

**Gary Alan Fine**  
Northwestern University, U.S.A.

## The Meso-World: Tiny Publics and Political Action

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.15.2.02>

**Abstract** In recent decades, sociologists have too often ignored the group level—the meso-level of analysis—in their emphasis on either the individual or the institution. This unfortunate absence misses much of what is central to a sociological analysis of community based on “action.” I draw upon Erving Goffman’s (1983) concept of the interaction order as I argue that a rigorous political sociology requires a focus on group cultures and tiny publics. Group dynamics, idiocultures, and interaction routines are central in creating social order. This approach to civic life draws from the pragmatism of John Dewey, as well as the broad tradition of symbolic interactionist theorists. Ultimately, I argue that a commitment to local action constitutes a commitment to a more extended social system.

**Keywords** Meso-Level of Analysis; Interaction Order; Tiny Publics; Political Order

To love the little platoon we belong to in  
society is the first principle...of public  
affections. It is the first link in the series by  
which we proceed towards a love to our  
country, and to mankind.

*Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790)

Edmund Burke

### Small Groups and the Political Order

How can we explain a revolution, a democratic transition, or a conspiracy by shadowy elites? If we examine the genesis of the First World War, the French Revolution, the Civil Rights movement, or the stable governance of a Midwestern farming town in the United States, we find a set of tiny publics (Fine 2012), either working together or engaged in conflict, that create the conditions necessary for political action. Dramatic changes and long-term continuities happen because groups of individuals commit to these political projects. Stated otherwise, citizens develop a “civic imagination” in which they confront issues while viewing themselves as holding joint membership (Baiocchi et al. 2014). They belong together and

**Gary Alan Fine** is James E. Johnson Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. His Ph.D. is in Social Psychology from Harvard University. He is the author of *Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Action and Culture*. His current book project, under review, is *The Hinge: Civil Society, Group Cultures, and Circuits of Action*.

**email address:** [g-fine@northwestern.edu](mailto:g-fine@northwestern.edu)

share a common fate, and actors define themselves as constituting a “we,” whether that operates locally or on a more expansive level. We imagine communities to which we aspire and which we value—and such collectivity covers much ground. As Georg Simmel (1971:24) remarks,

Sociation ranges all the way from the momentary getting together for a walk to the founding of a family, from relations maintained “until further notice” to membership in a state, from the temporary aggregation of hotel guests to the intimate bond of a medieval guild.

Many analyses of the structure of political engagement take one of two forms: either they investigate how institutional structures set the conditions for politics, erasing the role of the individual, or they examine how individual attitudes and beliefs shape political decisions. But, while ongoing social relationships are often marginalized and the links among local communities ignored in both of these approaches, we suffer if we ignore intermediate organizations (Ehrenberg 1999:x) and their shared perspectives. Moreover, despite the value of recognizing that institutions exist that are more local than the state, the interaction among citizens in building a local culture is still downplayed.

However, a shared politics exists because sociable groups base their ongoing interaction on pre-political behavior (Feigenbaum 1959) that can, under appropriate circumstances, generate political action. These local cultures—what I label the meso-level of analysis—are crucial. I follow Anthony Giddens

(1984) in arguing that structures exist insofar as they are enacted, and, as Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014:810) suggest, productive civic action consists of participants coordinating to improve their common circumstances. This requires interpersonal flexibility, negotiation, and the belief that society benefits from this shared project. Such a model is consistent with the American Political Science Association’s late 1990s “Civic Education Project for the Next Century,” which focuses on

the civic work of ordinary people who, located in diverse, plural communities, work on behalf of their communities and seek eagerly for common goods, both heroic and mundane. [Ehrenberg 1999:x]

The claimed intent of this project is to discover the locally-based middle-ground I will discuss below.

Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014:815) have emphasized the existence of phenomenological scenes that depend upon the continuing presence of participants who define themselves as mutually engaged in civic projects. They also include such components as intra-group relations, speech norms, and a social cartography that define the group in the light of a network of other groups. This position proposes the existence of a group culture that depends upon ongoing commitments and shared beliefs—what Goffman (1983) terms an interaction order—which, when recognized, permits situated interpretations, performances, and styles of civic life, leading to a recognition of the similarity of groups. Local actors rely on their belief in a shared interaction order, that is, a distinctive order that comes to characterize places and the groups in those

places.<sup>1</sup> Group relations are in continual dialogue with symbolic forms and shared beliefs.

My goal in the present discussion is straightforward, namely, to ask how groups—tiny publics—shape a political order. In what way does local culture shape affiliation and participation within a political system? Tiny publics affect civil society, civic behavior, and governmental action, and while this is a broad spectrum, the “political” in its various forms depends upon a meso-level and local analysis. Civic life is not a distinct domain of action or sector of political behavior, but is integral to any interaction order (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014:838, 852). Politics, communities, and institutions build upon the activity of their tiny publics on the basis of individual coordination and an awareness that action is important for them and their community. People see the world in much the same way as their close associates, whether or not they hope for the same future. Social actors, in fact, often acknowledge the ties that bind them, believe in shared participation, create group symbols, select a preferred style of interaction, and create solidarity by complaining about constraining forces (Feigenbaum 1959:30). Even ostensibly apolitical groups, such as leisure clubs, fit their commitments into political culture, no matter whether such commitments remain unrecognized (Kjølsrød 2013:1207). From their local perspectives and specialized interests, social groups of many kinds develop what sociologists Robert Merton and Elinor Barber (2004) refer to as

“sociocognitive microenvironments.” We do not live with millions, but with a few, and they influence how we see the world. I thus examine group influence throughout political engagement—from communal actions to government decision-making to terrorist attacks—and my concern is how the meso-level of analysis intersects with political action.

Groups, once central to the analysis of social order, had been marginalized both by those who examined the rational choice of individuals, embracing a micro-economic model, and by those who hoped to erase the individual by examining the power of more expansive institutional, state-based, and global systems. These two approaches have merged, but they ignored the places, communities, and social relations that motivate action. For a social system to thrive, individuals must see themselves as belonging together, these group members must routinely engage, and they must create systems of meaning and establish rules of order. This happens when people come together in common cause or in dispute.

A robust meso-sociological analysis must examine the intersection of three core concepts: *culture*, *interaction*, and *structure*. This triad, when considered together, constitutes the *interaction order*, the concept Erving Goffman (1983) outlined to explain how social systems are a precipitate of ordered, but interpersonal negotiation. This perspective recognizes the reality of structure as generated through interaction, and it provides social psychologists and ethnographers with theoretical constructs that permit them to address the core issues of the discipline. Culture was once the domain of anthropologists,

---

<sup>1</sup> Duck (2015:17) suggests that this commitment to interactional practices may be particularly common in impoverished neighborhoods where, for instance, rules about proper drug transactions may protect those who are not in that scene.

and sociologists did not examine how societies depended upon symbols and meanings that were inherent in these symbols. Interaction stood outside the mainstream of sociology, promoted by oppositional communities including symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists, and sociolinguists. Structure was the acknowledged, honored mainstream of the discipline, utilized by both functionalists and critical theorists, but, given that it stood apart from the control and choices of agents, it was distant from the core of social psychology.

However, scholars must combine these three conceptual domains in order to create an integrated sociology, using the lens of small group culture. Interactionists can rely on the group-oriented approach to social psychology that Muzafer Sherif (Sherif et al. 1961) pioneered in his Robbers' Cave experiment, examining how the local cultures of preadolescent campers permitted groups to overcome rivalries through focusing on superordinate goals. As influential as Sherif was, the ethnographic research conducted by Erving Goffman (1961) in his observations of mental patients at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC, acquired iconic status as it demonstrated that even the tightly controlled social systems of those defined as socially dysfunctional could produce routinized and recognized cultural practices that permitted resistance to authorities. While the meso-level of analysis—the realm of ongoing, historicized, and self-reflective group interaction—is thus essential for understanding social order, culture, understood as a form of shared, local, and collective action, is at the heart of how social order is possible. Theorizing the culture of local communities and idiocultures (the micro-cultural

systems of small groups) provides the grounding of a sociology that is as attuned to the street corner as it is to global trade patterns (Fine 2012).

If a meso-level approach has general utility, it should explain how groups provide a lens for understanding political involvement and governmental control. In this regard, John Dewey (1954:42) wrote in *The Public and Its Problems* that

The intimate and familiar propinquity group is not a social unity within an inclusive whole. It is, for almost all purposes, society itself.

In Dewey's (1954:218-219) pragmatism, sociologists find that local relations constitute society as properly organized with information interpreted socially, which constitutes a justification for Dewey's belief that in democracy the ear is more powerful than the eye. Personal communication trumps what an individual can perceive. As Dewey (1954:219) remarks, "Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator." The pragmatic philosopher Elizabeth Anderson (2014) emphasizes that the practices of social groups may be crucial for explaining alterations in moral standards. Few individuals comply with moral demands out of pure conscience, absent the support of influential others.

This awareness of group influence in public life, while often eclipsed by a focus on the individual, the institution, society, or the global, appears to be growing in contemporary social science. We find increased attention to neighborhood effects (Sampson 2012; Vargas 2016), networks of allegiance (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears

2006), community organizations (Eliasoph 2012), and places of affiliation (Goldfarb 2006). Meso-level scholars can draw upon several extensive bodies of research, often viewed as outside interactionist theory, to address how political process and community organization depends upon an interaction order, cemented within ongoing relations. This requires comparative analysis, as well as in-depth case studies, for, as George Homans (1946:294) points out, hierarchies among groups (in his case, small warships) are created through the fact that participants can compare leadership styles and the competencies of followers.

These meso-level traditions have a long lineage, connected to accounts of clans, participatory democracy, township governance, and friendships as the bulwark of political systems. The importance of friendship in the construction of the state recalls both Aristotle in his *Politics* and Ferdinand Tönnies (2001:43), who in *Community and Society* describes the clan as the “the family before the family and... village before the village.” While these points are important, it is equally vital to understand their limits, which Jane Mansbridge makes explicit in her exploration of “adversary democracy.” Mansbridge (1980:34) states that

When citizens have a common interest, face-to-face contact – which allows debate, empathy, listening, learning, changing opinions, and a burst of solidarity when a decision is reached – can bring real joy. But in the face of conflict, emotions turn sour. Even in representative systems, an aversion to conflict leads citizens to avoid discussing politics; in face-to-face assemblies, similar aversions have more profound

effects...Fear of conflict leads those with influence in a meeting to suppress important issues rather than letting them surface and cause disruption. It leads them also to avoid the appearance of conflict by pressing for unanimity.

Groups are most effective when they, like the archetypal Quaker meeting, can constitute themselves as a potent consensual system, covering over disagreements. But, whether in agreement or in dispute, groups affect politics. Mansbridge (1980:34) notes in this regard that

Face-to-face meetings of all citizens are in any case impossible on a nationwide level, although meetings of smaller groups can still have a significant influence on national policy. All parliamentary systems, for instance, end up with face-to-face meetings of elected representatives.

In partisan systems, external factors, as well as the structural features of party affiliation provide support for a system that continues in the face of ongoing opposition.

In examining group action—consensual and occasionally conflictual—we must reject a political sociology that erases micro-cultures and endeavor to build one which recognizes that elites, conformers, the marginal, and the resistant all depend on the meanings, social relations, and structural possibilities provided by local communities. Thriving societies depend on a web of social relations, as both Richard Sennett (1977:31) and Alexis de Tocqueville have observed. This also directly applies to the metaphor beloved of sociologists, that of “action.”

The interpretation of forms of *collective* and *coordinated* action is essential for any model of social organization and, ultimately, for the possibility of civil society.

## A Sociology of Action

The analysis of face-to-face interaction begins with a twined phenomenology. Alfred Schütz (1967), the distinguished phenomenologist of the social, regards face-to-face interaction as beginning with an “other orientation” (p. 163) or a “thou-orientation” (p. 173) that creates the possibility for what Schütz refers to as “we-relationships,” which he maintains are at the heart of sociality. Schütz quotes Max Weber’s *Economy and Society* as he addresses the meso-level construction of civil society in order to support his claim that when we talk about extensive collective entities, we are truly imaging actions that occur through face-to-face interaction. Weber (1978:14) writes that

For sociological purposes...there is no such thing as a collective personality which “acts.” When reference is made in a sociological context to a state, a nation, a corporation, a family, or an army corps, or to similar collectivities, what is meant is, on the contrary, *only* a certain kind of development of actual or possible social actions of individual persons.

Schütz (1967:199) extends Weber’s claims, adding that

every “action” of the state can be reduced to the actions of its functionaries, whom we can apprehend by means of personal ideal types and toward whom we

can assume a They-orientation...From the sociological point of view, therefore, the term “state” is merely an abbreviation for a highly complex network of interdependent personal ideal types. When we speak of any collectivity as “acting,” we take this complex structural arrangement for granted...we forget that, whereas the conscious experiences of typical individuals are quite conceivable, the conscious experiences of a collective are not.

This presents a challenging model that insists on a sociology of the mind, ignoring a sociology of joint action. We clearly must take seriously the concern about speaking of “artificial” entities acting, based on the combination of acts at different times and by different groups, erasing the agentic negotiations among participants. Nevertheless, it is apparent that under circumstances in which the parties are present (as in families or teams), we can recognize that the loci and causes of collective action are located in communal agreement. We must thus extend the analysis of shared projects beyond minds to include the specific, grounded cultures that groups create. This takes us from micro-level analysis to meso- or group-level analysis—from minded-sociology to a sociology of action.

Swidler (1986) emphasizes that culture is a tool, albeit a tool that is not merely generic, but rather used in *local* communities, which shapes civic life (Fine and Harrington 2004) and is tied to the recognition of shared pasts and prospective futures. The presence of what is variously known as group cultures, micro-cultures, or idiocultures reveals how interactions and institutions are mutually dependent through common recognition and intersubjective

experience. It is by means of the ongoing experiences of working together that organizational arrangements are treated as definitive. Such a perspective, based in sociological social psychology, suggests that the locus of culture need not be limited to extended populations, but can be analyzed through social worlds and communication networks. Culture is a form of practice, linked to local understandings, everyday interactions, and ongoing social relations.

This perspective demands an action-oriented approach to culture that examines performance, transaction, and coordination as they occur in situ, shaping the world in which action occurs. The study of culture should emphasize the analysis of groups—from primary groups (such as families), to interacting small groups (clubs, work teams, cliques), to networked segments that are bound together through on-going interaction, spatial co-presence, or shared interests.

Consistent with the meso-level analysis of group culture is what Erving Goffman termed the “interaction order.” Given that he composed his American Sociological Association presidential address while terminally ill, Goffman’s text leaves analytic gaps and is largely devoid of empirical cases. Still, Goffman (1983:4) claims that

At the very center of interaction life is the cognitive relation we have with those present before us, without which relationship our activity, behavioral and verbal, could not be meaningfully organized.

By recognizing and participating in an interaction order, group members treat their association as stable,

ongoing, and influential. Furthermore, this stability is not generated within the immediate encounter, but depends on *memory* as embedded in ongoing social relations, incorporating agreements developing from experience. From this perspective, Anne Rawls (1987) addresses the “interaction order *sui generis*,” suggesting that “imperatives that are not structurally defined” are organizing principles that build upon local commitments, a claim central to a meso-analysis. The salient point is that culture is both cause and effect of interaction and affiliation. Culture is not merely cognitive, but is revealed in action.

Goffman’s “interaction order” provides a basis for examining social systems comparatively and historically. The immediate encounter does not generate the communal relation, which instead depends on our social *memory*. In other words, interaction depends upon the mental recognition of how the past affects the present, and this perspective, central to examinations of collective memory, links collective cognitions with the building of communities (Olick and Robbins 1998). For the social psychologist, imagined communities (Anderson 1991) are everywhere, not only at the level of the state and nation. Civil societies are not appendages of the state, although they are responsive to systems of control. We can imagine ourselves tethered to worlds that are large and small, more or less powerful, and our commitments can take many forms. This connection can be cognitive (through cultural logics), emotional (through the strength of cohesion), and/or behavioral (through shared expectations).

Goffman (1983) argued that we build society through a tacit agreement to create orderliness because of

our use of successful past interaction as a model for the present. As a result, the establishment of comforting interactional routines generates trust (Miztal 2001). Those who focus on interaction regimes possess analytic tools with which to address social organizations from the dyad to the globe and from the bedroom to the state, a point that is consistent with Collins' (1981) description of how microstructures permit the development of macrostructural understandings.

Rawls' (1987) "imperatives that are not structurally defined" are the organizing principles that derive from local commitments. Goffman's concern in his essay, as in much of his writing, is to examine occasional encounters in which the parties are not in extended, meaningful contact. He emphasizes fleeting encounters, such as those between clerks and customers, while pointing to the centrality of what he terms "deeper" relations that depend on biographic awareness and idiocultures. As a general conceptual framework,

Idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, thus being used to construct a social reality for the participants. [Fine 1987:125]

Central to this definition is that culture is linked to interaction and affiliation, and that the historical and self-referential quality of the cultural elements

is crucial. From this perspective, behavior reveals culture, whatever culture's other cognitive and affective bases may be.

In extending the construct of the interaction order with its cultural traditions to established social relations, I combine Goffman's recognition about how interaction creates practices and routines with the recognition, too often missing within micro-analytic studies of interpersonal relations, that meanings are often situated within (relatively) stable group cultures. Families, clubs, teams, and cliques provide examples of such cultures. Shared awareness produces continuing social relations. Collective memories are essential if individuals are to believe that they are a shared public that has common interest or linked fate (Dawson 1995). Eviatar Zerubavel (1997) reminds us in this regard that thinking is neither individual, nor universal, but rather communal. Anselm Strauss (1978) and David Maines (1977) properly point to negotiation as a tool for building ongoing and flexible, but durable relations in organizations, as well as in families. Negotiations, as they shape the future, take place within a context of joint pasts, and the future as an interaction order depends upon a knowable past (Fine 2007; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Its construction is a form of *future work*.

A meso-level analysis that recognizes the interaction order and the power of group cultures provides a bulwark of civil society. The shared actions and discourses of groups permit the establishment of a civic imagination, shaped by social location, personal and political experience, and local group cultures (Baiocchi et al. 2014:69). If sociology is to address public engagement, understanding how civil

systems are built or undercut by shared action is crucial. It should be no surprise that a primary goal of mid-century sociologists was to develop a “general theory of action” (Parsons and Shils 1951). But, even if this project did not discuss action as a social achievement, it made the point that sociology, for all its belief in structures and social facts, depends upon individuals coordinating their actions within the context of their social relations.

As sociologists, we begin with Thomas Hobbes, who, perhaps to his surprise, is said to have provided our discipline’s core challenge. Hobbes proposed that without limits on rival personal interests, the security necessary for routine tasks would be absent. Although Hobbes never refers in *Leviathan* to “social order,” his problem has become ours. Hobbes (1651:62) writes that

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man... wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is...no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.

In such dire circumstances, how can orchards be fruitful, libraries filled, villages peaceable, and people die in their beds? Hobbes’ solution to a world of uncoordinated interests is a world of control, with authority being given to the Leviathan, an “artificial” or corporate person. Society is organized either from above, or from within. Hobbes dismisses the latter alternative, posing a world of solitary self-in-

terest against a world of central power and surveillance. He thus presents a choice without a middle. Both individuals and institutions lack self-governing social stability. However, democracy exists and self-determination is possible precisely because of this middle—a world of tiny publics teeming with acts and responses.

This meso-middle is the hinge (Fine 2014), the linkage of external structures and personal interests. Order can be built horizontally, not only vertically, and even vertical control depends upon the existence of groups at each level of authority. Oppression relies upon interactional routines as much as democracy does. In contrast to Hobbesian red-in-tooth-and-claw individualism, localism and social relations contribute to security and routine. The first place to search for a haven from behavioral and epistemic turmoil resides within the small communities in which one participates (Hallett 2010). With this goal, Tim Hallett correctly points out that any institutional theory must be “inhabited”—it must take into consideration the participants in the creation of the institution. Institutions cannot exist without inhabitants (Hallett and Ventresca 2006).

Ultimately, as Jonathan Turner (2012) argues, the intersection of micro-, meso-, and macro- creates an integrated sociology, our disciplinary mission. The centrality of culture is simultaneously social psychology and political sociology. In speaking of the development of a civil society, we must reach beyond a narrowly defined political analysis, acknowledging that individuals are committed to their emplacement in community. They do this through the recognition of the salience of social relations and

through the emotional linkages that flow from these relations.

Affiliation need not stop at the boundary of interaction, but can extend to other groups with similar character. We often consider ourselves members of a set of groups, in effect creating a social category from an array of micro-cultures. When this broader affiliation is established, actions (voting, contributing, or demonstrating), tied to interaction, generate deeper and more consequential commitments. While such connections initially benefit a tiny public, they are subsequently tied to a desire to shape a “good society” (Bellah et al. 1991). However, good societies depend upon good groups—groups that are virtuous and groups that are effective. This social imaginary is based in a belief that the strong ties of family and friendship can be extended, creating voluntary communities. In being linked to group cultures, people believe that they belong to scenes and treasure the amenities that those scenes provide (Silver, Clark, and Yanez 2010), which is true even if the community has internal splits or disputed boundaries. Conflict is as evident as consensus, and dispute may be an expected part of a group culture (Weeks 2004), rather than providing a basis for exit, as long as participants feel that there are resources or norms that are worth disputing with each other.

Studies of civil society often ignore group interaction in favor of individual preferences or structural pressures. The political theorist Michael Walzer (1992:107) recognizes that

Civil society itself is sustained by groups much smaller than the *demos* or the working class or the mass

of consumers or the nation. All these are necessarily pluralized as they are incorporated. They become part of the fabric of family, friends, comrades, and colleagues, where people are connected to one another and made responsible for one another.

Walzer argues that civil society connects to a set of relationship networks, asserting that the good life is possible only in a civil society that depends on our being sociable or communal, freely associating and communicating. Perhaps most significantly, he acknowledges that civil society is a setting of settings, emphasizing that there is a multiplicity of sites of engagement.

We lose the recognition of how political systems operate in practice when we erase social relations. Society requires a mesh of groups, a world of cross-cutting dialogues (Cohen and Arato 1992:252; Back and Polisar 1983). Social media, with their strands of “friends,” reveal the importance of affiliative ties even if these ties never involve face-to-face interaction, once considered to be the very basis of social psychology.

The approach that privileges affiliation as a result of ongoing interaction also privileges the power of associations, but caution is warranted in embracing association. Associations can be extensive and bureaucratic, incorporating thousands of “participants” whose engagement can be very thin. Kathleen Blee (2012) observes in her insightful ethnographic census of the range of social movement activism in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, how social movement organizations and social movement groups may be segmented by size and by the forms

of democratic deliberation. These forms permit various types of social relations to cohere and encourage differing types of affiliation between members and leaders. Even the largest organizations are, of course, controlled by decision-making groups, even if these groups are at some distance from the rank-and-file supporters or dues-paying members of the organization. Large groups have leadership circles, and they often have subsidiary groups (committees) that feed input into the decision-making process. When such an extensive association holds a mass meeting, rally, or demonstration, it is organized by groups and attended by groups. Neither a single person, nor a mob is capable of establishing the kind of organization that produces events that actually depend on colleagues and acquaintances.

In praising the illuminating insight of the meso-level of action, treating it as a hinge that connects persons and institutions, I hope that this argument provides an opening to the importance of interaction orders, treating the construction of communal structures as based on the power of groups. This connects local cultures to spaces in which people come together to act collaboratively. In this, I acknowledge the power of equality and the presence of inequality. Groups may treat their members as equals, such as when all are treated as citizens with equivalent civic rights in a state or society that extends beyond the focused domains in which communities of individuals operate. It is also the case, however, that neither individuals nor groups have equal access to resources, which advantages some groups in attaining their goals, while disadvantaging others. These differences are firmly engraved in the analysis of conflict and control. One of the chal-

lenges of a meso-level analysis is to determine how tiny publics can gain authority to make a case for themselves and the rights of their members. At the broadest level, I see this argument as a contribution to democratic theory, a contribution that examines not how civil societies *might* operate, but rather how they *do* operate as interactional regimes that depend upon social relations. To this end, I draw inspiration from the cultural tradition of group dynamics, the tradition of political analysis, and the philosophical tradition of social critique.

The examination of small group dynamics and idiosyncrasies can open the black box of political engagement, but too often political theorists have marginalized the level of the group in favor of the individual, the organization, the institution, and the state. Focusing on the meso-level brings us closer to seeing how individuals affiliate with political systems through the presence of tiny publics. While this should not be pushed too far insofar as the power of media representations and institutional communications are real, both are built upon groups and shape the experience of other groups. As John Dewey (1954) maintains, discursive and action-oriented groups have the power to shape the creation of local publics.

Democratic society operates *by groups* mobilizing themselves as the sources of commitment, and *through groups*, whose targeted commitment to particular civic projects demonstrates a generalized commitment to the existence of the political process. To be sure, the characteristics, motivations, and goals of these tiny publics are highly variable, and each must be considered in light of those in-

stitutions and publics that surround them. Some bridging publics strive to incorporate pluralistic perspectives, while in other cases, the boundaries are more tightly controlled and the character of the group is more homogeneous.

## A Meso-World

By ignoring the interaction order, sociology has neglected the link between individual actions and how these actions generate affiliations within civil society, providing political structures with tensile strength, even, or perhaps especially, in the case of what might otherwise be considered apathy or uncertainty. The public sphere is a realm of local action, and without this recognition, the linkage between individual and state is uncertain. While scholars have the right to analyze the creation of communities of affiliation from a macro-perspective and thus ignore the granular conditions of civic participation, for citizens themselves that linkage operates up close. Civic affiliation becomes real through families, classrooms, clubs, social movements, union locals, and political campaigns. The presence of like-minded others creates the collective representations on which institutions depend. Belonging to a political system is not merely an idea, but depends on action, and political theory in this respect is tethered to social psychology. Citizenship develops from the reality of the interaction order.

Civil society, as the label suggests, implies a reading of the idea of civility that in turn builds upon the existence of micro-communities in which this civility is modeled. But, civility means something distinct from politeness or passivity. Contentious politics,

when operating within bounds, can also be a form of civility. Even in the case of terrorism, where the acts that characterize the terrorist group may stand outside civil society, the discourse involved often contributes to ongoing and consequential moral debates, as in the case of the radical abolitionist movement.

The idea of the citizen in a legitimate political system, whether supportive of the status quo or in revolt, depends upon the idea that one is not alone. Patriotism is not an individual feeling, but assumes the presence of others who are similarly inclined and share that feeling in sites of collective activity. It is a group emotion that is often linked to times and places of collective commemoration. These can be private locations, such as Thanksgiving celebrations, or occasions in which groups of families and friends share a space and a beer, such as at Independence Day fireworks. Because one experiences common emotions and a belief in a linked fate, one is not alone, belonging to a group with similar memories and futures.

However, simply believing that one citizen is like others is insufficient. The creation of sets of relations, constituting social capital, reflects the existence of a community of others with whom one is in common cause and with whom one can work, building what one cannot create alone (Sennett 2012). One needs places in which selves can meet, recognize their common stakes, and devise shared action. The provisioning of places of action is essential. Combining spaces and persons reveals one's commitment through the performance of civil selves, which then becomes solidified through the sharing of histories.

Finally, tiny publics cause or become the target of control, either through their shared beliefs, or because those groups that run institutional systems have access to resources that permit them to enforce preferred rules and regulations. These processes are as evident in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 as in the early feminist Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. To be sure, the moral order, characteristics of actors, spatial opportunities, and technologies of control differ, but the group as the core of social action remains central.

## Conclusion

While I have presented the general conditions of a theory of tiny publics, we should not assume that all groups provide equally effective conditions for organizing and generating public engagement. We must consequently examine variability in the forms and uses of group culture. Some societies operate with robust and lasting groups, whereas elsewhere, perhaps because of distinct styles of interaction, levels of surveillance, or forms of social control, local participation may be truncated. Examining the effects of variation and how it arises is an important direction for research and theorizing. If we treat the

properties of tiny publics as variables, we can compare networks of tiny publics of nations and regions, creating a comparative meso-politics. This potentially provides a more sophisticated understanding of how the cultures, resources, and demographics of tiny publics shape the social order and the choices of individuals.

Ultimately, individuals become part of political systems not through the system as such, but because others—those with whom they recognize that they have similar interests and affiliations—surround them. Meso-structures, providing a space for interaction, reduce the need for a single over-arching power center.

Those who believe in the power of groups to create an interaction order must make this case persuasively. Too often the meso-level of analysis has been marginalized or erased. Affiliations among persons create affiliation with society. Allegiance is constituted in the local worlds in which citizens participate, and it then extends to allegiance to a world that is more expansive, but perceived as similar in kind. A commitment to local action becomes a commitment to an extended world.

## References

Anderson, Benedict O'G. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2014. "Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery." Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas.

Retrieved March 04, 2015 (<http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/14787>).

Back, Kurt and Donna Polisar. 1983. "Salons und Kaffeehäuser." *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 25:276-286.

- Baiocchi, Gianpaolo et al. 2014. *The Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Bellah, Robert N. et al. 1991. *The Good Society*. New York: Knopf.
- Blee, Kathleen. 2012. *Democracy in the Making: How Activist Groups Form*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burke, Edmund. 1790. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. London: J. Dodsley.
- Cohen, Jean and Andrew Arato. 1992. *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Collins, Randall. 1981. "On the Microfoundations of Macrosociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 86(5):984-1014.
- Dawson, Michael. 1995. *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dewey, John. 1954. *The Public and Its Problems*. Chicago: Swallow Press.
- Duck, Waverly. 2015. *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ehrenberg, John. 1999. *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea*. New York: New York University Press.
- Eliasoph, Nina. 2012. *Making Volunteers: Civic Life after Welfare's End*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Feigenbaum, Kenneth. 1959. "Sociable Groups as Pre-Political Behavior." *American Behavioral Scientist* 2(3):29-31.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1987. *With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 2007. *Authors of the Storm: Meteorology and the Culture of Prediction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 2012. *Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Culture and Group Action*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 2014. "The Hinge: Civil Society, Group Culture, and the Interaction Order." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 77(1):5-26.
- Fine, Gary Alan and Brooke Harrington. 2004. "Tiny Publics: Small Groups and Civil Society." *Sociological Theory* 22(3):341-356.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Goffman, Erving. 1983. "The Interaction Order." *American Sociological Review* 48(1):1-17.
- Goldfarb, Jeffrey. 2006. *The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hallett, Tim. 2010. "The Myth Incarnate: Recoupling Processes, Turmoil, and Inhabited Institutions in an Urban Elementary School." *American Sociological Review* 75(1):52-74.
- Hallett, Tim and Marc Ventresca. 2006. "Inhabited Institutions: Social Interaction and Organizational Forms in Gouldner's *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*." *Theory and Society* 35:213-236.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1651. *Leviathan*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Homans, George. 1946. "The Small Warship." *American Sociological Review* 11(3):294-300.
- Kjølsrød, Lise. 2013. "Mediated Activism: Contingent Democracy in Leisure Worlds." *Sociology* 46(6):1207-1223.
- Lichterman, Paul and Nina Eliasoph. 2014. "Civic Action." *American Journal of Sociology* 120(3):798-863.
- Maines, David. 1977. "Social Organization and Social Structure in Symbolic Interactionist Thought." *Annual Review of Sociology* 3:235-259.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1980. *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. New York: Basic Books.

- McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew Brashears. 2006. "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades." *American Sociological Review* 71(3):353-375.
- Merton, Robert and Elinor Barber. 2004. *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity: A Study in Sociological Semantics and the Sociology of Science*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Misztal, Barbara. 2001. "Normality and Trust in Goffman's Theory of Interaction Order." *Sociological Theory* 19(3):312-224.
- Olick, Jeffrey and Joyce Robbins. 1998. "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 105-140.
- Parsons, Talcott and Edward Shils. 1951. *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, Anne. 1987. "Interaction Sui Generis." *Sociological Theory* 5:136-149.
- Sampson, Robert, J. 2012. *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schütz, Alfred. 1967. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Sennett, Richard. 1977. *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopf.
- Sennett, Richard. 2012. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sherif, Muzafer et al. 1961. *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Book Exchange.
- Silver, Daniel, Terry Nichols Clark, and Clemente Jesus Navarro Yanez. 2010. "Scenes: Social Context in an Age of Contingency." *Social Forces* 88(5):2293-2324.
- Simmel, George. 1971. *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, Anselm. 1978. *Negotiations: Varieties, Contexts, Processes and Social Order*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51(2):273-286.
- Tavory, Iddo and Nina Eliasoph. 2013. "Coordinating Futures: Toward a Theory of Anticipation." *American Journal of Sociology* 118(4):908-942.
- Tönnies, Ferdinand. 2001. *Community and Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, Jonathan. 2012. *Theoretical Principles of Sociology. Volume Three: Mesodynamics*. New York: Springer.
- Vargas, Robert. 2016. *Wounded City: Violent Turf Wars in a Chicago Barrio*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Walzer, Michael. 1992. "The Civil Society Argument." Pp. 89-107 in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, edited by Chantal Mouffe. London: Verso.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Weeks, John. 2004. *Unpopular Culture: The Ritual of Complaint in a British Bank*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1997. *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

.....  
Fine, Gary Alan. 2019. "The Meso-World: Tiny Publics and Political Action." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 15(2):10-24. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.15.2.02>.  
.....