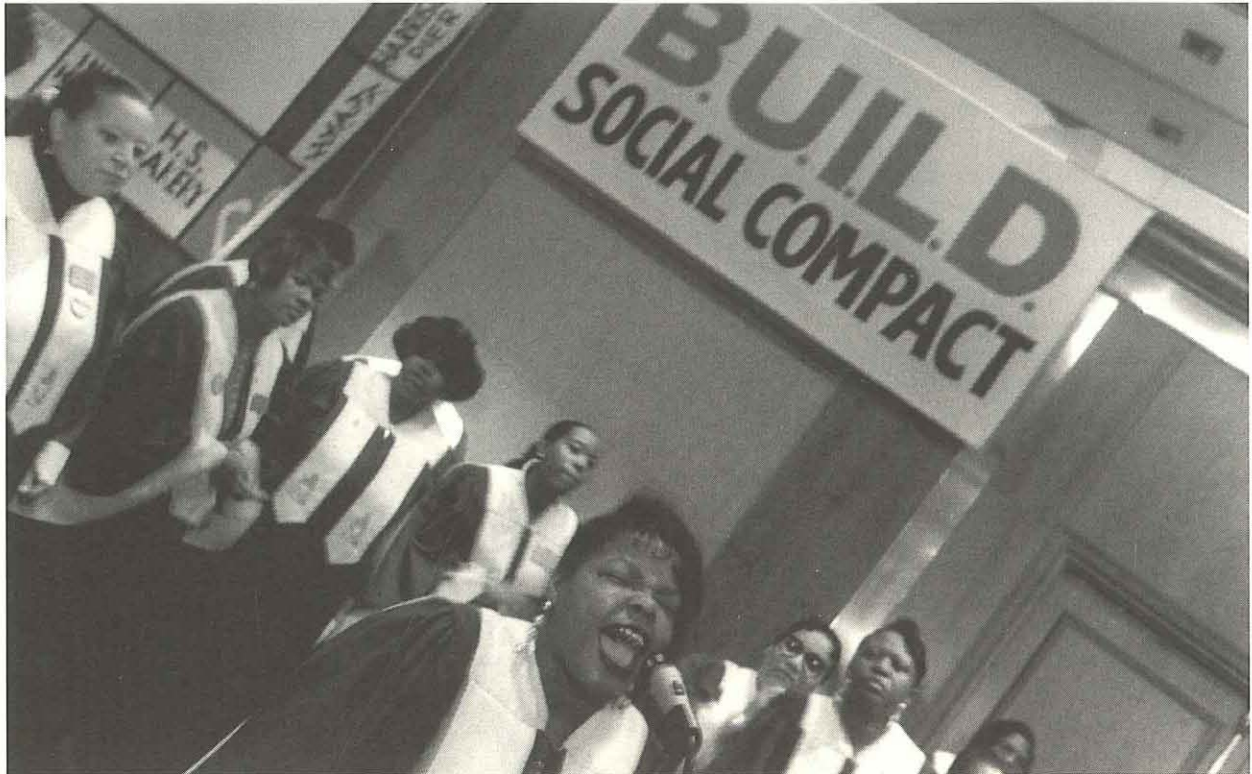
group membership among blacks in the highest educational category has declined, the rate of participation among this group in community-enhancing activities has remained the same. But for each category below the highest educational group, there has been significant erosion in community participation. The two lowest educational categories witnessed the greatest declines. Their scores hovered near half a standard deviation below the average for all blacks in 1967; by 1987 their score plummeted toward two standard deviations below the population mean. These findings suggest that the increasing economic inequalities within the black population are also reflected in civic life. They partly confirm sociologist William Julius Wilson’s claim about the increasing social isolation of poor blacks, and they raise serious questions about the transmission of participatory norms that have characterized black civic life for generations.

The contradictory trends I have described were best symbolized in the 1995 Million Man March on Washington. The march focused on the same values that civil society crusaders want to strengthen—personal responsibility, self-help efforts, social trust (specifically among blacks themselves), and participation in civic groups. Yet many of the participants were

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already firmly engaged in civic life. The gathering on the Mall represented a solid core of black civil society—(male) family members, fraternity brothers, masonic orders, church groups, black nationalist organizations, Boy Scout troops, black student unions, neighborhood groups, and even black gay organizations, among many others. Moreover, a survey by Howard University found that on average the marchers were considerably more active in political life than both the black and white populations at large. Out of a sample of more than 1,000 participants, nearly all (87%) reported that in the past year they had signed a petition for some cause; half had contacted a public official by phone or by writing (55%); slightly less than half had either contributed money to a political campaign (46%), volunteered or served in a political campaign (45%), or attended a public policy hearing (44%); and a significant number reported visiting a public official (38%) or attending a state or national convention (22%).

But if the march attracted a considerable number of political activists from the nation’s diverse black communities, it also indicated the widening class divisions in African American civic life. Most participants at the



A gospel choir performs at a fund-raising dinner for Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), a coalition of churches that has campaigned for expanded low-income housing, scholarships for African American students, and payment of a "living wage" to service workers in industries that benefit from city contracts or subsidies.

Photograph by Joseph Kohl

Million Man March were not from the poor or even from the marginal working-class segments of black society. As the Howard University research team reported, they came "primarily from the middle and upper social and economic strata of the Black community." Nearly half had grown up in two-parent homes, about 40 percent made over \$50,000 a year, and nearly 60 percent had some college or had graduated from college. Like the earlier findings, this suggests that class may be structuring participation in black society and politics more than it did a generation ago.

Civic Culture and Neighborhood Poverty

Recent work by political scientists Cathy Cohen and Michael Dawson has documented the devastating effects of neighborhood poverty on black political and civic life in Detroit. Survey respondents who lived in Census tracts with more than 30 percent of residents living in poverty were less likely to engage in civic and social activities than blacks who lived in communities with less poverty. Residents in severely poor neighborhoods were less likely to belong to a church or social group, talk about problems with family and friends,

attend a meeting about a community problem or issue, or (not surprisingly) contribute money to a political candidate. The effects of living in "deadly neighborhoods" hold up even after taking into account individual levels of poverty and personal attributes like education and income.

Cohen and Dawson's findings, along with evidence on educational variations in group membership and community-enhancing activities, point to the disappearance, in many inner-city communities, of those institutions that Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte have called "free spaces"—environments in which "people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue." They also suggest that the institutions of civil society among the poor can no longer sustain an oppositional civic culture, leaving open the possibility that the "organization of discontent" might lead to "uncivil," disruptive alternatives. Without the institutions to instill the twin virtues of civic engagement *and* organized opposition against forces that perpetuate racial and economic inequalities, prospects for civic renewal for those at the margins of American society seem dim.

Rebuilding and strengthening civic life in inner-city communities will take an enormous commitment and effort. Voluntarism and role-modeling can only touch the surface of the vast problems they face. Institutions that have historically transmitted a civic culture of opposition are crumbling or no longer exist, and feelings of group solidarity may be weakening throughout the black population as other identities and interests begin to take shape. There is no longer a "black community" whose political interests are defined by the experience of racism alone.

Recent trends in black political attitudes are telling. Although nearly three quarters of blacks in the 1993 National Black Politics Survey agreed that "American society is unfair to black people," nearly 40 percent also agreed that "economic divisions in the black community have grown so much that black people as a group no longer share common interests." Class, gender, religion, nationality, and increasingly sexuality are also influencing the character of black society and politics—a phenomenon that is occurring in American society at large. On the other hand, race still remains the great social divide in American society and politics. Greater racial polarization in American society may actually reinforce feelings of black solidarity, even though greater differentiation within the black population is taking place.

So what is to be done? Just as a combination of participatory norms has historically characterized black civic life, multiple strategies must be deployed to rebuild and transform civic life in poor and working-class urban neighborhoods. This means helping citizens to transform their own communities by nurturing leadership *within* those communities. It means reviving and sustaining what Charles Payne calls the "organizing tradition," in which residents themselves—rather than charismatic figures or well-meaning volunteers with little knowledge of inner-city communities—teach and recruit other residents to organize. It means fostering associations and institutions—rather than personalities—that can nurture and sustain social capital.

The organizing tradition of group-centered leadership and the participatory norms that characterize black civic life will have to be deployed to attack the problems affecting poor neighborhoods. Those efforts, for instance, should encourage residents to demand that police and elected officials deliver equitable services and keep streets safe; to challenge financial institutions that redline poor communities as well as corporations that refuse to reinvest in those communities. It will require cultivating entrepreneurship, making all elected officials accountable for their (in)actions, and establishing "free spaces" (YMCA's, Boys Clubs, after-school programs in schools and churches) where residents can cultivate community-enhancing activities. It will mean creating incentives for multi-class,

highly structured institutions like masonic groups that can coordinate youth and community programs. Only with the aid of indigenous leadership and free spaces can civic life in poor communities begin to take root.

—Fredrick C. Harris

Fredrick C. Harris, assistant professor of political science at the University of Rochester, is the author of *Something Within: Religion in African American Political Activism* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Sources: Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam, Jr., "Race, Socio-Political Participation, and Black Empowerment," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 84 (1990); Richard D. Shingles, "Black Consciousness and Political Participation: The Missing Link," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 75 (1981); Marvin Olsen, "Social and Political Participation of Blacks," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 35 (1970); Thomas M. Gutterbock and Bruce London, "Race, Political Orientation, and Participation: An Empirical Test of Four Competing Theories," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 48 (1983); Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brady, and Jane Juno, *Participation in America: Continuity and Change* (January 1990); Aldon D. Morris, Shirley J. Hatchett, and Ronald E. Brown, "The Civil Rights Movement and Black Political Socialization," in *Political Learning in Adulthood*, edited by Roberta S. Sigel (University of Chicago Press, 1989); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1963); Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, eds., *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (Yale University Press, 1992); Paula Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement* (William Morrow, 1988); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Boycott Movement Against Jim Crow Street Cars in the South, 1900–1906," *Journal of American History*, vol. 55 (1969); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Harvard University Press, 1993); Charles Harris Wesley, *The History of Alpha Phi Alpha: A Development in College Life* (Foundation Publishers, 1953); William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925–37* (University of Illinois Press, 1991); St. Clair Drake and Horace A. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (University of Chicago Press, 1993); 1966 Harris-Newsweek Race Relations Poll; 1969 Gallup Survey on Black Americans, study number GO6955 (made available through the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut); National Black Politics Survey (1993); National Black Election Study (1984); Participation in America Study (1967); General Social Survey (1987); Lorenzo Morris, Joseph McCormick, II, Maurice Carney, and Clarence Lusane, "Million Man March: Preliminary Report on the Survey," *Wellington Group/OMAR and the Howard University Political Science Department* (November 1, 1995); Cathy Cohen and Michael C. Dawson, "Neighborhood Poverty and African American Politics," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 87, no. 2 (June 1993); Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Harper and Row, 1986); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California Press, 1995).

The “Quickened Conscience”: Women’s Voluntarism and the State, 1890–1920

The history of voluntarism among American women’s organizations offers a valuable perspective on debates now taking place about the nature of civil society and its relationship to the state. Do state initiatives limit those of voluntary agencies? Does the expansion of state responsibilities reduce the effectiveness of voluntary groups? Is society best served by leaving the solution of social problems to voluntary associations independent of state authority and control?

These questions have acquired compelling resonance today, as Americans seek political strategies to address the social and economic changes wrought by an emerging global economy. Should we rely more heavily on voluntary effort and trim the state accordingly? Or should we expect voluntary groups to work closely

Many of our civil associations, much of our political culture, and the basic tenets of what might be called our current social contract emerged during those decades. I want to describe the role of women in this history, and then offer some general observations about its relevance to our current preoccupations.

Empowering Women

More than any other factor, the separation of church and state accounts for the remarkable strength and independence of women’s voluntary associations in the United States. Beginning with Virginia in 1776 and ending with Connecticut in the 1840s, all American states eventually broke the traditional ties that had bound church and state together. This process greatly empowered the laity, whose financial donations now took the place of state monies in supporting the ministry and the church, and accordingly put greater control over church affairs into their hands.

The empowerment of the religious laity had the unexpected consequence of empowering women, not only because women constituted a majority of church members, but also because, beginning in the 1820s, women were able to form vigorous pan-Protestant lay organizations, which challenged the authority of ministers and generated an autonomous social agenda. The best example of such an organization before 1870 was the American Female Moral Reform Society (AFMRS). When the national arm of the AFMRS was formed in 1839, it united almost five hundred preexisting locals scattered in the towns and villages of New England and New York. The AFMRS had no equivalent in England or Europe, where church and state remained entwined and the female laity enjoyed less autonomy.

In the depression winter of 1873–74, another pan-Protestant organization, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, emerged to supplant the AFMRS. By 1883 a branch of the WCTU existed in almost every American county. According to historian Ruth Bordin, the WCTU reached its height around 1890, when, in keeping with its campaign to “Do Everything,” in

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American political culture.*

with formal political institutions? Historical studies cannot answer these present-day questions directly, but by offering models of past options they can illuminate current ones.

This essay focuses on women’s voluntarism during the watershed of American history between 1890 and 1920 known as the Progressive era. During this period, traditions of voluntarism and traditions of limited government in the United States fostered women’s associations of extraordinary strength and independence. The fact that many social problems associated with rapid industrialization, rapid urbanization, and massive immigration remained unsolved by predominantly male institutions—whether civil or affiliated with the state—offered a fertile field for women’s activism. At the same time, women’s voluntary organizations added crucial ingredients to the political culture, which, with the aid of the state and of male civil institutions, created an effective new model for addressing social problems.

Chicago alone it maintained "two day nurseries, two Sunday schools, an industrial school, a mission that sheltered four thousand homeless or destitute women in a twelve-month period, a free medical dispensary that treated over sixteen hundred patients a year, a lodging house for men that had [by 1889] provided temporary housing for over fifty thousand men, and a low-cost restaurant."

Throughout the United States, the WCTU provided prodigious social services to local communities and offered women a wide range of leadership opportunities within their communities. By 1896 twenty-five out of a total of thirty-nine "departments" within the WCTU dealt wholly or in large part with nontemperance issues, such as prisons and jails, juvenile welfare, and "the industrial question." To maximize their political power, in the 1870s WCTU locals took the shape of congressional districts, and in 1881 the Union endorsed woman suffrage.

Thus, by the time women's organizations began to address the social problems of the 1890s, two generations of women's vigorous and autonomous social activism had preceded them. The pattern of women's participation in American public culture was well established. Although they lacked rights as individuals (especially as married persons), they exercised power collectively through women's organizations.

The Role of Education

The generation of women who did so much to reshape American public culture between 1890 and 1920 built on traditions of activism that arose from the separation of church and state, but their opportunities for community service were greatly expanded by their increased access to higher education. By 1880 one of every three students enrolled in American institutions of higher learning was female. Three kinds of institutions produced this remarkable result. First, elite women's colleges, such as Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley, began accepting students between 1865 and 1875, providing equivalents to elite men's colleges. Second, state universities, established through the allocation of public lands in the Morrill Act of 1862 and required to be "open for all," made college educations accessible for the first time to large numbers of middle-class daughters in the nation's central and western states. Third, large numbers of women were enrolled in normal colleges or teacher-training institutions; indeed, the chief force driving women's access to higher education between 1830 and 1870 was their employment as teachers in the hamlets and villages of the newly settled West.

Though a small percentage of all women in the 1890s, college-trained women in American cities exercised an influence disproportionate to their numbers. Vida

Scudder, a Smith graduate, summarized the spirit of their empowerment in 1890: "We stand here as a new Fact—new to all intents and purposes, within the last quarter of a century: Our lives are in our hands." Women's unprecedented access to higher education in the United States by 1880 created a generation of leaders capable of effectively channeling women's activism to meet the new challenges of their modernizing society.

The Social Settlement Movement

The best-known and most influential flowering of women's public culture in the 1890s was the social settlement movement. Imitating the British example of Toynbee Hall, settlements consisted of middle-class people who took up residence and tried to promote civil institutions in poor, working-class urban neighborhoods. In the United States this movement was predominantly female, and the neighborhoods were populated by immigrants. Like Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago in 1889, most of the movement's leaders were women who had been born around 1860 and had spent the 1880s searching for work commensurate with their talents. At all levels, the settlement movement attracted women college graduates who had few alternatives other than marriage or teaching.

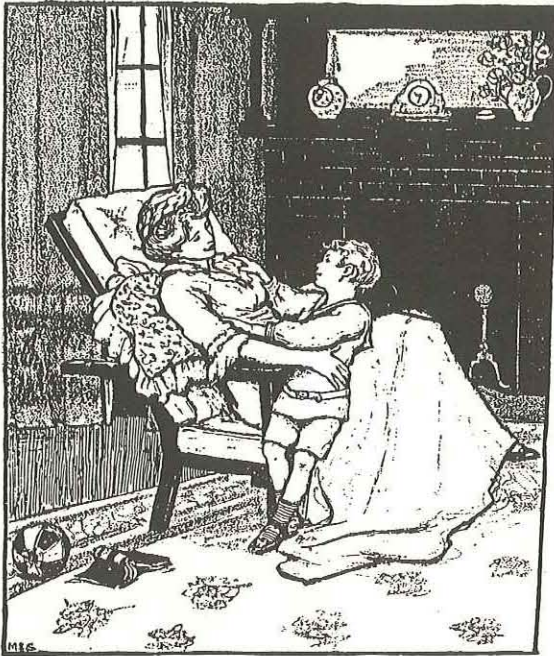
By 1910 over four hundred settlements had been established in American cities—most drawing on private sources for financial support, some on organizations like the YWCA, some on churches. About three quarters were founded by women. In about half, all the residents were women, and in another third the

Social settlements were sites of tremendous originality, creating new civic institutions and conceiving important policy innovations.

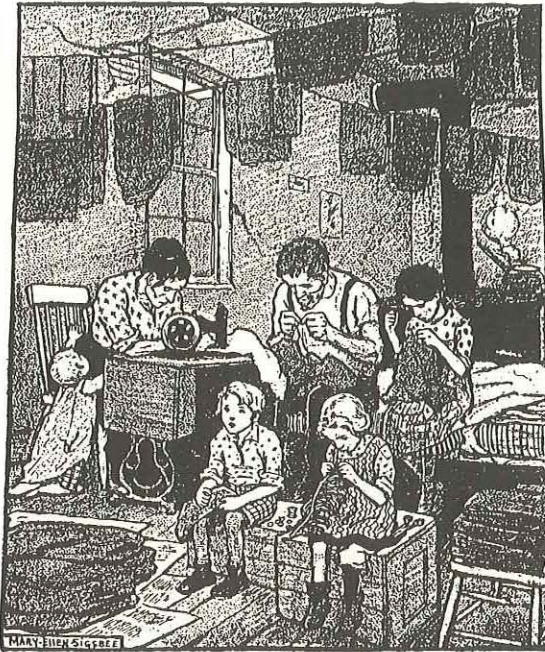
majority of residents were women. Settlements were sites of tremendous originality, creating new civic institutions, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which arose out of the Henry Street Settlement in 1909, and conceiving important public policy innovations, such as the creation of the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1912, which in turn originated the first federal health legislation, the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, passed in 1920.

Women reformers affiliated with the social settlement movement formed the core of what has been called a "female dominion" of reform. Much of the power of that dominion rested on the support it received from a wide range of women's voluntary

TO THE WOMAN IN THE HOME



How can a mother rest content with this—



When such conditions exist as this?

There are thousands of children working in sweat-shops like the one in the picture. There are thousands of children working in mines and mills and factories. Thousands more are being wronged and cheated by Society in countless ways.

IS NOT THIS **YOUR** BUSINESS?

Intelligent citizens WHO CARED could change all this—providing always, of course, that they had the power of the ballot.

DO **YOU** CARE?

Mothers are responsible for the welfare of children.
This duty as mothers requires that they should demand

VOTES FOR WOMEN!

NATIONAL WOMAN SUFFRAGE PUBLISHING CO., Inc.

PUBLISHERS FOR THE

NATIONAL AMERICAN WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION
605 FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK CITY

organizations formed in this period, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Congress of Mothers (later called the PTA), the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Association of Colored Women, the American Association of University Women, and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Support also came from

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the woman suffrage movement, which gradually muted its defense of suffrage as a right and amplified its advocacy of suffrage on the grounds of the reform agenda that women could accomplish with the vote. For example, a flyer issued by the National American Woman Suffrage Association around 1910, "To the Woman in the Home," advocated votes for women on the basis of their duty to end sweatshop working conditions.

Women's Activism and the State

There is no doubt that traditions of voluntarism and limited government formed a positive and innovative context for women's organizations in the United States. The strength of women's voluntarism drew on the strength of voluntarism within American political culture generally. Yet these traditions were themselves a fundamental obstacle that prevented American political culture from addressing some of the era's most grievous problems. For women's organizations, the challenge was to reach beyond voluntarism to forge new models of public responsibility involving the state.

Courts enforced the concept of limited government by prohibiting legislatures from responding to many civil groups who advocated enlarged state responsibility. For example, after the fledgling American Federation of Labor in the early 1880s obtained the passage of a New York law that prohibited the production of cigars in tenements, the New York Appeals Court ruled the law unconstitutional. As head of the AFL, Samuel Gompers concluded that "the power of the courts to pass upon the constitutionality of the law so complicates reform by legislation as to seriously restrict the effectiveness of that method." But women's organizations continued to pursue "reform by legislation," and with some success. Two years after the *Lochner* decision (1906), in which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a New York law limiting the hours of work for bakers, the National Consumers' League (NCL) won a landmark case permitting regulation of

working hours for women, on the grounds that women were different from men and deserved different treatment.

As important as such victories were, women's organizations did not pursue their public agenda through court battles alone. In fact, women's voluntarism in the Progressive era overflows with examples of organizations forming partnerships with the state to implement goals that could not be achieved without the power of the state. This paradigm is well represented in the "White Label" campaign of the National Consumers' League, which between 1899 and 1917 sought to improve working conditions in the garment industry.

The White Label

The first league, founded in New York City in 1890, began when working-class women appealed to middle-class consumers about their working conditions in a hat-making firm. In 1898, Florence Kelley, who the next year became executive director of the national organization, proposed a White Label that would identify products from factories that complied with state factory law, hired no children under 16, made all goods on the premises, and had no employees working overtime. Kelley identified some factories

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already worthy of the label, designed the label, created a model contract between manufacturers and consumers' leagues, and devised "a well-considered plan for advertising the label."

Although the NCL and its local leagues included some trade union members, consumers' leagues consisted overwhelmingly of white, middle-class women. Anti-sweatshop campaigns in major American cities in the 1890s appealed to middle-class self-interest by emphasizing the public health threat posed by garments produced in disease-ridden tenements. Middle-class consumers were taught to fear that such garments might import smallpox, diphtheria, or other diseases into their homes. The new germ theory of disease transmission lent credence to this view.

Yet middle-class consumers were not alone in their concern for clean and healthful working conditions. Such conditions also mattered to workers. Dank air, filthy floors, and stinking toilets were some of the most objectionable features of sweatshop labor. "The shops are unsanitary—that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used," strike leader

THE CONSUMERS' LEAGUE
OF
MASSACHUSETTS

4 Joy Street, Boston.



THIS LABEL

Certifies that the goods which carry it have been made in clean and safe factories under good conditions, and that the manufacturers who use the label employ no children and give out no work to be made up outside the factories.

April, 1907

*White Label
Consumers' League of Massachusetts
Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College*

Clara Lemlich said in 1909. Tuberculosis was common in the garment industry—induced by the long hours and damp air—and spread rapidly in unventilated rooms, so the quality of air could be a life-and-death matter to sweatshop workers. Thus health issues forged a common bond between consumers and producers in the garment industry—a bond that promoted the NCL's view that it was speaking for the welfare of the whole society, not the narrow interests of one group.

Acting as though they believed that the state, too, represented the welfare of the whole society, league members worked closely with state and local officials. The Louisville league exemplified this process in 1902. Though its campaign began by targeting consumers (who were asked to purchase goods carrying the Consumers' League label) and leading department stores (who were urged to carry such goods), the league also assisted, as its minutes show,

in passing the Child Labor Law and the Compulsory Education Law and amending them at many sessions of the Legislature. Cooperated in enforcing both, by working with the truant officers, visiting the homes of truants, and supplying shoes and clothing necessary to return them to school.

Later the league boasted that it had "secured the passage of the ten hour law for women, which is the only labor law for women in Kentucky."

In Louisville, as elsewhere, the label campaign ineluctably carried league members into new realms of knowledge about their communities. It did so by raising detailed questions about working conditions that were new to this middle-class constituency. Before local leagues could award the label to manufacturers, they had to answer a multitude of questions about the work process. How far below the standard set by the Consumers' Label were their own state laws? Should the state issue licenses for home workers? Was their own state high or low on the NCL's ranked list showing the numbers of illiterate child workers in each state? Should laws prohibit the labor of children at age 14 or 16? Should exceptions be made for the children of widows? Could workers live on their wages, or were they forced to augment their pay with relief or charitable donations? How energetically were state factory laws enforced? How could local factory standards be improved? Such questions, most of which were quite alien to middle-class women in 1890, by 1905 had acquired personal meaning and moral significance for thousands of politically active women.

Most of these questions assumed that the NCL's goals could not be fully implemented without the coercive power of the state to intervene in the relationship between employer and employee. Indeed, it is not too much to say that their campaign would not have been

possible without the state's coercive power as a weapon in their armory. In that sense, their own robust intervention in public culture was decisively aided rather than diminished by the power of the state, and the more responsive the state was to their interests, the more actively they promoted their goals.

The NCL's cooperation with "enlightened" businessmen was also an important feature of its success. The alliance of large department store owners with the League's White Label campaign exemplified the tripartite dimensions of its coalitions: they included entrepreneurs as well as reformers and their grassroots supporters. Economically, the campaign aided large producers who could achieve economies of scale in the

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pricing of their goods, and who profited from the more stable workforce attracted by better working conditions. These economic facts of life became dramatically apparent in the partnership that John Wanamaker and his department stores forged with the White Label campaign. One of the League's largest approved manufacturers, Wanamaker originated what became a staple of the campaign—a series of exhibits in which garments bearing the label were augmented by pictures of sweatshop labor compared to pictures of workers producing Wanamaker garments. Wanamaker carried the exhibit to state and international fairs throughout the United States in the decade before World War I. The White Label campaign offered Wanamaker a perfect opportunity to give his commercial leadership a moral aura, and at the same time consolidate his economic power.

After 1908 the National Consumers' League moved away from the White Label campaign and put its public power to new uses. Working with its local league in Oregon, the NCL sponsored, in *Muller v. Oregon*, a pathbreaking argument before the Supreme Court, in which the Court for the first time recognized the validity of sociological evidence. The so-called "Brandeis Brief" was actually written by Brandeis's sister-in-law, Josephine Goldmark, who was Florence Kelley's chief assistant. In 1917 the League again worked with its Oregon local to establish the constitutionality of hours regulations for men in non-hazardous occupations. Between 1910 and 1923, the NCL conducted a successful campaign for the passage of minimum wage legislation, which in 1938 became the basis for the adoption of minimum wage provisions in the Fair Labor Standards Act. In this way, the White Label campaign

became an opening wedge for more general protections for American wage earners.

Lessons of the Campaign

How does the White Label campaign illuminate our concerns about the relationship between civil associations and the state? Four conclusions seem relevant.

First, the campaign drew women into public life in ways that validated what might be called their "social citizenship" almost twenty years before the passage of the woman suffrage amendment to the Constitution. By confronting large social questions that grew out of but reached beyond issues related to women and children, women demonstrated their value as equals to men in public life.

Second, women's voices "elaborated and made authoritative" (in Tom Bender's phrase) new forms of power in public life. The campaign created a new "supply" of women's power. The "demand" for that power came from the need within newly evolving liberalism for an ethical buttress to support state intervention in the economic marketplace. The step from concern about women and children to advocacy of state intervention was an easy one for many women to take.

Third, NCL members provided innovative answers to "the social question." In its component parts, "the social question" included the largest issues then being debated in public life: What do the social classes owe one another? How could civil society affect the marketplace economy? Where should middle-class people stand in relation to the changes precipitated by massive industrialization, urbanization, and immigration? Where should middle-class people stand in relation to the often violent struggle between capital and labor? And how might that conflict be mediated by the state?

Fourth, in our own time liberalism has been defined as a set of principles whereby practitioners of divergent conceptions of the good can peacefully coexist. But liberalism requires what today's public culture calls a "level playing field." Consumers' Leagues and other women's voluntary associations helped create that fictive field.

The Fate of Women's Activism

We can make several general statements about the relevance of this model of problem-solving to the present. First, it shows that transformative economic change can become an impetus for extensive social and political change. Second, it suggests that the potential for solving social problems lies in a fruitful combination of civil and state initiatives rather than a withering of state initiatives. Third, the model suggests that given the voluntarist biases in American political culture, we

will always be debating where the line should be drawn to limit state authority. That debate arises more from the vitality of voluntarism in our political culture than from the power of our state.

At first glance, the Progressive model might make one wonder whether growing government capacity after 1930 undermined the civic vitality of women's pre-1920 activism. But a closer examination reveals this conclusion to be unwarranted. Historians devote much of their energies to analyzing causal relationships among variables. A simple correlation—such as that between civic activism and limited government capacity at one time, and declining civic activism and government with larger capacity at another time—may or may not reflect a causal relationship. In fact, everything we know about women's activism before 1920 leads us to conclude that this correlation was not causal.

Historians have identified a multitude of causes that led to the decline in women's civic activism. The two most important were the end of the suffrage movement with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, and "Red Scare" attacks on women's activism by hyper-patriotic, right-wing groups in the 1920s. Also important was the cultural shift in the psychological construction of women's identity away from a nineteenth-century emphasis on the differences between the sexes to a twentieth-century emphasis on the similarities between the sexes. Whereas the nineteenth-century formulation had encouraged women's collective activism, the twentieth-century formulation discouraged women's group affiliation and instead encouraged various forms of individualism. Growing government capacity empowered women's activism before 1920, but the effectiveness of women's social agenda had already substantially declined before the New Deal of the 1930s. During the 1920s, it shifted away from social justice issues and towards a more narrow concern with women's rights (for example, the inclusion of women on juries) and clean government. After 1950, when married women between the ages of 35 and 55 entered the paid labor force in unprecedented numbers, women's activism declined even further. Thus, causes other than the expanded capacity of government explain the decline of women's activism in the second half of the twentieth century.

Is this decline irreversible? Though historians shy away from making predictions, I venture to say that new forms of voluntary association will probably emerge within American political culture. Perhaps they will be connected with the global processes that are driving so much contemporary change—massive immigration, for example, or the Internet. They are not likely to be generated by downsizing the state. On the

contrary, new forms of voluntary association are likely to need partnerships with the state to achieve their goals. If American political culture survives the global marketplace now gaining so dramatically in strength, it is likely to do so because those partnerships embody one of the most creative sites in American society.

—Kathryn Kish Sklar

Kathryn Kish Sklar, professor of history at the State University of New York-Binghamton, is the author, most recently, of *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830–1900* (Yale University Press, 1995). Sources: Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (Hill and Wang, 1967); John D. Cushing, "Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780–1833," *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 3, ser. 26 (1969); Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage from Property to Democracy, 1760–1860* (Princeton University Press, 1960); Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly*, vol. 23 (1971); Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (Temple University Press, 1981); Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (Yale University Press, 1985); Vida Scudder, "The Relation of College Women to Social Need," *Association of Collegiate Alumnae Publications*, series 2, no. 30 (Oct. 1890); Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (Dutton, 1925); Eileen Boris, "'A Man's Dwelling House Is His Castle': Tenement House Cigarmaking and the Judicial Imperative," in *Work Engendered: Towards a New History of American Labor*, edited by Avon Baron (Cornell University Press, 1991); Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Harvard University Press, 1962); National Consumers' League annual reports, 1901–1904; Judith Walzer Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Princeton University Press, 1982); Clara Lemlich, "Life in the Shop," in *New York Evening Journal* (Nov. 28, 1909), quoted in *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, edited by Leon Stein (Quadrangle, 1977); Minutes, Consumers' League of Kentucky, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College; The Consumers' League of Ann Arbor, *Fourth Annual Report*, 1903; Mary I. Wood, *History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs for the First Twenty-Two Years of its Organization* (Dabor Social Science Publications, 1978; first edition, 1912); Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, vol. 73 (June 1986); Wendy Sarvasy, "From Man and Philanthropic Service to Feminist Social Citizenship," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society*, vol. 1 (Fall 1994); Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920–1940* (Greenwood, 1983); J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (University of Illinois Press, 1973); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Yale University Press, 1987).

Civic Infrastructure in America: Government and the Nonprofit Sector

For those who worry about the condition of America's civil society, the fate of membership organizations that depend on local volunteers is a matter of particular concern. Robert Putnam has reported that over the past few decades, the growth of the nonprofit sector has not been primarily in traditional membership groups such as the Elks or the PTA. Instead, growth has been concentrated in advocacy and service provider organizations linked to the state. Some critics charge that this trend has led to a deterioration of voluntarism and civic engagement. Many nonprofits, these critics say, never become an integral

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part of their communities. Instead of developing the capacities of ordinary citizens, they concentrate power and resources in the hands of paid staff and "credentialed elites." And as a result, the indictment concludes, these groups have been sadly ineffective in resolving social problems, especially those connected with urban poverty.

In this essay, I examine the changing character of nonprofits in the postwar period, with a special emphasis on service providers. I consider why the government has encouraged the formation and expansion of these groups, and whether they have indeed supplanted networks and organizations that rely on direct volunteer involvement. I also ask how reductions in state support are affecting nonprofits and the communities they serve.

More generally, this essay addresses the civic infrastructure of local community as it relates to the provision of social welfare and health services. While "civic infrastructure" is subject to different definitions, I will use it to refer to the network of public and voluntary associations in a community and their capacity to address social problems. The rise of nonprofit service agencies in the postwar period, funded extensively by government, altered the civic infrastructure. More

recent shifts in federal policy, including welfare reform and devolution, raise new questions about local civic infrastructure in the United States.

The Postwar Transformation

Prior to the 1940s, some private service agencies in America received cash or in-kind assistance from the state. This aid tended to be small-scale, with little public oversight or monitoring. Many service providers were in fact opposed to accepting government funds, viewing their mission as private and separate from government.

The postwar years represented a dramatic change in the government-nonprofit relationship and the role of nonprofits in society. The federal government became less reluctant to fund private organizations, and in turn, these organizations became less resistant to the idea of accepting public money. In response to the imperatives of the war, federal funding for defense-related research at large nonprofit research universities rose sharply; after the war, government support for defense and energy-related research continued to rise.

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Diversification also occurred: in the late 1940s and 1950s, the federal government inaugurated several new grant programs in education, mental health, developmental disabilities, public health, and child welfare.

Federal support for nonprofit organizations was provided in several ways other than direct grants. For example, the GI Bill offered financial assistance to individuals, spurring greater access to and demand for higher education. Other federal initiatives helped nonprofit organizations with their capital needs. The federal Hill-Burton Act, for example, provided hundreds of millions of dollars to nonprofit (and public) health organizations for renovation and new construction. Federal grant-in-aid programs to the states offered

funding for efforts to improve regulations and standards for health and welfare services. And, the federal government offered technical assistance to nonprofit organizations and state and local governments to reform and upgrade their programs.

At least initially, the change in nonprofit revenues and programming was not particularly dramatic: during the 1950s, most nonprofit health, educational, and welfare organizations remained dependent upon fees, endowment income, and donations. Fee income was especially important as a revenue source: universities depended upon tuition; social welfare agencies relied upon client fees; and hospitals depended primarily upon a mix of private insurance payments and income from patients. The importance of donations as a source of support varied tremendously from one organization to the next. Social welfare agencies often received small

In the 1950s, many nonprofit service agencies saw themselves as separate from the public sector.

cash and in-kind donations from individuals and funds from the United Way—or the Community Chest, as it was known in the 1950s. But the Community Chest typically supported the established community agencies such as the American Red Cross, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the YMCA, and family service agencies. These agencies had been founded in the nineteenth century or the early part of the twentieth; few agencies founded in the postwar period, such as community programs for the developmentally disabled, received Community Chest funds.

The universe of service agencies was still relatively small by today's standards; even long-standing nonprofit agencies had meager budgets—often less than \$50,000 for agencies founded in the nineteenth century. Most nonprofit service agencies continued to see themselves as separate from the public sector. Except for selected child welfare agencies and service agencies in some urban areas such as New York City, nonprofit agencies were distinctly separate from public service agencies. They played a niche or residual role in the service system, providing counseling for families and children, recreational programs for youth and adults, transitional shelter, and emergency assistance.

Individuals needing intensive or long-term assistance were usually served by public agencies: state hospitals and schools for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled; training schools for juvenile delinquents. Cash assistance for the poor was provided by county welfare departments, and public housing by state and local authorities. With respect to health care,

the situation was more variable. But in many regions of the country, notably the South and West, nonprofit community hospitals were supplemented by a network of public hospitals serving the poor and the working classes.

In short, a community's response to social need involved a sizable effort from the public sector and a specialized response by private service agencies. The capacity of nonprofits to sustain their operations without significant public funding hinged upon the willingness of the public sector to shoulder responsibility for the poor and disadvantaged, albeit inadequately in many areas.

The War on Poverty and Beyond

This public and private mix of services faced growing criticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Activists charged that state hospitals and state schools were dehumanizing institutions which deprived the residents of their basic human rights, and that private service agencies neglected the poor and minorities in favor of the middle class and the wealthy. Implicit in these critiques was the view that the civic infrastructure of local communities—i.e., the combined efforts of public agencies, voluntary service agencies, and individual citizen volunteers—was hampered in its response to social need by scarce resources, inexperienced agency staff, and political opposition from local

The political climate became conducive to a major expansion of the federal role in social programs.

leaders. By the 1960s, the political climate had become conducive to a major expansion of the federal role in social programs.

For the most part, the War on Poverty and other new federal health and social welfare initiatives were implemented through new and existing nonprofit service providers at the grass roots. Programs as diverse as Head Start, community mental health centers, and programs for at-risk youth were primarily nonprofit programs funded by the federal government—either directly or through grants and contracts administered by state and local governments. Federal regulations and the new funds also provided incentives for state and local governments to increase their contracting with nonprofit social and health organizations. Many of the new contracts were with entirely new nonprofit organizations, created either by government officials or by local advocates in response to the availability of government funds.



Board members, staff, and volunteers from Chase-Brexton Health Services—a nonprofit, community-based health care provider for people with HIV—take part in the Baltimore Pride Parade, June 1997.

Federal funding stimulated the growth of nonprofit service agencies and related advocacy organizations through other avenues than direct contracting. Higher levels of cash assistance for the poor and disadvantaged allowed many people previously excluded from agency programs to pay for various services (sometimes the cash assistance went directly to the agency). New eligibility for services such as health care spurred greater demand for these same programs. The new federal initiatives also encouraged the growth of national advocacy organizations such as the National Association of Community Mental Health Centers and state associations such as the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers, which then pushed for more funding of nonprofit service agencies.

One important characteristic of the new nonprofits needs to be stressed: these organizations were providing services which were for the most part unavailable prior to the 1960s. Examples include community residential programs for the developmentally disabled, outpatient services for the chronically mentally ill, home care, shelters for domestic violence victims, and innovative intervention programs for abused children. At the same time, many of these nonprofits represented a form of privatization, assuming societal

responsibilities that had once been carried out by public institutions such as state welfare agencies or state hospitals.

The new service providers differed in important respects from traditional organizations. For instance, the older nonprofits tended to have large boards of directors, composed of community leaders. The boards of the newer agencies were more diverse, but smaller, and members were often recruited for their interest in a particular service, such as mental health, rather than for their links to the local community. There was seldom a general voting membership made up of local citizens. Thus, the structure of the newer agencies did not promote extensive community ties. Moreover, public funding encouraged these groups to focus their attention on government policy—for example, influencing government rate-setting and regulatory procedures—and not the cultivation of local support.

The new service providers generally lacked volunteers and depended heavily upon paid professional staff. The national and state advocacy groups were either small, staff-driven organizations or larger membership organizations that lacked the face-to-face contact characteristic of community organizations such as the PTA. State-level advocacy organizations emerged

as an important force in state politics on a host of new policy issues such as domestic violence, home care, and drug and alcohol prevention and treatment. Some of these new advocacy groups were affiliates of national organizations, while others were state-specific organizations but very interested in national-level policy concerns.

The emergence of these agencies, and the extensive government support of their work, raise complicated questions for public policy and for how we think about civic infrastructure and community. As we have seen, public funds allowed the provision of services that were previously unavailable; indeed, the new voluntary agencies funded by government can be viewed as

The absence of pressure to raise funds from the community meant that these agencies did not need extensive local ties to survive.

a response to the failure of the pre-1960s public and private service network to address social need adequately. These organizations also presented some community members with opportunities for employment and volunteer service on boards of directors. On the other hand, most of these organizations were professional agencies with volunteers in support functions rather than direct service roles. The absence of pressure to raise funds from the community meant that these agencies did not need extensive local ties to survive; their capacity to build wide social networks of volunteer and funding support was limited by their orientation toward government. Once established, these agencies also tended to fight to protect their service niche rather than to engage in creating ongoing networks of cooperation among public and private service agencies.

A Change in Direction

The growth of federal social spending halted in the late 1970s as many scholars and politicians started to question the direction of the welfare state in the United States and other advanced industrial countries. The high inflation and unemployment of the late 1970s created profound doubt about the future of the world economy and inevitably focused attention on government expenditures as a possible cause of the economic troubles of countries in North America and Europe.

Worries about the American welfare state contributed to Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980 and gave him the opportunity to win passage of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981, which inaugurated the first major wave of devolution of federal policy.

OBRA reduced federal spending for social programs, deregulated many federal grant programs, and consolidated many categorical federal social and health programs into block grants. In the ensuing years, federal spending for many social programs such as housing declined. On the other hand, federal health care spending escalated sharply, and during the 1980s and 1990s, new funding was appropriated for an array of programs, including drug and alcohol treatment, Head Start, foster care, and AIDS services.

The number of nonprofit organizations continued to rise despite devolution and federal cutbacks. The reasons are varied: after initial federal cutbacks, state and local governments substituted for lost federal revenue; nonprofit organizations generated alternative revenue through fund-raising, higher fees, and entrepreneurial activities such as real estate development and partnerships with for-profit organizations; and many agencies "absorbed" the cuts through lower salaries, longer queues for service, and fewer personnel.

Although definitive statistics are unavailable, the record suggests that changes in federal policy did not lead to a substitution of volunteers or private donations for paid professional staff and government funds. Many nonprofit service agencies were primarily professional organizations where volunteers cannot easily substitute for paid staff, and so agencies suffering cutbacks often eliminated services or imposed higher fees

Agencies suffering cutbacks often eliminated services or imposed higher fees rather than increasing their reliance on volunteers.

rather than increasing their reliance on volunteers. Private giving to support day-to-day operations was often difficult to generate, since many foundations prefer to provide grants for capital improvements or seed money for new programs. On the other hand, the restructuring of federal policy did not represent severe retrenchment; instead, it was a mixture of selected cuts combined with new spending.

Paradoxically, the selected cuts in the public sector—and the concomitant demand for greater accountability for the expenditure of public funds—created many new opportunities for nonprofits, even as they imposed certain constraints and hard choices. States closed public facilities and transferred responsibilities to nonprofit agencies. Some states shifted management responsibility for services such as child welfare and mental health to third-party, nonprofit (and, in some cases, for-profit) management organizations. Government at all levels also responded to emergent public problems such as hunger, homelessness, and AIDS primarily through

nonprofit service providers funded by the state. As in the postwar era, many of the new organizations provided services which did not previously exist. Meanwhile, the political ferment surrounding the Reagan cuts and his devolution policies prompted many groups to organize and petition the state. Some

As in the postwar era, many of the new organizations provided services which did not previously exist.

of these organizations wanted direct funding, but many were issue- or cause-related and simply wanted to influence government policy. Overall, the competition for public and private funds increased sharply, since the number of nonprofits outstripped available resources.

The scarcity of public and private charitable funds has encouraged nonprofit service organizations to tap fees and commercial activities—affinity cards and for-profit subsidiaries—as a source of revenue. Nonprofit housing developers such as community development corporations cobble together funding from many sources—bank loans, tax credits for investors, local government bond money, and private donations—to build low-income housing. Nonprofit hospitals operate for-profit home care agencies. Museums rely upon gift shops and blockbuster shows to generate revenue and memberships. The ability of nonprofits to tap new sources of public and private revenue is a major reason for the continued escalation in the number of tax-exempt, charitable 501(c)(3) organizations—from 322,000 in 1982 to 546,000 in 1992.

The impact of the ongoing restructuring of nonprofit service agencies on local civic infrastructure remains unclear. Many of these agencies perform a professional service role that cannot easily be assumed by community members without adequate training or background. Some nonprofits are reaching out to new community constituencies and striving to create new networks of political and social support. Mergers and consolidations appear to be more common. Nonetheless, many nonprofits remain focused on their own service niche and resist entering into cooperative arrangements with other service providers. The increased competition for public and private funds can discourage active cooperation among agencies.

The unanswered question for the future concerns the effects on the nonprofit sector of the current wave of devolution, as reflected in the 1996 welfare reform legislation, funding cutbacks, and the pending proposals for a shift in federal housing and health policy to the states. These current and proposed policies are sub-

stantively different from the changes in federal policy in the 1980s: the cutbacks are more extensive; state and local governments have greater discretion in spending money; and for-profit organizations are likely to compete aggressively with nonprofit service organizations for public funds. Consequently, many nonprofit service organizations which successively weathered the 1980s and 1990s may find themselves severely pressed financially, with many closures and mergers possible.

Nonprofits and Public Policy

The complex interplay between the nonprofit and public sectors in the postwar era presents several lessons for social scientists and policymakers. First, the prevailing view of America's "exceptionalism" with respect to its reliance on private associations needs to be rethought. The extensive direct and indirect government support for nonprofit organizations suggests that America's distinctiveness in the postwar period may lie in its use of nonprofits as a policy tool to achieve public purposes.

Second, the effects of public funding on nonprofits are not entirely positive. Government can undermine nonprofits through inappropriate regulations, funding delays and cutbacks, and political opposition. These problems can sap staff and volunteer enthusiasm, contribute to turnover, and destabilize agencies facing ser-

Some nonprofits are reaching out to new community constituencies and striving to create new networks of social and political support.

vice cuts and disruptions. And, as we have seen, reliance on public funding can encourage nonprofits to focus their attention on government rather than on the community around them.

The remedy for these problems, however, is not to curtail federal funding and place all our hopes in local communities, but instead to devise innovations in public and nonprofit management. To the extent that we are guided by a substitution paradigm—less government, more private activity and voluntarism—we risk overstating the capacity of local communities to respond to social need in the absence of government support.

To be sure, nonprofits can emerge in response to government failure. Recent faith-based grassroots programs to address poverty and unemployment are good examples. But these programs are quickly overwhelmed if they are forced to confront an array of social needs without government help in the areas of income maintenance, transportation, and health care,

even if this help is indirect. These programs also depend for their success on diverse public and private service options that allow the matching of individuals to appropriate programs. This array of services needs ongoing public support.

In an age of devolution, the challenge is to craft a new balance between private and public responsibility. The first task for policymakers is to design government policies which allow government to maintain accountability for the expenditure of public funds by nonprofit organizations without undermining their stability. Recent developments in performance evaluation, for example, have shown promise as strategies to measure service outcomes in nonprofit service agencies while encouraging flexibility, innovation, and efficiency. In addition, more research and evaluation must be undertaken to clarify under what circumstances collaboration and cooperation among nonprofits or between public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations is beneficial for local communities.

Many public initiatives to support the development of civic infrastructure will have to be undertaken by state and local government. State government should be cognizant of the need to help support the fiscal capacities of local and regional government: Without an adequate resource base, municipal policymakers will be unable to provide effective assistance to nonprofit associations in their community. State governments should also nurture and support the growth of statewide and regional associations representing nonprofit groups. These associations can be a source of crucial technical assistance and support for local associations, enhancing their ability to foster voluntarism and supportive social networks in the community. Statewide associations can also help with leadership development.

Even grassroots organizations staffed primarily by volunteers rely either directly or indirectly on government for their long-term sustainability. Neighborhood crime-watch groups need a police department that can respond to their concerns. PTA chapters will falter if the public schools are broke and the education wanting. Absent a vital public sector, voluntarism will not flourish.

Finally, the postwar expansion and evolution of voluntary associations demonstrates the complexity of community and ways to build or rebuild community.

If we as a society are committed to creating a more vibrant and healthy civic infrastructure, we need to examine ways in which local voluntary associations—from social service agencies to unions to churches—can become more connected to their communities, broadly defined. This challenging task will require new approaches by voluntary associations to governance, membership and community support.

Many voluntary associations are in the midst of experimenting with such approaches across the country. As we learn more about these strategies, we can begin to provide greater guidance and support to voluntary associations and the citizenry in building local civic infrastructure.

—Steven Rathgeb Smith

Steven Rathgeb Smith, associate professor in the Graduate School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, is the co-author (with Michael Lipsky) of *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Harvard University Press, 1993) and editor of the *Nonprofit and Volunteer Sector Quarterly*. Sources: Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6 (1995); Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (American Enterprise Institute, 1977); Martin Rein and Lee Rainwater, "The Public/Private Mix," in *Public/Private Interplay in Social Protection: A Comparative Study*, edited by Martin Rein and Lee Rainwater (M.E. Sharpe, 1986); A. K. Bixby, "Public Social Welfare Expenditures, Fiscal Year 1992," *Social Security Bulletin*, vol. 58, no. 2 (Summer 1995); Ruth Margaret Werner, *Public Financing of Voluntary Agency Foster Care: 1975 Compared with 1957* (Child Welfare League of America, 1976); Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (Anchor Books, 1961); R. Cloward and I. Epstein, "Private Social Welfare's Disengagement from the Poor: The Case of Family Adjustment Agencies," in *Social Welfare Institutions: A Sociological Reader*, edited by Mayer N. Zald (John Wiley and Sons, 1965); A. J. Kahn, "The Social Scene and the Planning of Services for Children," *Social Work*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1962); M. F. Gutowski and J. J. Koschel, "Social Services," in *The Reagan Experiment*, edited by John L. Palmer and Isabel V. Sawhill (Urban Institute Press, 1984); R. Lifset, "Cash Cows or Sacred Cows: The Politics of the Commercialization Movement," in *The Future of the Nonprofit Sector*, edited by Virginia Hodgkinson, et al. (Jossey-Bass, 1989); *Nonprofit Almanac: 1995-96* (Independent Sector, 1996); Julian Wolpert, "Delusions of Charity," *American Prospect*, no. 23 (Fall 1995).



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