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The Varieties of Civic Experience

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ABSTRACT *Scholars, including Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol, in documenting declining civic participation in the US over the past 50 years, have arrived at a view of civic or political engagement that is too narrow. They disparage activity that is insufficiently oriented to the public good, transitory, individualistic, and lacking in risk or sacrifice. Their view is misleading. Activities that seem privatistic, transitory, individualistic, or low-cost may have far-reaching civic benefits.*

The concept of “the civic” is so diffuse and the activities one might plausibly regard as having an important civic dimension are so varied that forms of civic engagement cannot reasonably be lined up and measured on a single scale of better and worse, more and less “civic”. Nonetheless, many observers have taken this tack, including the two distinguished scholars I will single out for special attention here: Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol. Both are concerned about the deterioration of older forms of civic life they believe more likely to achieve important public ends than newer forms of social activity that seem to be replacing them. I am reluctant to join in their critique because a look at the history of civic participation in the United States (US) shows not only that *forms* of civic participation have changed but also that *ideals* of civic participation have been transformed. I suspect that Putnam, Skocpol and others mourn civic practices in decline in part because they are captive of ideas and concepts affixed to and appropriate to a historical moment that has passed. What civic participation is best? That is too abstract a question. What forms are best will be relative to what forms are possible; what forms are possible will be relative to the historical and social conditions of a particular moment.

That is the claim I want to advance as I take a closer look at the types of civic participation Putnam and Skocpol criticize. Their very standards of criticism arise from a set of assumptions pegged to the historical moment—now a memory—that generated the civic forms they believe most valuable. Without systematically reviewing Putnam’s and Skocpol’s work, I nonetheless will try to abstract from it the set of criteria they associate with ideal civic practices, and a set of characteristics they link to less effectively civic or un-civic activity. I will then make a case that there are many forms of legitimate civic and political activity today that bear the very features Putnam and Skocpol have disparaged, and that merit a more positive evaluation.

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What sort of civic engagement is most honored has differed in different eras of American history. That is the main claim of my book, *The Good Citizen* (Schudson, 1998). I cannot present the argument in full here. But a group of high school teachers suggested to me that my position is easily summarized if I re-state my historical argument in terms appropriated from *The Simpsons*, the long-running popular television cartoon show. Even for readers who do not know the show, this may be clarifying.

In the US, what contemporaries have honored as the ideal citizen or the normatively desirable citizen has differed across four eras, each of which can be represented by a different member of the Simpson family. The colonial era through the Washington and Adams administrations offers a model of “the deferential citizen”. The ideal citizen in this era recognized the leaders of the community and voted for them, deferring on any specific issues to their judgment. Picture Marge Simpson, conscientious, moral, but normally knowing her place—deferential. In the 1700s, voter turnout was low, campaigning was discouraged, voters were supposed to measure candidates by their character and social standing, not their political ideas; voluntary organizations were welcome in private life but looked upon with suspicion if they ventured to offer opinions on public affairs.

In the early 1800s, as mass-based political parties emerged to replace the party-phobic world of the founders, the normative good citizen became not the deferential man of property but the democratic, enthusiastic (white male) partisan. This ideal is faithfully represented by Homer Simpson, including that fellowship and partisan rivalry were often embraced for their own sake, regardless of issues or ideologies, and that the tavern’s social life, not the party platform’s intellectual life, is the center of political identification.

In this era, modes of civic participation multiplied as did the varieties of people welcomed as participants. The political party became the central avenue of civic engagement. Parties involved masses of citizens in local and regional nominating conventions, and many more in the barbecues, picnics, torchlight processions, pole raisings, glee clubs, brass bands, hooliganism and mass mobilization on election day. This festive politics proved remarkably sturdy and popular for most of the nineteenth century. Homer would have fit right in.

The period 1890 to 1920 brought a flock of important reforms, not matched anywhere else in the world, to assault party control and the enthusiastic mode of civic participation that it fostered. State-printed ballots replaced party-printed tickets, nonpartisan municipal elections in many cities supplanted party-based elections, the initiative, the referendum, and the direct election of senators sidestepped party machinery, and the growth of an independent commercial press replaced party-directed newspapers. All of these changes provided the institutional groundwork for an ideal of an informed, rather than blindly partisan, citizen. It is Lisa Simpson to a “t”. This model of citizenship was well suited to single-issue and policy-oriented interest groups, from the Grand Army of the Republic and its advocacy of veterans’ pensions to the women’s suffrage movement. In fact, in the wake of the achievement of women’s suffrage, the League of Women Voters emerged as a leading voice of information, informed policy discussion and debate, and a form of civic engagement determinedly at arm’s length from party politics. Even the parties developed a more informational style of campaigning, moving from parades to pamphlets as they adopted what historian Michael McGerr (1986) terms an “educational” style of politics in the 1890s and after. The Progressive Era reforms did not destroy political parties but the reformers, in their

distaste for the nineteenth-century style of party politics, succeeded in promoting a new ideal of a rational, issue-centered, educated and informed citizenry.

And Bart? What does Bart Simpson represent? Bart is the anti-authoritarian, individualist, irreverent, rights-claiming citizen of the era that the civil rights movement ushered in. It would be a mistake to see Bart as the anti-citizen. Instead, he offers another ideal-type figure of what good citizenship can look like. To some degree, Bart just plays pure id to Lisa's pure superego, his impulse to her conscience, but that is not the whole story. Bart, like the representatives of so many of the liberation movements that have powered American politics since the civil rights movement, stands up for his rights, making aggressive and often self-serving claims. But to claim a right is not just to grab what you want; it is an implicit agreement to make a case on the basis of common principles, common aims and common laws. Whether it is a pro-life or a pro-choice movement, environmentalism or advocacy for livable wage ordinances, supporters of a patients' bill of rights or school choice, politics of the past half-century has operated increasingly through mechanisms at the fringes of the parties and not always readily linked to them. Historians do not yet know what to make of the bewildering array of political approaches these social movements have spawned, or the way they have enlarged—exploded—the arena of politics itself. In 1961 political scientist Robert Dahl observed that most people have little interest in politics; their primary activities are not politics but “food, sex, love, family, work, play, shelter, comfort, friendship, social esteem, and the like” (Dahl, 1961, p. 279). It is easy to see that all of these topics (even, at least in California, “self-esteem”) have been politicized. This is Bart's world, not entirely serious or sober or responsible, playful and brash and irreverent, sometimes charming and sometimes gross, breaking with convention, highly individualistic, and yet fueled by indignation at perceived injustice.

A question remains: who or what does baby Maggie Simpson represent? What model of citizenship will she embody as she grows up? Consider this an open-ended question and not a matter of reclaiming some model from the past. The point of recounting this thumbnail history of changing American civic ideals is to lay the groundwork for the possibility that critics of contemporary American political life fail to recognize important forms of civic action because they are locked into past ideals of civic life, particularly the ideal of the “informed citizen”. Different, and multiple, ideals of civic life undergird democracy. Recognizing each of them, and giving each its due, suggests a different valuation of a variety of contemporary civic or quasi-civic practices.

Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol are two of our most systematic and thorough-going thinkers about what civic engagement today is and what it should be.¹ Neither is dogmatic about what counts as “civic”. Nor are they peas in a pod. Where Putnam is concerned primarily with the vigor of associational life where people act on their own as the necessary condition for democracy, Skocpol is more interested in finding ways, particularly through governmental action, to remedy economic and social inequality that neither the market nor civil society handles effectively. Although sympathetic to each other's work, they have disagreements and have even sparred in print (Skocpol, 1996; Putnam, 1996). However, they share some assumptions about what the best, most generative, most effective, most lasting, most worthy forms of civic engagement are and they do suggest along the way that some other forms are minimally civic or even counter-civic in their effects on public life. I want to make a case for a more pluralistic sense of what civic life should be and can be.

The Ideal Form of Civic Participation

Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol have both argued that membership in national, cross-class, face-to-face, chapter-based organizations has served the US well as a foundation for civic life. Skocpol opens *Diminished Democracy* (2003) with observations on the gravestone of one William Warren Durgin of North Lovell, Maine. The headstone mentions not only Durgin's service as a Civil War veteran and pall bearer for Abraham Lincoln but also his membership in a veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, membership in the Patrons of Husbandry or the Grange, and membership in the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. As Skocpol wryly observes, however much she values her own active membership in the American Political Science Association and the Social Science History Association, she could not imagine herself requesting that "APSA" and "SSHA" be "chiseled into my gravestone" (Skocpol, 2003, p. 5). Durgin's world of voluntary associations had a meaning and a weight that membership even in the same or similar organizations no longer carries. Skocpol expresses a longing for this world we have lost.

Why? What is so special about participation in groups like veterans' organizations, occupational associations and fraternal orders? What makes these groups so civically admirable and effective is that they are (or were) simultaneously:

1. grass roots, located in local communities and organized by chapters;
2. based on face-to-face meetings;
3. involving people often across lines of social class (like veterans' groups, at least for the World War II generation when military participation was broad and drew people from across classes more than it did in the Vietnam and Gulf wars);
4. oriented to fellow members across the country and to national legislative programs through affiliation with a national organization;
5. with enough local social and charitable activity to engage a variety of participants in a variety of activities that generate social ties and social and political skills;
6. requiring of people a commitment of time or energy;
7. depending little or not at all on paid, professional staff;
8. capable of generating moral and political demands on the state, especially on the national government;
9. providing an enduring organizational structure to ensure survival of the activity over time; and
10. operating by democratic election, rotation in office, and voting.

In Skocpol's work, many of these characteristics are taken for granted. She does not write, for instance, of voting and elections inside the organizations she admires. In drawing attention to national organizations composed in federations of face-to-face, local chapters, she emphasizes the cross-class membership of participation in these organizations, and their reliance on volunteer, lay leadership rather than professional staff.

In addition to these national voluntary organizations, I suspect Skocpol and Putnam would both recognize two other preferred models of civic engagement: the social movement and the political party. Social movements share many of the features of national chapter-based organizations but they may not have an enduring organizational structure, they may be single-purpose rather than multidimensional in their activities, they may or

may not bring people together across class or across other major social divides, and they are likely to require greater time commitment than the national chapter-based organizations. They are also likely to be more centrally defined by (1) asking participants to take significant risks of time, energy, and public visibility and vulnerability; (2) asking participants to present themselves as oppositional to some aspect of the going state of affairs; and (3) asking participants to define their involvement in terms of moral concerns and moral claims on state power.

As for the political party, in the US it has typically been a cross-class and cross-region alliance, but whether it has demanded face-to-face time-consuming participation has varied over US history and, at present, is much weaker than it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for lack of such participation. Still, the orientation of parties to national policy, the vestigial importance of grass roots participation, the ultimate dependence of the parties on at least a momentary act of mass participation on election day, the harnessing of moral fervor to the needs of national policy, and the maintenance of an enduring organizational structure to recruit and renew public participation all bring to the parties at least some of the ideal features that Putnam and Skocpol see in the veterans' organizations or the Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

What kind of organizations are left out when you pull together the features of parties, social movements and national chapter-based organizations as vehicles of good civic behavior? At least the following are omitted and are explicitly or implicitly disparaged in the work of Putnam, Skocpol and others:

- groups that are oriented to goals too particular, local and self-serving—there is disparagement of NIMBY groups that define the public good (if they define it at all!) in terms of highly localized self-interested needs. (Putnam, [2000, p. 22] mentions NIMBYism as evidence that groups that generate social capital may be committed to “malevolent, antisocial purposes”).
- groups that emerge around momentary crises or events that fail to generate sustaining social capital. (Putnam [2000, p. 164] compares marches on Washington of the 1990s unfavorably to those of the late 1960s because the more recent marches are not “preceded and followed by continuing activism in communities across the country” and offer “no assurance of continuing, community-based action”).
- groups that are driven by the views and values of paid professional staff where public participation is too easy and too cheap to generate either social capital or individual commitment from members. Skocpol (2003, p. 219) writes critically of the shift she sees since the 1970s from “membership to management” in American civic life when “new social movements and professionally managed civic organizations took to the field in huge numbers, redefining the goals and modalities of national civic life”. This has built a society that is “still a nation of organizers but much less a nation of joiners, because civic leaders were no longer committed to mobilizing vast numbers of fellow citizens into ongoing membership activities” (Skocpol, 2003, p. 220). Skocpol (2003, p. 232) argues that we should recognize the downside of “professionally managed, top-down civic endeavors” that in the end diminish democracy.
- non-groups, individual activity, particularly of ornery or evidently self-interested individuals and their advocates in the legal system, often obstructionist rather than solidary, like the atheists or the ACLU in pursuing relatively trivial dimensions of

the separation of church and state. Putnam (2000, p. 147) sees the growing numbers of lawyers since the 1970s as a sign of “the fraying of our social fabric” as Americans turn to formal institutions and the law to resolve conflicts that social trust and social networks once managed quite well.

- groups that are more therapeutically oriented than politically oriented and have explicitly or implicitly an anti-political stance, seeing hope for the future not in collective solutions but in self-responsibility or person-to-person caring, familial rather than political. Putnam’s (2000, p. 151) data indicate that self-help groups are the only kind of organization or association people belong to where membership is not positively correlated with “voting, volunteering, giving to charity, working on community problems, or talking with neighbors”.

For Putnam and Skocpol, and in this they are representative of many academics and social critics who worry about a broad decline of civic spirit, forms of civic participation can be disparaged if they are: (1) oriented to private interests or personal transformation rather than public purposes; (2) transitory, occasional or event-centered rather than enduring in mobilizing and maintaining public participation; (3) individual rather than collective in civic strategy; and (4) cheap and convenient for participants rather than demanding of risk, sacrifice, or investment of time and energy.

You may believe that I am barking up the wrong tree if I am now about to sing the praises of episodic organizations, NIMBY organizations, litigious cranks and twelve-step groups. Well, I am not making an argument *against* national chapter-based organizations, social movements or political parties. But these kinds of organizations should not exhaust our civic imaginations. Other forms of participation have a place that should be recognized and perhaps honored, not disparaged. They should be honored and their advantages exploited because, first, they suit the individualistic and pluralistic society that we have increasingly become; and second, they are in fact capable of generating social connection, civic benefit and moral claims upon the state.

Insufficient Orientation to Public Purposes: Therapeutic Groups and NIMBYs

In Robert Putnam’s remarkable body of data on the perilous decline of civic participation since the 1960s, he finds several counter-trends, among them a significant growth in self-help and support groups, from Alcoholics Anonymous to Weight Watchers. He accepts that support groups provide many members improved health and psychological well-being. They are especially valuable for people who are most isolated from other social networks; divorced and single people participate at much higher rates than married people. To their credit, Putnam (2000, p. 151) concludes, many support groups “bring problems hitherto dealt with in isolation into a communal forum”. They turn private troubles into social relations, and sometimes (although not often) they are organized in a way to pursue directly political goals. Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Association for Retarded Citizens have both acted directly in the public and legislative realm.

Even so, for Putnam, support groups fail to provide what the old-style civic associations did so well. Membership in self-help groups is not correlated with other community involvement, from voting to volunteering to talking with neighbors. The groups are not families. They are not communities. Their connection to a larger public life is “sometimes tenuous and hard to detect” (Putnam, 2000, p. 152).

I accept Putnam's characterizations but not his conclusions. No one claims that support groups are the best way or the only way to organize our social life. A twelve-step group is too inward-looking and, besides, it deals with the individual tragedies and sorrows of life, cancer or addiction or obesity or compulsive gambling, things not essentially about the distribution of power and privilege but about the distribution of fortune. In this sense, support groups are probably more like churches than they are like the PTA. What they lack, that churches have often provided, is a full-service program of activities—people can join the church because they want solace in grief or a pre-school for their children or a safe and congenial social setting for expressing spirituality, for finding a mate, making friends or drumming up clients for a business. Whatever the reason may be, the church provides them entrée into a wide variety of activities, some of them civic.

This is more rarely the case with therapy groups, although it does happen. Some of the 9/11 families came together initially as emotional support groups, to be able to grieve together. As these groups consolidated, they morphed into advocacy groups, and it is widely acknowledged that their efforts were decisive in forcing the Bush administration to agree to an independent 9/11 investigating commission. It is likewise clear that pressure from these groups forced Condolezza Rice to testify before the commission. Hundreds of family members have joined in nearly 100 lawsuits seeking damages from defendants as varied as Osama Bin Laden, the government of Saudi Arabia and the New York Port Authority.²

But surely this is the exception, not the rule. What may be more important with support groups is that sometimes they work. That is, sometimes they provide individuals with insight, strength and support. They make better, stronger individuals. These people may be in a position to help others who suffer from similar ills. They may be understanding of their family and friends and co-workers in ways they were not before. They may find themselves more able to cope with the world and more ready, even, to respond to opportunities for civic engagement. Putnam's data indicate they do not vote more, give more to charity or talk more to their neighbors. It may be that therapy groups offer less a mode of civic engagement than a collective and democratized mode of medical practice. If they contribute to civic health, they may do so primarily by contributing to individual health. They do so in a way that is anti-organizational, anti-bureaucratic and anti-professional. When they succeed, the participant eventually ceases to be a participant, exits from the group (and from Putnam's measures of membership) but then, healthier, more autonomous, and more convinced of the power of the kindness of strangers, they may choose civic engagement. They may not. I do not know of evidence one way or the other.

A stronger case can be made for the civic value of NIMBY groups than therapy groups. One of the more effective neologisms of the past quarter century is "NIMBY" and "NIMBYism". We seem to accept that NIMBYism is a bad thing, but the history of the term is instructive. William Safire (1993, p. 499) traces its first use to the American Nuclear Society, the trade association of the nuclear power industry. The term came into general use particularly among critics of environmentalists in the early 1980s and especially critics of those who protested the siting of hazardous waste disposal in their neighborhoods. Until the mid-1970s, siting decisions had been left to market forces and the private decisions of petrochemical corporations. Although 25 states had some relevant legislation, the Environmental Protection Agency reported to Congress in 1974 that in practice hazardous wastes "are essentially unregulated" because none of the states had

fully implemented its laws. As for the federal government, a comprehensive program to regulate the treatment and disposal of hazardous waste emerged only with the 1976 Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (Szasz, 1994, p. 11). It was only with the emergence of an environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s and the passage of key environmental legislation that government bureaucrats came to play a role. The large-scale social ramifications of land-use became more apparent to many, and state governments took on powers and established agencies authorized to override local decisions.

In this context of a growing role for democratic decision-making in land use, the NIMBY phenomenon appears. It accompanies growing democracy, it is made possible by growing democracy, and of course it has been fueled by growing distrust of science and expertise (Mazmanian & Morell, 1990). NIMBY sentiment has blocked the siting of hazardous waste disposal facilities, half-way houses, the release and placement of sex offenders in residential neighborhoods, and so on. I do not suggest that this has always been to the greater good or that NIMBY conflicts are ideal forms of deliberation. I do suggest that NIMBY groups have not only mobilized people for civic engagement but that they have done so in the name of the democratic process and they have been empowered by forms of democratic review and accountability that simply did not exist before the late 1970s. They do not displace a prior world of rationality or democracy but a world of private, corporate decision-making (e.g. Munton, 1996).

NIMBY organizations have some Lisa Simpsons in them. On the environmental scene, NIMBY groups have sometimes become experts in scientific and technical matters, able to debate corporate or government scientists cogently. But they have more than a little of Bart Simpson in their brash disrespect for politics as usual, their unwillingness to defer to established authorities, their sometimes histrionic, publicity-seeking ways of operating. Because they are so committed to democratic processes and public contestation, I am unwilling to conclude that they are insufficiently oriented to the public good. They may, however, be insufficiently enduring.

Insufficiently Enduring Civic Participation

The infrastructure of experience today may give unusual aid and comfort to political activity organized around events and occasions rather than around institutionalized groups. Consider the argument, made by political scientist Bruce Bimber (2003, p. 192), that the growth of what he calls “postbureaucratic” organizations offers a new capacity for “speed, opportunism, and event-driven political organization”. Some organizations, through careful targeting of subpopulations of the general public, have been able to mobilize people far beyond their own membership lists for specific political actions. In fact, this has been successful enough to effectively change what these organizations even mean by “membership”. Membership changes, in a sense, “from issue to issue and event to event. As information grows more abundant, the boundaries and membership of a political organization are increasingly a function of the particular event in which it is involved” (Bimber, 2003, p. 209).

Bimber (2003, p. 228) does not expect the digital era of political communication to stimulate an increase in civic participation. He is not a starry-eyed Internet utopian. He recalls that it was not the generally competent and serious Howard Dean in 2004 who was the first politician to benefit from Internet-generated fundraising but the naïve populist Jesse Ventura in his successful 1998 campaign for governor of Minnesota. But Bimber does expect that the vastly increased access to political information that the Internet

provides to millions of people will alter the character of the public sphere. He points to the “Million Mom March” of May 2000 as a case where a massive mobilization of people emerged entirely outside conventional civic and political organizations. One person, unaffiliated with any groups, conceived the idea and as late as September 1999, her organization was one phone line and two volunteers.

Was the Million Mom March a political success? It did not get the Congress to pass the gun control legislation the organizers sought—but then, conventional political pressures have also failed to achieve gun control legislation. It did not establish an enduring organization. It did, however, raise \$2 million, bring tens of thousands of people with little or no prior political experience to a march in Washington and won extensive media attention.

How important are such flares of political activity if they do not give rise to sustainable political organization? How important are they if the character of contemporary life makes them more and more possible and more and more successful in their own limited terms? Is it true that temporary, transitory and occasional events are not well suited to building enduring social ties or political skills? I once shared this view. Serving on a committee that distributes small grants to San Diego community groups, I joined with my fellow committee members to deny support for proposals to stage one-time cultural events like an annual neighborhood picnic or fair. I now think that was the wrong decision. Sometimes putting a festival together builds social capital. It requires planning, committee work, deliberation, vision, imagination and compromise. It may even be self-consciously oriented to serve “political” ends. This is the case, for instance, in the revival or invented tradition of “Day of the Dead”.

Communication scholar Regina Marchi has found that Day of the Dead rituals in the US contain political and cultural significance absent in their original Latin American setting. She notes that Day of the Dead festivities transcend divides of class and ethnicity in the Latino community as well as divides between immigrants and people whose families have been in the US for generations. In Oceanside, California, the Chamber of Commerce initiated a city-wide Day of the Dead event for the most mundane and self-interested of reasons: the Chamber wanted more visitors in downtown Oceanside and sought to transform the image of a city sometimes regarded as hostile to ethnic minorities.

Once begun, the project had multiple, community-building consequences. Recent immigrants, with the most knowledge of the “authentic” rituals, took charge and became the tutors and teachers for second-, third- and fourth-generation American Latinos and for non-Latinos. People came to know one another and develop skills at working together and bridging social divides. “There are lots of meetings”, one volunteer told Marchi:

So we have business people, artists, Mixtec people, designers, teachers all working together . . . There’s people who speak Spanish and people who speak English and people who speak Mixtec or Zapotec . . . We had the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts involved . . . On the day of the event, everyone is working together . . . People who know about Day of the Dead and those who didn’t know about it before all work together. (Marchi, 2005)

And this is just the beginning. As Marchi shows, Day of the Dead events not only bring Latinos together but also generate understanding and appreciation of Latino culture among others who come to enjoy the Day of the Dead celebration as participants in the planning or as observers and tourists at the scene. Furthermore, as the events come to be widely

recognized in the general culture, political activists take full advantage. Immigrant rights activists in recent years, across the US, have sponsored Day of the Dead processions and altars critical of US border policies (Marchi, 2005).

In our informational system today, in our present politics of ethnic and other identities, with our present media hungry to cover events, event-centered, transitory, but effectual organizing may be a growing part of civic life that has more potential for sustainability than is apparent on the surface.³

Insufficiently Collective Civic Participation

Few features of contemporary life are more disparaged by the critics of declining civic engagement than American individualism, particularly that of “baby boomers” and the generations that have followed them. The boomers, as Putnam (2000, p. 258) has observed, “vote less, campaign less, attend political meetings less, contribute less, and in general avoid their civic duties more than other generations”. They also marry late and divorce often, leave the religion in which they were raised and rarely return to it, are less loyal to a particular company or workplace, and are “more insistent on autonomy”. They are more libertarian and more tolerant than their parents, less respectful of “authority, religion, and patriotism”. They are “highly individualistic, more comfortable on their own than on a team, more comfortable with values than with rules”. And all of this has been socially harmful because these people volunteer less, give less, trust less and provide “less shared responsibility for community life” (Putnam, 2000, pp. 258–259).

At the same time the result of all of this is not what, in a European context, Putnam calls “*incivisme*”. This is what Putnam found in an earlier study in some regions of Italy where there is little involvement in associational life and where most people see public affairs as “somebody else’s business”, that of bosses or politicians. People feel powerless, exploited, unhappy. But this is clearly *not* the American situation. The American brand of individualism may be privatizing, may weaken traditional civic associations and political actions, but it is not antithetical to political involvement. It is not necessarily linked to a sense of powerlessness. There are a variety of individualistic approaches to political action that cannot be easily dismissed.

Some critics have seen people’s preoccupation with individual rights as a particularly American feature of the civic problem. Instead of seeking to work out common solutions to problems, people rely on untrumpable claims on the state or the public that they call “rights”. This looks, to some critics, like an extreme individualism, almost an atomism, that wreaks havoc with social trust and social connection. But rights are anything but individualistic. They exist in practice only when governments are prepared to enforce them. This happens only when governments are willing to invest resources in courts, police services and offices full of lawyers willing to take a matter to court on behalf of a citizen or a group of citizens. All of this, as Stephen Holmes and Cass Sunstein have argued, costs money. Money requires taxation. Rights are not simply a claim of individuals against the state but a claim of individuals that the state itself underwrites for the good of all. This includes property rights of individuals that Holmes & Sunstein (1999, p. 196) judge “an indispensable condition for democratic citizenship”. For them, a decentralized economy including property rights that government cannot confiscate at its whim, provides “a reliable material basis for an unintimidated political opposition”.

Rights are not possessions of individuals against the government; they are “powers granted by the political community” (Holmes & Sunstein, 1999, p. 17).

It is today a familiar observation that the worst thing for the cause of women’s liberty to make decisions about their own bodies was the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* to legalize broad accessibility to abortion. Some proponents of pro-choice politics have held that, in retrospect, taking a judicial route to abortion access was in the end a terrible error in judgment. It won a right but it did not win broad public support. We are now instructed that seeking to legitimate same-sex marriage through the courts rather than the legislatures is producing, just as *Roe v. Wade* did, a passionate backlash. But how does the political seer of the rear-view mirror figure out when people should give up their right to pursue justice in the legal system and when they should exercise that right? Did the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) make a political error to seek school desegregation in the 1940s and 1950s through the courts? Should the NAACP have taken the slower, tougher, but more lasting stance through the electoral process? It is hard to imagine recommending such a choice.

Antipathy to strategies that use the courtroom for political ends is one underlying theme in contemporary American discussions of civic engagement. Everybody loves to hate a lawyer. But we should not be too quick to jump on this bandwagon especially when, as one harsh critic of contemporary tort law writes, class action suits offer “the new town meeting” of political participation (Huber, 1988, p. 83). This goes much too far, but it does suggest that there is a collective, politicized dimension to civil litigation.

The capacity of individual citizens to raise a ruckus by suing powerful corporations has become a significant political force. The tobacco industry was under attack for years before it was dealt its most severe (although not crippling) blow. This came not from legislators and not from the Surgeon General but from a set of individual attorneys and finally state attorneys general seeking damages for individual citizens or the families of individual citizens who had suffered disease or death from tobacco addiction. Individual litigants made a difference, too, in the efforts to gain reparations from corporations who worked with and for the Nazi government in Germany. A handful of Holocaust survivors, aided by platoons of lawyers, brought to their knees the Swiss banks that had profited by supporting Hitler’s regime. While a handful of survivors led the charge, some 20,000 of them were in the end able to share in a payout of more than a billion dollars.

Suing private corporations for damages to achieve political ends is largely a product of the past half century, spurred by new rules governing class action suits and inspired by the successes of litigation strategies in the civil rights movement and its successor movements for the rights of women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and others. Few individuals have the economic resources to sustain a long courtroom battle, but if the prospects are good for a large settlement, the costs of litigation will be borne by a small set of public-interest or economically motivated contingency-fee lawyers. Litigation for school desegregation, courtroom battles for gay and lesbian rights, and litigation challenging the tobacco companies all have stimulated public awareness, public education and political organizing.

Civic Activity Insufficiently Demanding of Risk and Sacrifice

In the eyes of critics, some of the forms of political engagement I am seeking to validate here are just not sweaty enough. If you don’t look like Charlie Chaplin on the assembly

line in “*Modern Times*”, you aren’t doing politics right. Civic engagement should hurt. It should be uncomfortable. Writing a check to the Sierra Club doesn’t count. Complaining about surly, inefficient or negligent service from school, government or corporation isn’t civic engagement at all, it’s just complaining. Moral posturing is easy, as Allan Bloom (1987, p. 325) observed in criticizing the rebel morality of the 1960s. For him, morality should be not “histrionic” but humble, exercised in daily acts of telling the truth or paying one’s debts—and this morality “always requires sacrifice”.⁴ This seems to be the assumption of both conservative critics and left-wing critics of contemporary American civic morality—that we do not have much of it or, to the extent that we do, it is a morality of the easy way out.

This does not do justice to current civic life. It ignores how much event-centered civic activity gives rise to intensely energetic efforts for limited periods of time—whether this is the weeks of organizing for Day of the Dead or whether it is the tens of thousands of Americans who serve time after time as election day clerks or the tens of thousands who raise money for breast cancer research and treatment in a 26-mile walk or whether it is the Million Mom March. Even more, it omits altogether consideration of two domains whose civic activity requires—in very different ways—plenty of sweat. One, ironically, is the increase in the number and percentage of people whose civic engagement comes from a life’s commitment to full-time work in the public or non-profit sectors. When Skocpol looks to organized civic groups, she is seeking to locate volunteer activity beyond the workplace or the family. Nowhere do the dour accounts of Putnam and Skocpol make allowances for the increase in the number of people whose *jobs* are oriented to public service. To the extent that Skocpol deals with it, she sees it as a negative factor—the more that professionals take on the operation of public service organizations, the less of a role there is for the rank and file. A figure that strikes me as important and positive—that today there are an estimated 18 million people or eight per cent of the US labor force doing human service work in nonprofits—Skocpol cites as unhappy evidence that we have moved from a membership to a management society. (And she fails to note that this figure represents a great increase, with the number of human service organizations themselves having increased from 300,000 in 1967 to 1.4 million in 1992.)⁵

Professionalization, for Skocpol, is a danger to civic life. For her, if political parties are run not by volunteer precinct workers but by jet-set media consultants and pollsters, the whole activity of party politics becomes just another domain of professionally managed human activity and not the central self-governing act of democracy. But even if we might want to concede this for politics, as a special and important case, it is unlikely that we would also want to criticize the school system for having taken on the professional management of children’s education or hospitals for having professionalized home health care or social service agencies for having displaced neighbors, grandmothers and peer groups in offering counseling, occupational therapy, hot meals for the homeless, and so forth. Is there a social cost to every one of these changes? Yes, Skocpol is right to call it to our attention. But the social gain is substantial, too, and it is difficult to imagine turning back this clock.

This is not to say that the benefit of professionalized social services derives necessarily from public-oriented civic virtues. A person may choose to be a school teacher or a clerk in the social security office for reasons that have little or nothing to do with a sense of civic duty. There is no reason to assume that a teacher is a better human being than an insurance salesman; you can’t read virtue off a job card. But some jobs in themselves require civic

service constantly—and there are more such jobs in total and as a percentage of all jobs than there used to be. The professionals working for non-profits recruit a vast army of volunteers. Volunteering an occasional hour or even a regular hour or two on a weekly or monthly basis is something an increasing number of Americans have been doing in the past decades. They do it because they are high school or college students who may get course credit for it or gold stars from fraternities or sororities or other clubs they belong to. They do it because they are secure enough and healthy enough in their retirement to want to give back to the broader community. They do it because they want to be engaged—but in a structured way with a controllable commitment of hours. And they do it because the growing army of non-profit organizations asks for their help. One of the reasons the non-profit professional/volunteer relationship has flourished is that more and more people see community problems as “extremely serious”. The old-style club woman and good neighbor who worked on an after-school program or a library addition were likely to see their work as charitable but not likely to view it as wrapped up in earth-shaking public issues. Volunteers today are more likely to recognize that their efforts are directly or indirectly tied to problems of racism, inequality, homelessness and other serious ills (Wuthnow, 1998, pp. 46–47).

The second form of civic engagement that is highly demanding of risk and sacrifice but largely ignored by social critics is highly individual, highly expressive or therapeutic in orientation, but intensely risk-taking. What I have in mind are various political acts on the domestic scene—the woman who leaves her partner for a women’s shelter, or who seeks a restraining order against him, say; the teenager who comes out gay to his family and friends. Granted, the woman who seeks refuge in the battered women’s shelter is not doing the same sort of civic act as the volunteer who helps at the shelter or the professional who manages the shelter or the philanthropist who funds it. The young people who bravely come out are not performing the same civic act as the people who organize the gay pride parade or go to court to win domestic partner benefits or who lobby for same-sex marriage laws. But they are still taking the step of recognizing a private trouble as a socially or politically organized trouble to which there might be social or institutionalized remedies.

Risk-taking for the public good takes on a variety of highly personal and individualistic forms. Political theorist Nancy Rosenblum lists two personal “dispositions” she finds particularly important for building a democratic society.

First, she mentions the inclination to treat all people equally and informally, a kind of democratic spirit in manners, an easy openness to all people equally and without standing on ceremony.

Second, she mentions the willingness to speak up over small, everyday injustices, a disposition that draws on an insistent sense of right and wrong and a willingness to intervene, even across the chance of embarrassment or conflict (Rosenblum, 1999). For her, this kind of speaking up is most vital in the most inconspicuous moments, the moments of everyday life when one may choose, for instance, to break a polite silence to say something about a racist or sexist remark one has just heard or overheard, or to break a polite inattention to intervene when an older child cheats or bullies a younger one, or when a clerk speaks rudely to a customer—or a customer to a clerk.

I would add to Rosenblum’s list another democratic disposition: frankness. A growing frankness in public discourse spurs and is spurred by a growing frankness in everyday talk. Much of this frankness is about intimate life, sexual, medical or otherwise. It was a moment of considerable social importance in 1974 when Betty Ford, First Lady in the

White House, publicly acknowledged that she had undergone surgery for breast cancer. Her frankness prompted tens of thousands of women to get cancer screenings who would not otherwise have done so. A few years later Mrs. Ford would pioneer in revealing publicly her addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs.⁶

Of course, contemporary frankness may be self-indulgent, solipsistic or simply vulgar in rock music lyrics or TV or radio talk shows or contentious political rhetoric. Even this, for all of its crudeness, has been part of an opening over the past half century that has transformed what it is possible or safe for people to discuss in their daily lives. (Old-fashioned virtues of discretion and civility have their own appalling consequences in hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and the various indignities and repressions of the silent, repressed, and unspoken.) The expansion in the past half century of what counts as political to include aspects of intimate life, health and sexuality, but more broadly bringing the lives of women and children into public discourse, has been on balance a boon for men and women, adults and children.

Talking about politics as such is not easily done. Politics is a dangerous and divisive subject today as in the past. People's own native tact and eagerness to maintain sociability, preventing their own or their social partners' embarrassment, screens out or skirts around political topics even in our putatively frank era and even, as Nina Eliasoph (1998) has shown, in avowedly civic or political groups. This reticence has scarcely disappeared. Even so, supported by a wider culture, people take up topics in everyday talk today they could not have imagined discussing with their friends or family or co-workers a generation ago.

Conclusion

Many scholars and activists intent on improving civic participation in our country, and deeply worried by signs of the degradation of civic life in declining voter turnout and declining membership in many of the civic organizations that served society in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, have arrived at a view of what counts or what should count as "public life" or "civic engagement" that is too narrow. Looking at the work of Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol, two of the most imaginative, ambitious and substantial of these thinkers, I have tried to extract from their work a set of features of organized civic activity they admire and, by implication or express statement in their work, a set of features of quasi-civic or pseudo-civic or un-civic organized activity they disparage. This exercise led to the identification of four kinds of activity Putnam and Skocpol find wanting—activity not sufficiently oriented to the public good, not sufficiently enduring and institutionalized, too individualistic, or lacking in a commitment of time, energy, or risk. In each of these instances, a closer look leads to a different conclusion—that apparently privatistic or transitory or individualistic or apparently low-cost actions may have far-reaching civic benefits.

Nostalgia for old forms may be almost inescapable, but the effort to get past nostalgia is vital. We must be able to register not just how society closes off access to once thriving forms of group life but opens avenues to others. I am not thinking here of technological changes like the Internet, although in the past ten years that has become a factor in civic participation as in so much else. I am thinking more of social changes in family, work and kinship. I am thinking of broad demographic changes from the rapid increase in single-person households to the rapid rise in the prevalence of and legitimacy of divorce; of broad

changes in the labor market, including the dramatic rise in women's paid employment in the labor force. We live in a period of a rapid growth of higher education that privileges professional accomplishment more than volunteer amateurism and critical acumen over adherence to dogma; and in a culture of individual autonomy that saw in 1955 only four per cent of Americans practicing a religious faith other than the one they were born into—a figure that rose to 33 per cent by 1985 (Roof, 1999, p.75; Wuthnow, 1988, pp. 88–89). I am thinking of all these phenomena that social scientists and historians have not yet been able to piece together into a comprehensive portrait of the underpinnings of any kind of civic participation in the present age. If we do not recognize the depth of these changes, their enduring importance, and, for that matter, the extent to which they represent what are arguably advances for human freedom and equality, it will be difficult to know what kinds of civic engagement today are possible, or desirable, or even to determine what civic engagement means.

Some of the American founding fathers who lived into the early nineteenth century looked with horror at the new social forms emerging in that era. What, they wondered, had happened to the civility that had been so essential to the formation of a new republic? Why were the selfless men who stood for office in those first years being replaced by self-seeking organization men of that upstart and obnoxious organizational form, the political party? It might be very well for more people to participate more actively through these new forms, but the cost to sensible, civil and peaceable government could throw the country into ruin! The aging founders who made these arguments were right to see value in the earlier era and to see that some of it would be lost forever. But they were wrong, too, wrong for failing to recognize that the gross and rude new forms embodied virtues of their own, virtues better suited to a shifting social order than the founders' preferred set of civic dispositions could ever be.

Notes

- ¹ Their contributions are many but I will be focusing primarily on Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone* and Skocpol's (2003) *Diminished Democracy*.
- ² See *New York Times*, 22 July 2004, A14. (Jim Dwyer, "Families Forced a Rare Look at Government Secrecy.") On Saudi Arabia's response to lawsuits filed against them on behalf of the 9–11 families, see *Newsweek*, 16 April 2003, reported on the MSNBC Website www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3067906/.
- ³ This leaves aside the argument that transitory occasions of communal sentiment that happen *without organizing* are also of political and social consequence. I have in mind claims about the moral significance of spontaneous gatherings in the wake of widely noted and deeply felt mass-mediated experiences like the death of Princess Diana. See Roseneil (2001) and, for a fuller sociological treatment of similar phenomena, Katz & Dayan (1992).
- ⁴ One knows exactly what Bloom means, on the right, and what Putnam and Skocpol mean, on the left. But I think they are all seeking to engender individual morality and not civic engagement.
- ⁵ Skocpol, 2003, p. 214. The data is from Wuthnow, 1998, p. 47.
- ⁶ See Greene (2004). The rise of public frankness since 1960 is the topic of my present research.

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