The terms “voluntary organizations”, “nonprofit organizations” and “volunteering” do not generate identical connotations in the minds of peoples of varied nationalities because their origins are embedded in the particular historical, societal, political, and cultural contexts of North America and Western Europe (Oommen 1995). Thus it can be difficult for peoples from different social contexts to intuitively grasp what voluntary organizations and volunteering mean, mainly due to the lack of such entities in their own nations and the resultant unlikely chance of personal involvement in them. For instance, in Japan, one of the most advanced economies on the globe but located in East Asia, no word matches the term “volunteer”. “Borantia”, which is simply the Japanese pronunciation of the English term, appeared instead in dictionaries from the 1970s (Nakano 2005).

Today the culture of voluntary organizations and volunteering has been disseminated to many parts of the world from North America and Western Europe, along with other political and economic institutions such as democratization and industrialization. Diffusion of voluntary organizations around the world is thus regarded as a part of the isomorphic modernization process by new institutionalist scholars (Jepperson and Meyer 1991; Jepperson 2002; Meyer et al. 1997). In particular, voluntary organizations and volunteers are assumed to be major elements of civil society, which in turn are regarded as an indicator of how mature a democracy a country has achieved (Halman 2003; Putnam 1993, 2000; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993). In terms of the interrelationship among key civil and political players, voluntary organizations are posited as a mediator to many citizens and the state: voluntary organizations provide opportunities for citizens to relate to the political system (Almond and Verba 1965). With regard to this bridging role, voluntary associations are also thought to instill civic and social virtues and skills in their members (Putnam 1993, 2000). Based on the assumption of such external bridging and internal educational functions performed by voluntary organizations, comparative studies have been conducted mainly to explain (1) how voluntary organizations and volunteers are unequally distributed across nation-states and regions, and (2) what kind of structural and cultural factors contribute to this unequal distribution.

This chapter aims to review major structural and cultural causal mechanisms behind international and interregional variations of voluntary organizations and volunteers. It also introduces individual-level causes for these variations. However, before beginning a detailed discussion of these causes, let us first consider how voluntary organizations and volunteering were regarded as American exceptionalism. This background provides a plausible reference point for the structural and cultural causes of cross-national variations.

American Exceptionalism

In the literature of volunteering the United States is assumed to be a unique “nation of joiners” even though other countries such as Canada, its neighbor in North America, and Western European nations are also put into a wider category of nations of joiners (Curtis, Grabb, and Baer 1992; Curtis, Baer, Grabb 2001). Even in the eyes of European social scientists, the United States in her formative period was perceived as a new kind of country, engaging citizens in various types of associations so numerous that flourishing civic associations were regarded as a principal factor explaining the success of her participatory democracy (Tocqueville [1840] 2003; Weber 1946, 302–22 [In this piece Weber offers insightful discussion of Protestant sectarian congregations in the United States. For in-depth review of Weber’s contribution to understanding American Puritan culture and civil society, refer to Tiryakian (1975) and Kim (2004, 68–84)]).

Based on such an exceptionalist view of American civic engagement, Putnam argued that a consistently declining pattern of membership rates in various types of associations—e.g., a decreasing number of bowling leagues so that people have to bowl alone—during the second half of the 20th century signals a crisis of participatory democracy and a growing deficit in social capital in the United States (Putnam 1995, 2000). This argument entailed controversy in regard to whether civic associations and membership in them have indeed decreased across time (Paxton 1999; Rotolo and Wilson 2004; Wilson 2000, 2001).
For example, Wilson (2000) found that volunteering rates were either stable or increasing in the United States, with new types of grassroots community organizations replacing older associations and with the generation of “healthy elderly” volunteering at higher rates compared to previous generations.

Regardless of whether volunteering rates and number of voluntary associations have been decreasing or increasing, the discussion shows a normative feature of volunteering in the United States: volunteering is assumed to be an essential part of national identity strongly associated with civil society and participatory democracy. This American exceptionalism in volunteerism has provided a practical standard in the recent pursuit of international research, wherein overall volunteering rates and types of volunteering activities and associations in other countries are compared to seek structural and individual principles of volunteering that may explain how and why volunteerism diverges considerably by country and region.

Structural and Cultural Causes
As Musick and Wilson (2008) have observed, international comparative studies in volunteerism are a recent development in the literature. Empirical comparative studies in this area only became possible because of the availability of multinational data sets furnished by identical survey schemes (e.g., World Values Survey, European Values Survey, or European Social Survey). These have enabled systematic tests of propositions regarding volunteer work within and between countries. At first comparative research in voluntarism suffered from a lack of macro structural-cultural theories explicating why volunteerism varies by countries and regions. Curtis et al. (2001, 784) attributed such lack of theorization to “the widespread acceptance of the American exceptionalism thesis.” In this section I review several structural-cultural theories aiming to explain international and interregional variations in volunteering.

Types of Regime
It has been theorized that to a significant extent variations in volunteering across countries are captured by type of political regimes (Parboteeah, Cullen, and Lim 2004; Salamon and Sokolowski 2003; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001). Overall, liberal and social democratic regimes are assumed to have higher volunteer rates than other regime types such as statism, corporatism, or ex-communist types.

Another approach, based on the literature on the varied types of institutional arrangements in political and welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990; Moore 1966), proposes a “social origins” approach by which four types of regimes are proffered by two key dimensions—the extent of governmental welfare spending and the scale of the nonprofit sector (Salamon and Sokolowski 2003). In essence, the two dimensions are indicators of the historical trajectory of a country regarding the degree of ideological sympathy or hostility toward governmental welfare responsibility and a resultant level of preference for voluntary associations as an alternative institution. When governmental social welfare spending is high, social democratic (small nonprofit scale) and corporatist (large nonprofit scale) types appear, while when spending is low, statist (small nonprofit scale) and liberal (large nonprofit scale) types are formed.

In a similar vein as the four types of regime, Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001) analyzed the impacts of regime types on two associational types—old and new social movements—using multilevel modeling on data from thirty-two countries in the 1991 World Values Survey. They found that polity types matter significantly in explaining variation of memberships in both old and new types of social movements. Specifically, statism (the polity type opposite to liberalism) significantly reduces memberships regardless of type of social movement associations, but particularly more strongly for new social movements such as environmental associations or peace organizations, controlling for individual-level covariates. In line with this finding, Parboteeah et al. (2004) also observed from an analysis of twenty-one countries in the World Values Survey that a liberal regime has a significant association with higher volunteering rates. In turn, corporateness (the polity type opposite to social democracy) predicts significantly more memberships in old social movements such as trade unions, professional associations, or political parties, but is not related to new social movements. However, other macrostructural factors such as democracy and national economic development (measured by GDP per capita) do not exert any significant impact on membership in voluntary associations. Thus Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001, 824) conclude “the act of joining, and the particular