

ASSOCIATIONS AND DEMOCRACY: Between Theories, Hopes, and Realities

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■ **Abstract** Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest and research into the connections between associations and democracy. This article divides the question of associative contributions to democracy into four component parts: What (a) contributions do (b) different kinds of associations make to advance (c) contesting ideals of democratic governance in various (d) political contexts? Associations enhance democracy in at least six ways: through the intrinsic value of associative life, fostering civic virtues and teaching political skills, offering resistance to power and checking government, improving the quality and equality of representation, facilitating public deliberation, and creating opportunities for citizens and groups to participate directly in governance. These contributions are not all mutually consonant with one another, and different forms of associations are better suited to advance some contributions

of democracy. This renewed attention to the multiple mechanisms operating in the space between economy, intimate private life, and formal state structures is welcome. In contrast to many early theorists of democracy such as Rousseau and Madison, much of this research remains quite celebratory or at least hopeful about the contributions that associations can make to democratic governance. As the field has evolved, its leaders have increasingly recognized that associational forms, purposes, and impacts are legion. However, some kinds of associations can threaten democratic values rather than stabilizing them. The general form of the question soon became “What kinds of associations are good for democracy, and why?” (ME Warren 2001; Rosenblum 1998a,b; Kaufman 1999).

The pages that follow review this recent body of work, make explicit a few of its embedded controversies, and point out several silences. The now familiar assertion that healthy democracy requires robust social structures and practices of association can obscure more than it reveals. In their efforts to unpack this assertion conceptually and empirically, scholars have failed to converge on any consensus regarding the ways in which associations contribute to democracy. Rather, the study of associations has become another vantage from which to elaborate enduring disagreements about the ideal of democracy itself. To elucidate the character and depth of these disagreements, I divide the question of the relationship between associations and democracy into four component parts: What (*a*) contributions do (*b*) different kinds of associations make to advance (*c*) contesting ideals of democratic governance in various (*d*) political contexts?

The first part of this extended question is familiar. Although a few authors (Warren 2001, Cohen & Rogers 1995) have been attentive to the multiple mechanisms through which associations improve democracy, many other analysts have focused on a single, or just a few, contributions. The next section describes six paths, not all of them consonant, through which associations have been said to sustain democracy. Freedom of association has been viewed as an intrinsic component of democracy. At the psychological and individual level, associations school citizens by inculcating civic dispositions and teaching them skills necessary for political action. Especially in political contexts of tyranny or deep injustice, the central contributions of associations have been to check illegitimate political power, to offer resistance, and to check official power. Where democratic circumstances are more firmly in place, associations can improve the quality of representation by allowing individuals—especially those who lack resources—to express their views in political arenas. Associations form a principal part of the structure of civil society in which individuals deliberate with one another to form public opinions and criticisms of officials, policies, and state actions. Finally, some kinds of associations also create avenues for direct participation in the regulation or production of public goods such as education, public safety, and the provision of social welfare. Some of these contributions are incompatible with one another. Furthermore, very different kinds of associations are likely to make these various contributions. Choral societies, for example, may foster far more generalized trust in their members than revolutionary cells. However, revolution, or at least resistance, is sometimes more

important for democracy than generalized trust, and choral societies offer less help in this regard. The forms, purposes, and memberships of associations determine the extent to which they make these various contributions to democracy.

relationship between these situations and the democratic priority of various associational contributions. Those who have examined the role of associations and civil society in developing countries have naturally been attentive to these contextual differences. Consequently, their accounts frequently emphasize different contributions of associations (Avritzer 2002, Diamond 1999, Evans 1996). Where there are authoritarian governments or where basic democratic procedures are young and fragile, the resistance and checking functions of civil society may be particularly important. Where levels of economic and human development are low, the most important contribution of associations may be to organize and mobilize individuals to help contribute to the provision of public goods or to assure that scarce resources are equitably distributed (Baicocchi 2002).

SIX CONTRIBUTIONS OF ASSOCIATIONS TO DEMOCRACY

Many authors have compiled lists of the contributions that associations allegedly make to democracy, and their joint list is long indeed. Mark E. Warren (2001) has offered the most comprehensive account in this regard. He divides the functions of associations into three broad categories: Participation in associations can have developmental effects on individuals such as increasing their senses of efficacy, providing them with political information, imbuing them with political skills, developing their civic virtues, and teaching them to be critical. Associations, as a principal component of civil society, can also serve as a medium for broad political discourse and so have important public-sphere effects such as facilitating public communication, representing difference, and representing commonality (Avritzer 2002; Habermas 1991, 1996). Finally, associations can have a host of institutional effects when they interact with formal state structures of legislation and administration. These include equalizing representation, which enables resistance, alternative governance, social coordination, and democratic legitimation (Cohen & Rogers 1995, Hirst 1994). The following sections discuss six of the contributions of associations to democracy that have received the greatest conceptual elaboration and empirical scrutiny.

The Intrinsic Good of Association and Freedom to Associate

Part of the very definition of liberal democracies is that they create the space for a plurality of civic and political associations (Dahl 1989, p. 233). An important question, therefore, concerns not what associations can do for democracy, but rather what liberal democracy can do for associations. The answer is that liberal institutions create legal protections that allow a much broader range of associations to flourish than do authoritarian, illiberal states. These individual legal protections are important because the freedom to choose one's associates, and to form associations to advance one's purposes, is a central component of individual freedom. Apart from success or failure in advancing those purposes, the experience of

association is often valuable and pleasurable in itself. “Indeed,” George Kateb (1998, p. 37) writes, “the means may matter more than any end; the web of relations housed in an association can take on tremendous value, greater than the goals of the association.”

Nearly every liberal and democrat would agree with this sentiment. Pure classical liberals, however, are distinctive in that their concern for the relationship between democracy and association ends with this concern that the freedom to associate, whether for intrinsic or instrumental purposes, be preserved quite apart from the other ramifications of the resulting associations. So long as the law “maximizes the domain of the voluntary . . . [which] of course includes voluntary association,” pure liberals “take no sides concerning which forms of voluntary association are to be preferred over others; all such questions are devolved down to the level of individuals” (Lomasky 2002, pp. 64–65). Many scholars in this area have anguished

respect for others, respect for the rule of law, willingness to participate in public life, self-confidence, and efficacy (for a description of this view, see Warren 2001, p. 73). To the extent that individuals possess these values, democracy itself becomes more robust, fair, and effective in myriad ways. A second version of this view focuses on civic skills rather than virtues. Here, associations are important schools of democracy because they teach their members skills—how to organize themselves, run meetings, write letters, argue issues, and make speeches—that are necessary for all manner of political action.

In an account of this view that has received substantial scholarly attention, Robert Putnam (Putnam et al. 1993, Putnam 2000) has singled out one civic virtue as particularly important: generalized reciprocity. He argues that associations of all kinds frequently foster adherence to a principle of generalized reciprocity in their members: “I’ll do for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps even without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor” (Putnam 2000, p. 134). Pervasive gen-

a leveling effect in this regard. Adults are as likely to acquire and practice civic skills in religious organizations as in other kinds of associations. However, poor respondents were as likely to be involved with church organizations as wealthy ones (Verba et al. 1995, pp. 309–320).

Are some kinds of associations more likely to inculcate these civic virtues and skills than others? Since both civic virtues and skills are acquired in the course of relatively dense interactions between members, organizations that provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction are more likely to generate these individual effects than the “advocates without members”—associations in which the principal activity and contribution of most members is financial support—so ably criticized by Theda Skocpol (1999). In the same vein, horizontally organized associations—those with chapters, meetings, local activities, and dense interactions—are therefore more likely to imbue civic skills and virtues than hierarchically, or vertically, organized associations.

Beyond this straightforward minimum, however, scholars disagree about whether some kinds of associations—those with public as opposed to private purposes, those with inclusive and heterogenous versus homogenous memberships, and those with social and civic versus explicitly political missions—are more congenial to conferring civic virtues and skills to their members. Many of the most prominent authors—such as Putnam et al. (1993, p. 175), Cohen & Rogers (1995), Skocpol (1999), and Diamond (1999, p. 227–233)—have argued that associations conducive to democracy themselves have forms that are consistent with democratic principles:

To what extent does it practice democratic principles of constitutionalism, transparency, accountability, participation, deliberation, representation, and rotation of leaders in the way it makes decisions and allocates its own power and resources . . . if, in its own patterns of governance, it perpetuates norms that penalize dissent, exalt the leader over the group, and cloak the exercise of power, one thing it will not do is build a culture of democracy. If civil society organizations are to function as “large free schools” for democracy . . . they must function democratically in their internal processes. (Diamond 1999)

Nancy Rosenblum has called this attractive and common argument the “congruence thesis.” The thesis holds that associations that are good for democracy assume forms that are congruent with political democracy writ large: “that the internal life of associations mirror liberal democratic practices and principles” (Rosenblum 1999a, p. 36). She rejects the congruence thesis. She argues instead that the moral benefits of associations for their members are frequently unintended, and so state measures intended to promote civic virtue by manipulating the purposes and structures of associations will frequently fail (Rosenblum 1998a,b). A rich plurality of associations—many of them illiberal in their doctrines and practices, exclusive in memberships, and hierarchical in organization—can nevertheless contribute to democracy by fostering self-respect in individuals whose memberships in these associations are often multiple, cross-cutting, and dynamic.

Resistance and Checking Power

Resistance to domination and antidemocratic power has been long thought to be a central contribution of associations to democratic governance. The basic notion is a simple one: Organized associations of all kinds can potentially act as a source of countervailing power against state authority or other concentrated interests. When associational life is rich, those associations can offer resistance to tyrants or authoritarians who might otherwise dominate them (ME Warren 2001, pp. 85–86). Resistance has largely fallen into the background in many contemporary discussions of associations and civil society, especially for those concerned primarily with mature democracies.

In contexts where democratic institutions are young, fragile, or even absent, however, the prime contribution of associations to democracy often has been resistance to illegitimate authority. Examples abound. Diamond reviews the contributions of student, worker, civic, and professional associations to democratic reform in South Korea, Chile, Nigeria, and South Africa by “checking, monitoring, and restraining the exercise for power by . . . states and holding them accountable to the law and public expectations of responsible government” (Diamond 1999, p. 243–241). “The teachers, writers, and journalists of the Czech underground, the shipyard workers and intellectuals of Poland’s Solidarity, and the pastors and laymen who met in East German church crypts” transformed their resistance into the revolutions of 1989 (Ignatieff 1995). Under merely corrupt but not authoritarian conditions, associations can also help to check the abuse of power by monitoring officials and making their actions more transparent (Jenkins & Goetz 1999).

associations that “often rejected and expelled those who collaborated with the Apartheid state while . . . activists . . . often advocated a simplistic division of all members of the community into those who were for or against ‘the system.’ All too often, this [led] activists to characterize those with whom they [had] political differences as the enemy” (Klug 1995, p. 219). These associational dynamics have contributed to the divisive politics that characterize the post-Apartheid era. One dimension of this polarization is that deep rifts have grown between the African National Congress and the civic organizations that were once their allies.

More generally, those associations that are most capable of offering political resistance may be unlikely to foster a range of civic virtues such as tolerance, generalized reciprocity and trust, and respect for the rule of law. First, one of the ways in which activists and their associations develop solidarity and mobilize support is to articulate cognitive frames that set dominant actors and institutions as perpetrators of oppression and injustice (Snow & Benford 1986, Benford & Snow 2000). The virtues that such frames encourage are more likely to be dispositions toward criticism, suspicion, and disobedience, which are indeed democratic virtues in contexts of serious injustice but nevertheless quite distinct from more commonly cited civic virtues such as those discussed above. Second, organizations capable of offering resistance, especially in climates of severe repression, frequently do not follow democratic principles in their internal operations. Exigencies of survival and effectiveness press many of them to adopt forms that are neither open, transparent, horizontal, nor clearly accountable.

Interest Representation

Still a fourth contribution of associations to democratic governance is to improve ways in which interests are represented to lawmakers and translated into law and policy. Associations offer additional channels—beyond voting, lobbying, and direct contact with public officials—for individuals to press their public concerns. Associations can improve the quality of representation, and so the quality of democracy more broadly, in several ways when they transmit the needs and preferences of their members to government. The views communicated by associations in areas such as health care, social security, education, and national security policy are likely to be more detailed, nuanced, and information rich than thinner channels of representation such as voting. Furthermore, associations often organize interests with less regard to territorial boundaries and so may introduce geographically dispersed interests that would be otherwise politically mute. Finally, associations may be better able to transmit intensities of interest to officials than formal channels of representation (Cohen & Rogers 1995, pp. 42–44; ME Warren 2001, pp. 83–84).

Beyond improving its quality, proponents for increasing the role of associations in democratic governance have argued that associations can also enhance the equality of political representation:

Politics is materially conditioned, and inequalities in material advantage of the sort definitive of capitalism translate directly into inequalities in political

power. Groups can help remedy these inequalities by permitting individuals with low per capita resources to pool those resources through organization . . . groups can promote a more equitable distribution of advantage by correcting for imbalances in bargaining power that follow from the unequal control of wealth. (Cohen & Rogers 1995, p. 43).

Associations may also equalize representational inequalities that stem from the intense interests of minorities and from the relative concentration of policy beneficiaries.

In most arenas, however, the notion that associations can equalize representation remains more a hope than reality. Michael Walzer writes that “it is a general rule of civil society that its strongest members get stronger. The weaker and poorer members are either unable to organize at all—or they form groups that reflect their weakness and poverty” (Walzer 2002, p. 39). The study of social movements is dedicated to examining the conditions under which this general rule is broken, but those exceptions perhaps prove the rule. In political science and political sociology, group research has consistently shown that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with an upper class accent” (Schattschneider 1960, p. 35). This is true both for individual participation—those of higher socioeconomic status join at higher rates—and in sectoral representation. Among Washington groups, businesses and industries enjoy more overrepresentation than any other interest (Baumgartner & Leech 1998). It is important to note that those who favor associations as a path to equal representation do not claim that pre-existing associational configurations already make that contribution. Rather, they claim that appropriate policy interventions could encourage “a deliberate politics of association” that equalize interest representation (Cohen & Rogers 1995). A substantial gap, however, separates the existing reality of inequality-reinforcing associations and a hoped-for politics of equality-enhancing association.

Furthermore, the forms of association that would best serve otherwise underrepresented interests in the political arena may not be well suited to making other democratic contributions such as political socialization, resistance, and deliberation. Against the common wisdom of inequality-reinforcing associations described above, Jeffrey Berry has recently argued that a number of associations have indeed been successful at pressing causes such as environmentalism, consumer protection, and racial and gender equality in American politics (Berry 1999). Though he calls them citizens’ groups, many of the organizations that have won these victories are large lobbying organizations whose members do little more than contribute financial resources. These kinds of associations, given the opportunity structures of contemporary political institutions, may be best suited to equalizing representation. They do not, however, resemble the face-to-face organizations imagined by Rosenblum, Putnam, Skocpol, or, indeed, Tocqueville himself.

Public Deliberation and the Public Sphere

Beyond representing interests, Jürgen Habermas (1996), Jean Cohen & Andrew Arato (1994), and others have argued that a chief democratic contribution of

associations is to facilitate public deliberation. For critical theorists and others, the idea of deliberation is fundamentally different from conventional conceptions of interest representation. The shift, as Simone Chambers puts it, is from “voting-centric” to “talk-centric” democracy (Chambers 2002, p. 98). Public decisions result from the aggregation of fixed interests and preferences that compete through the mechanisms of power and money in voting-centric, representative politics. Public decision making becomes more deliberative to the extent that it reflects the results of an equal and open communication process in which participants appeal to reasons that others can accept, rather than to force, money, sheer numbers, or status. Deliberation, as Habermas (1984, p. 25) put it famously, “excludes all force . . . except the force of the better argument.”

Whereas political decisions are always subject to influence from money and other forms of social power, proponents of deliberative democracy often see associations as helping to constitute a space, called the public sphere, in which more nearly ideal processes of communication can occur. It is in these more open and inclusive spaces that social problems and priorities—environmental degradation, racial discrimination, the burden of social risks (Beck 1999)—are often initially articulated and transmitted to political and economic spheres (Habermas 1996, p. 359):

Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life sphere, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalize problem solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. These “discursive designs” have an egalitarian, open form of organization that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallize and to which they lend continuity and permanence. (Habermas 1996, p. 367)

choral societies—contribute less or not at all to the public sphere on this account. Theda Skocpol (1999) argues that encompassing associations that include both working people and elites are particularly important for a healthy public sphere. She contends that the contrasting outcomes between the 1944 GI Bill—which created generous educational opportunities for millions of American veterans—and the failed 1993 health care reform was due in part to the differences in the associations that constituted the public sphere. In 1944, she argues, large associations, such as the American Legion, created spaces in which ordinary people could articulate their needs, persuade elite members of their own organizations, and mobilize when necessary. By 1993, associational life had desiccated. The health care debate of that year, analogous to the debates over the GI Bill, was dominated by top-heavy, elite organizations that were incapable of mobilization and trapped in gridlock. That associational configuration resulted, in part, in the failure to extend health insurance coverage to the millions of low-income families.

Direct Governance

The five associative contributions to democracy just described all have in common two features. First, they are all compatible with relatively sharp separations between the civil sphere of associations and the state on one hand and economy on the other (Fraser 1992). Second, they do not require any fundamental transformation of the state in either the scope of government action or its methods of administration and implementation. These associative contributions are front-loaded in the sense that they seek to improve the quality of input into a largely unchanged democratic machinery of legislation and policy making. A number of scholars, however, have suggested that associations and their members should play a more direct role in the state functions of regulation, service provision, and even policy formulation. More radical reconfigurations of governance in this way, would, as the other contributions above, address democratic deficits on the input side of the governance equation. Distinctively, however, the direct involvement of associations in a range of traditional state functions would also help to address deep limitations in the output side of the state: the capacities of public authorities to solve public problems.

One ambitious, maximal version of associative democracy comes from Paul Hirst (1994), who argues that state and economy should be restructured in ways that give associations a much greater role in social and economic production and governance. The fundamental basis of his program is that “voluntary self-governing associations gradually and progressively become the primary means of democratic governance of economic and political affairs.” How might this shift occur? Hirst suggests the following:

First, that the state should cede functions to such associations, and create the mechanisms of public finance whereby they can undertake them. Second, that the means to the creation of an associative order in civil society are built-up, such as alternative sources of mutual finance for associative economic

enterprises, agencies that aid voluntary bodies and their personnel to conduct their affairs effectively, and so on. This is . . . intended to be . . . a gradual process of supplementation, proceeding as fast as the commitment to change by political forces, and the capacity to accept tasks by voluntary associations allows. (Hirst 1994, pp. 20–21).

Hirst's vision seeks to extrapolate upon inspiring developments in economic development such as successful industrial districts (Whyte & Whyte 1988) and in public-private partnerships in social service provision. Skeptics might raise a range of objections, stemming from considerations about the desirability of such a program to its organizational feasibility. No doubt the first steps toward such an encompassing socioeconomic reconstruction would encounter stiff hurdles of political resistance from officials and businessmen who perform functions that would be ceded to associations. However, similar objections might be raised against any grand proposal, associative or otherwise. Hirst's program nevertheless expands our political imagination regarding the potential contributions of associations to democratic governance.

Joshua Cohen & Joel Rogers have offered another ambitious associative program (1995) that recommends a much more intimate relationship between associations and government to address by now well-known limitations of welfare states in social and economic regulation. They recommend that associations play a much larger role, operating in conjunction with formal public authorities, in "(1) the formulation of policy, (2) the coordination of economic activity in the shadow of policy, and (3) the enforcement and administration of policy" (Cohen & Rogers 1995, p. 55). Increasing the role of associations in these state functions, Cohen and Rogers argue, would introduce higher-quality information into policy formulation and enhance the level of cooperation between associative representatives of complexly interdependent actors. As intermediaries that stand between governments and subjects, associations can help improve policy implementation by leveraging local knowledge, encouraging compliance, and monitoring outcomes. To consider just one example, policies to protect worker health and safety are presently hobbled by the problem of "too many plants and too few inspectors" as well as by incredible diversity among those plants. To remedy these defects, public agencies might enlist "forces on the ground"—many of them already in place—such as local unions and worker health and safety committees (Cohen & Rogers 1995). These associations could provide information about practices and conditions that would improve policy, educate members and other workers about best safety practices, participate directly in environmental monitoring, and participate in enforcement actions such as the reporting of violations or closing of plants.

Like Hirst's program, this vision of associative governance would require substantial policy interventions to foster a diverse and inclusive ecology of associations that have the wherewithal to collaborate with government in these ways. Cohen & Rogers argue that "groups are . . . importantly artifactual" in that patterns of association stem just as much from legal opportunities and constraints,

structural features of the political economy, and material inequalities as from the histories and exogenous preferences of individuals (Cohen & Rogers 1995, p. 46). They therefore prescribe deliberate policies to foster the kinds of associations that can underwrite fair and effective governance through measures such as lowering barriers to unionization (80), inviting associations into policy-making forums, empowering associations to implement and enforce policy, subsidies, and imposing requirements of democratic accountability, and openness.

Erik Olin Wright and I have suggested yet a third approach that we have called Empowered Participatory Governance (EPG) (Fung & Wright 2003). EPG is an institutional model for participatory democracy that is based on a set of diverse public experiments that include neighborhood governance in the city of Chicago, novel approaches to ecosystem management, participatory budgeting in several Brazilian cities, and local government reforms in the Indian state of Kerala. Like the associative-governance approaches of Hirst and Cohen & Rogers, EPG posits a substantial reconfiguration of government in ways that invite social actors to participate in decision making and administration. Whereas associations stand as the intermediaries between citizens and formal state structures in those approaches, the EPG model describes institutional forms that create avenues in which individual citizens may participate directly in decision making. With community policing in Chicago, for example, citizens can attend monthly neighborhood meetings with police officers at which they engage in joint decisions regarding the prioritization of public problems and development of solutions to address those priorities (Fung 2001). Similarly, villagers in the municipalities of Kerala participate directly in the formulation of local development plans under the government's "democratic decentralization" reforms (Thomas Isaac & Heller 2003).

Although citizen participation is less mediated by organizations in EPG than in the programs of Hirst or Cohen & Rogers, associations nevertheless figure importantly in EPG (Fung 2002). Real-world reforms that create the participatory opportunities described by EPG are often pressed by social-movement organizations that favor local control, state accountability, or social equity. EPG, then, is often the product of institutional reforms demanded by associations who view participatory democracy as a means toward particular policy goals such as safer neighborhoods or more accountable police. Associations can thus play a generative role in creating EPG institutions. Once reforms are in place, those same associations or their allies play important roles in stabilizing and defending participatory institutions against counterreforms. Public officials, for example, often grow uncomfortable with the burdens of participation and seek to recentralize or reinsulate their agencies from the vicissitudes of politics. Similarly, associations can mobilize and equip individuals to participate in the political opportunities that EPG offers. Especially in impoverished areas, many individuals will lack the motives, information, or skills necessary to effectively engage in participatory democratic opportunities. In many EPG reforms (Fung & Wright 2001), secondary associations such as social-movement organizations have trained and recruited citizens to participate in these ways. Furthermore, the relationship between EPG reforms to formal state

structures and secondary associations is reciprocal. Associations not only breathe life into this variety of participatory democracy, but formal, direct, and deliberative opportunities to influence public policy and state action create incentives for individuals to create and maintain secondary associations (Baicocchi 2001).

THREE CONTESTING DEMOCRATIC VISIONS

These six contributions of associations to the quality of democratic governance potentially conflict with one another. Similarly, as discussed above, the forms of association and public regulation of association that best advance one of these contributions frequently differ from the forms and regulations that best advance the other contributions. In this section, I suggest that part of the difficulty in formulating generalizations about the contributions of associations to democracy stems not just from these incompatibilities, but also from another confusion. Advocates and scholars alike have held quite different background ideals about democracy itself. Contrasting ideals of democratic governance rely upon the six associative contributions to very different degrees, and so entertain distinctive accounts of the relationship between associations and democracy. This section briefly considers three such visions of democracy: liberal minimalism, conventional representation with bureaucratic administration, and participatory democracy.

Liberal Minimalism

A classical minimal liberal vision of democracy generally supports the freedom of individuals to associate with one another as a component of individual freedom. From this vantage, the causal arrow points from democracy to association rather than the other way around: Democracy contributes to associations. Liberal democracies should respect a broad range of individual rights, and associations will result naturally from the exercise of these rights by individuals as they pursue their private and collective purposes. Classical liberals principally value, then, the intrinsic good of association and preservation of the freedom to associate so that individuals may join with others to pursue their self-chosen ends.

Because classical liberals (Lomasky 2002, Nozick 1974) favor a state that is minimal in the sense that it performs just a few functions such as protecting individual liberties, several potential associative contributions to democracy are not particularly important to liberal minimalists. Indeed, to the extent that associations contributing in those ways may extend the role and reach of the state, liberal minimalists may be positively hostile to them. For example, the associations that represent social interests or create the space for public deliberation may generate pressures for the expansion of social protections or provision of rents to special interests that in turn require collective contributions—taxes—to which liberal minimalists typically object. Worse still, groups may press for the intrusive regulation of associations that, for example, exclude persons on the basis of their religion,

racial background, or gender. Liberal minimalists should object more strongly still to proposals for direct participation in governance. All of these measures extend the reach of collective coercive power into economic and social realms of life that should, on the strong classical liberal view, be left to individual rather than collective choice.

Liberal minimalists are somewhat more friendly to the socialization and resistance contributions of associations. Both of these may instrumentally stabilize liberal-individualist sociopolitical orders. To the extent that a voluntary and plural ecology of associations fosters civic virtues such as tolerance, the state itself may be less disposed to violate individual liberties. Associations that are capable of resisting the power of the state and checking its expansionary tendencies similarly stabilize liberal orders.

Representative Democracy

Much of the commentary upon associations and democracy has probed the ways in which associations promote or erode the health of familiar representative democratic institutions. There are three central associative contributions in this regard: (a) civic socialization and political education, (b) interest representation, and (c) public deliberation.

Many of the scholars operating in this tradition have decried the failings of contemporary representative government (Putnam 2000, Skocpol 1999). They view robust associations as one method for revitalizing representative government. In this vein, representative government improves when associations foster dispositions in individuals to participate in public life and teach them the skills necessary to do so effectively. This enthusiasm, however, lies in some tension with the actual effect of organized political interest groups. As discussed above, existing structures of interest groups frequently reinforce material inequality and social exclusion, and so reduce the quality of democratic governance on egalitarian grounds. Though some proponents of associative democracy have offered proposals for how the inequality-reinforcing effect of associations might be mitigated or even reversed (Cohen & Rogers 1995), many enthusiasts of association have failed to confront this conundrum squarely. Even as associations contribute to representative democracy by socializing individuals and teaching them political skills, they may also erode the quality of representation by reinforcing and exacerbating social and material inequalities.

Those who view associations as principally benefiting representative institutions are also frequently silent regarding the resistance and checking of contributions of associations. On one hand, associations that can monitor and check official behavior help to control corruption and contribute to the quality of public political debate overall. However, some associations that offer political resistance—such as militias and militant organizations—are quite unlikely to foster civic dispositions such as tolerance, respect for the rule of law, trust in government, and generalized reciprocity.

Those who delimit their investigations of associations to the realm of representative political institutions also avoid engaging those who are concerned with alternative structures of democratic governance in which associations or individuals participate directly in legislation, policy making, or administration. Because such institutions are relatively immature and uncommon, they have avoided the gaze of most political sociologists and political scientists.

Participatory Democracy

Some scholars maintain that the most promising contributions of associations to democracy revolve around its potential to revitalize participatory impulses and ideals. They can be divided into two camps. In one camp are those who see secondary associations as already capable of vindicating the ideals of participatory democracy. In another are those who see great participatory potential in secondary associations but argue that harnessing that potential requires deeper transformations in formal institutions, for example, by inviting associations to share in the exercise of state authority or by devolving decision making or administrative power to venues that are directly accessible to citizens.

The first favors secondary associations because they create opportunities for face-to-face engagement. In this view, one of the most attractive aspects of participatory democracy is the experience of participation itself, and associations can provide that experience. Part of what is valuable is intrinsic, and part is instrumental. When a member exercises direct voice over an association's decisions regarding its purposes, strategies, and actions, the exercise is itself valuable as a social, collective, and potentially political act. Furthermore, to the extent that the conduct and rules of the association affect important aspects of the member's life, participatory procedures within the association also secure a measure of self-government and organizational accountability. In this view, distinctively and interestingly, many of the benefits of participatory democracy can be captured without altering the formal, institutional arrangements of representative government and hierarchical bureaucracy. Most participatory democrats have viewed decision making within the state as the locus of participation and so participatory democracy has been thought to require radical transformations in political structures. Some recent work on associations, however, has viewed interactions within associations

revitalize American democracy generally. To be sure, these social movements are not indifferent to the disposition of political power and decision in formal arenas. Using a similar case drawn from the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), Wood (2001, p. 260) writes that the aim of such face-to-face publics is to “project power into the public arena.” Participatory democracy within associations may be an effective way of constituting that power (MR Warren 2001b, Wood 2001, Polletta 2002). More speculatively, participatory decision making within associations may also prefigure broader institutionalized forms of governance that some social movements favor.

Scholars of civic engagement such as Putnam & Skocpol—though they focus on contributions to representative government rather than resistance to it—also view voluntary associations as the main spaces for a kind of participatory democracy in which members develop democratic skills and sentiments. Though civic-engagement scholars are not typically participatory democrats in the sense that they recommend substituting some representative or bureaucratic structures with directly participatory ones, they often favor associational spaces because they make individual acts of political reflection, participation, and organization more frequent in public life. Putnam and others working in the civic-engagement tradition have developed a novel hybrid view that vibrant representative democracy in formal public institutions requires a robust participatory democracy whose scope is limited to private, secondary associations: “the health of American democracy, . . . the health of our *public* institutions, depends, at least in part, on widespread participation in *voluntary* groups” (Putnam 2000, p. 336).

A second group of scholars focuses upon the transformation of political institutions as well as the development of secondary associations. They reject any limitation of ideals and practices of direct participation to the voluntary civic arena of secondary associations. Instead, they see great promise in those kinds of associations that can extend participatory practices and values into the hearts of public institutions. For them, the best realization of workable participatory democracy requires the simultaneous, mutually reinforcing, transformation of both public institutions and secondary associations. Three distinct approaches within this category—those of Hirst (1994), Cohen & Rogers (1995), and Fung & Wright (2003)—were surveyed above in *Direct Governance*. Although these approaches differ in many respects, they share in common the traditional participatory democratic commitment that the familiar political structures of representative politics and bureaucratic administration frequently operate in unjust, unaccountable, and ineffective ways, and that these defects be addressed in part by making politics and administration more participatory.

Unlike the resistance and civic-engagement routes to participatory democracy just described, scholars in this camp do not see reinvigorating associational life as the key to revitalizing democracy in participatory directions. Such revitalization hinges as much on whether state structures afford those associations or their constituents a greater share in the exercise of public power. Without partaking in consequential decision making in this way, participation in associations can be

cramped and trivial from the democratic point of view. From this perspective, robust parent-teacher associations do indeed afford parents the positive experience

in which associations can operate in direct governance roles by sharing public power rather than projecting it into the interest group arena.

POLITICAL CONTEXTS

The desirability of various associative contributions to democracy depends deeply on features of particular political contexts. Associative contributions and forms that advance democracy in some contexts may be counterproductive or even inimical to those values in others. This observation is straightforward but not often noted in scholarly attempts to develop generalized accounts of the relationship between democracy and associations. Beyond the contending democratic ideals discussed in the previous section, then, considerations of political context introduce another source of confusion and obstacle to generalization regarding the relationship between associations and democracy.

Michael Foley & Robert Edwards (1996, 1997) have illuminated the importance of political context sharply in their elaboration of two varieties of the “civil society argument”:

The first version puts special emphasis on the ability of associational life in general and the habits of association in particular to foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity . . . The second, articulated most forcefully . . . in formulating a strategy for resistance to Poland’s communist regime in the 1980s, is also evident in recent literature on the processes of “redemocratization” in Latin America. This argument . . . lays special emphasis on civil society as a sphere of action that is independent of the state and that is capable—precisely for this reason—of energizing resistance to a tyrannical regime. (Foley & Edwards 1996, p. 39).

In tyrannical and underdemocratized political contexts, then, the principal contributions of associations to democracy are likely to involve resistance to political authority and a kind of autonomous public deliberation (Avritzer 2002). In more fully democratized contexts, it is at least arguable—and many civic-engagement scholars have indeed argued—that the principal contributions of associations to democracy involve less conflict and more civic disposition and inclusive cooperation. As discussed above in *Six Contributions of Associations to Democracy*, very different kinds of associations are likely to provide these different democratic contributions.

However, the polar cases of tyrannical government on one end and more fully

advanced democracy by expanding citizenship and reducing economic and social inequality.

This observation highlights a rift between two kinds of associative democrats. On one side, some argue that tame associations are the ones best suited to advancing democratic values. Civic-engagement scholars such as Robert Putnam (2000) and Theda Skocpol (1999), whose accounts emphasize associations such as choral societies, sports clubs, parent-teacher associations, and fraternal orders, reside in this camp. To be sure, many of these scholars, including both Skocpol and Putnam, count social movements among those associations that advance important civic virtues (Putnam 2000, pp. 154–161; Skocpol 1999). However, these analyses for the most part fail to acknowledge and develop the distinctive democratic contributions that such associations may make—for example various kinds of distrust and resources for resistance and even rebellion—compared to tamer and more civic associations. Despite other differences, the recommendations of Cohen & Rogers (1995)—who propose a politics that tames the mischiefs of faction—also reside in this camp. They recommend institutional reforms that would allow associations to participate cooperatively with officials in policy making and administration. On the other side are those who argue that the best associative strategies to address the deep inequalities that pervade even relatively democratic political contexts feature, perhaps centrally, just the kinds of protest, rebellion, and disruption that can jeopardize social peace, respect for the rule of law, and generalized reciprocity. These scholars (Foley & Edwards 1996; ME Warren 2001; Wood 2001; Szasz 1994, 1995) highlight the role of social movements in advancing democratic values through social conflict.

This rift between those who favor tame as opposed to mischievous associations as agents of democracy may stem from differences in their assessments of political context. In tyrannical contexts, most observers agree that voluntary associations capable of resisting authority are crucial to democratic advance. In mature democracies like those of North America and Western Europe, it may be that the proliferation of mischievous associations—social-movement organizations and other unruly groups—would indeed increase equality and inclusion but do so at too high a cost to social peace and civic sentiments. Whether the social and political circumstances of these contexts are sufficiently exclusive and unequal to give democratic priority to the activities of disruptive countervailing associations is one point on which these two camps may disagree. The rift may also stem from differences of political judgment. Like associational democrats from social-movement traditions, Cohen & Rogers recognize that very stark background inequalities and exclusions pervade even the mature democracies. Unlike theorists who focus upon resistance organizations, however, Cohen & Rogers argue that a collaborative politics of joint governance between official bodies and associations holds great promise as a strategy for addressing the very inequalities that justify the activities of some mischievous associations as well.

There are at least three kinds of settlements between tame and mischievous associative democrats. The first settlement, which is implicit in most of the

literature, is to simply disagree. Some scholars adopt some of the tools and terms of recent work on associations while maintaining analytical priority for potentially disruptive associations such as social-movement organizations and while occasionally chiding civic-engagement scholars for their inattention to power and conflict. Others, and they remain the central tendency, continue to focus upon the general contributions of relatively benign associations in fostering trust, reciprocity, and civic virtue while remaining inattentive to political conflict. The second settlement is an inclusive pluralism that acknowledges important roles for both tame and mischievous organizations—for the simultaneous importance of socialization, resistance, representation, and deliberation—in contemporary democracies (ME Warren 2001). The obvious truth of this view makes it attractive. Any healthy democracy will feature a mixed ecology of different sorts of associations, and Warren offers helpful guidance about what that mix might be. Yet a third settlement, visible in the recent work of social-movement scholars such as Robert Wood (2001) and Mark R. Warren (2001b), recognizes that some of the most inventive social-movement organizations develop strategies that combine both cooperation and mischief. The mix that best advances democratic values such as participation, deliberation, political accountability, and effective administration depends deeply on the details of particular contexts within mature democracies. The association that best presses these values in urban areas, for example, may require the strength to protest local autocrats even as it retains the flexibility to cooperate with officials who are disposed to fair engagement.

CONCLUSION

Warren (ME Warren 2001) and Rosenblum (1998a) are surely correct in their arguments that it is difficult and unwise to draw straightforward generalizations about the connections between associations and democratic governance. Conceptual, normative, and empirical considerations intertwine to render attempts at generalization even more difficult than those critics suggest. Conceptually and empirically, observers agree that associations render important contributions to democracy, including the intrinsic pleasures of association, civic socialization, political education, resistance, representation, deliberation, and direct governance. The diversity of these contributions makes generalization difficult, not least because the kinds of association that best make one contribution may be inimical to the others. Furthermore, variations in political contexts can alter the priority of particular associative contributions to democracy. In tyrannical contexts, for example, resistance may be far more urgent than the development of civic virtues such as toleration and respect for the rule of law.

Normatively, those who contend that associations contribute to democracy frequently hold contesting visions of what sorts of individual practices and institutional arrangements constitute a vibrant democracy. In much of the existing literature, this confusion stems in part from the failure to make these background democratic ideals explicit. Civic engagement and associations have appealed to

both representative and participatory democrats. Indeed, I suspect that part of the attractiveness of this set of ideas relies upon blurring the distinction between representation and direct participation. Nevertheless, important differences in the account of the sorts of associations and the relationships between associations and the state that advance democracy hinge on what sorts of governance arrangements one considers to be democratic. Suppressing differences in ideals of democracy may momentarily broaden the appeal of some account about the connection between associations and democracy, but ultimately it increases confusion. Making these differences explicit further complicates the conceptual ambition to generalize about the relationships between associations and democracy.

The diversity of approaches and tensions surveyed above testifies to the strides

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