Voluntary Associations as a Model of Social Change*

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Theoretical Consideration

Among the classical sociologists, Alexis de Tocqueville, George Simmel and Emile Durkheim had long pointed out the associative character of modern societies. Tocqueville (1882: 129) observed that “Americans of all ages, all conditions and all dispositions constantly form associations.” Durkheim (1933) recognized the fragmentary nature of modern society and went so far as to advocate employee-associations as the basis of a new social order based on organic solidarity. Simmel also wrote extensively on the urban metropolis and the urban condition, and passed his interests to many of his students, in particular Robert Park.

To Robert Park and Louis Wirth, both in politics and in other areas of social life, the city is the “natural habitat” of associations — that is, of groups, in principle voluntary, which express specific interests of their members (Park, 1926; Wirth, 1938). The structural roots of urban associationism are in the fact that the city no longer constitutes a unified community in which all interests are somehow represented; rather it has become a highly complex collectivity within which special interests must be individually attended to.

Robert MacIver (MacIver and Page, 1949: 437) asserted that associations and interest groups are, from the sociological viewpoint, “the most characteristic feature of modern complex society”. He thus neatly and forcefully implied a crucial linkage between group development and social structure. The logic of this relationship is not difficult to follow: as societies become more differentiated, both in the sense that the religious, economic and political spheres separate and also in the sense that specialization in various kinds of work emerge, the number of focal points where interests and loyalties converge is multiplied.

This rich genre of theoretical research has led to the “grand theories” of sociologists like Eisenstadt and Parsons. Eisenstadt (1966; 1973) is primarily concerned with the general characteristics of modernization in the Third World countries, while Parsons’ (1962; 1966) pattern variables are an attempt to build an ideal-type typology of traditional and modern societies.

Most current research on voluntary associations, however, represents discontinuous approaches without reference to systematic theory, as illustrated in the works

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of Rose, Chapin, Queen, Komarovsky and Goldhamer. Rose (1954: 52) for example, is concerned with associations that are formed to achieve a condition or change in some segment of society (which he classifies as "social influence" groups), while associations organized to express or satisfy the interest of their members (which he calls "expressive" groups), are excluded from any systematic consideration. Chapin (1957: 261) has investigated the degree of involvement of members in community organizations through the measurement of participation; and from his study of formal groups have proposed the theory that voluntary associations develop into bureaucratic structures over time. Komarovsky (1946) and others, like Smith (1975), are especially concerned with the correlation between participation in voluntary association and personal attributes like social class, sex and education. That such relationships exist has been firmly established, but its interpretation within any systematic theoretical framework of voluntary associations is limited.¹

Goldhamer (1951: 507) following Wirth, likens the corporation in the economic realm to the club and association in the non-economic sphere. Complexity in economic organization arises in conjunction with specialization and division of labor. Similarly the proliferation of voluntary organizations is a direct outgrowth of peculiar interests as it springs from heterogeneity (for example, ethnic, occupational, educational and special interests). For Goldhamer, formalization of a given organization facilitates and engenders the coming together of like-minded persons. Hence, an implicit assumption in his work (and that of others) is that persons who have like interests will seek organizations that help them realize these interests.

Based on this study, Gordon and Babchuk (1959: 22–29) have attempted to construct a typology of voluntary associations based on accessibility, status-defining capacity and the instrumental, instrumental-expressive and expressive functions of voluntary associations. The key weaknesses of this typology are that it is based only on a cursory illustration of American associations without the benefit of cross-cultural referents and the authors’ failure to recognize that these associations themselves are not isolated and static phenomena. As a result, the authors give equal weight to the D.A.R. (Daughters of the American Revolution) and the Historical Club as reported in Davis and Gardners’ Deep South (1941), when these associations are clearly in decline and have little collective importance in modern American society.

There have also been studies on the ethnic differences in voluntary participation. These studies tend to focus on the differential involvement of blacks and whites (cf. London, 1975; Mydral et al., 1944; Olsen, 1970; Wright and Hyman, 1958) and, more recently, their comparison with Mexican Americans (Antunes and Geitz, 1975; Williams et al., 1973).

Three main theories have been advocated to explain differential racial participation. The compensation theory initially proposed by Mydral views voluntary associations as mechanisms for ego-reinforcement which cannot be obtained elsewhere in a racist milieu and is used to explain "pathological" higher participation of blacks in American society. The isolation theory (Wright and Hyman, 1958) suggests that because of structural barriers, blacks in fact participate less than whites. The ethnic community theory originally advanced by Lane contends that higher black participation can be explained by a common identity and mutuality of interests found among blacks.²