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Paul Lichterman: Elusive Togetherness

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INTRODUCTION

IT WOULD have been hard to guess from the beige linoleum tile floor, the white cinderblock basement walls, or the big aluminum coffee pots labeled “regular” and “decaf” standing at attention near the doorway. You would not know it from scanning the people in the room, either. Here were late middle-aged, white church volunteers in cotton shirts and tan slacks. Neither the scene nor the people would look very remarkable to many middle-class people in the American midwest. But soon after the director of the Urban Religious Coalition opened this meeting in the basement of Lakeburg Presbyterian Church, on September 18, 1996, it struck me that something historic was happening. Lakeburg’s religious community was going to define caring in a new, ambitious way. Church groups were going to build new relationships with social service providers and community action groups, as they responded to the drastic social welfare policy reforms that President Clinton recently had signed into law.

I was at my first meeting of the Humane Response Alliance. People in the audience were worried about what welfare reform was going to mean for kids, people in nursing homes, recent immigrants. One volunteer walked us through the facts and figures in her elaborate handouts, trying to make the impending policy changes more concrete for us. Each month, 3.5 percent of the state’s welfare caseload would be dropped from the rolls. Some of these “cases” would be people with compounded problems, another volunteer reminded us. He pointed out that some of these people had chronic medical conditions they could not afford to treat. They would not have had much schooling. Some would have a drug habit. We could not expect these people to move easily into the workforce, no matter how rosy the job market was just then. The volunteer spoke descriptively, not judgmentally. He was somber. “Not to be doomsday, but this is not trivial. It’s an incredible challenge to the community.”

How different this all sounded from what else I had heard about welfare reform. The Lakeburg daily paper had quoted state officials sporting an easy confidence with the policy changes. It would be a “walk in the park,” the governor said. Outside this room, I had not heard anyone ask what would happen to poor immigrants or sick people who could not work. Urban Religious Coalition executive director Donald sounded urgent. Invoking the words of a presidential hopeful of that election season, Donald told us, “We need to look for new solutions. Bill Bradley says we need to find new ways to link the private and public sector.” We in the Humane Response Alliance would try to “reconnect the caring community.”

Neither Donald nor anyone else in this sprawling basement meeting-room

sounded happy about the strict new limits on welfare payments. No one said that church groups could or should take over social service as state-sponsored services shrank. At the same time, Donald was saying that people of faith had civic obligations to the community at large, and needed to figure out new ways to practice them.

I was starting a new study of religiously based community service groups. I had been interested in changing styles of public involvement in the United States. Research for an earlier book had taught me that “being involved” could mean very different things to different people, with different consequences for collective action. I wanted to learn more about what being involved in local community life meant to religious people. Church-based volunteer groups were an oddly understudied part of community life in the United States, and this was a fascinating time to begin studying them.

So I followed a variety of church-based community service groups and projects, over three and a half years. I chose groups from the Protestant religious majority in the United States. I listened in as the Humane Response Alliance tried to strengthen civic bonds and build new ones in the wake of welfare reform. I listened in and joined in with other groups, some of them originally sponsored by the Humane Response Alliance. One of these produced educational workshops for local churches on the politics of welfare reform. Members of another cosponsored a public health nurse and an “eviction prevention” fund for apartment residents in a low-income neighborhood of African Americans, southeast Asian, and Spanish-speaking immigrants. Others put on evening events for “at-risk” teenagers, housed and fed homeless people in church basements as part of a revolving shelter program in Lakeburg, or kept elementary schoolers busy during a two-week summer camp. There was also a coalition of pastors, liberal and conservative, who met monthly to publicize their stand against racism in Lakeburg; some of the pastors figured that racial tensions would only increase as welfare reform left more people with fewer means of survival. I studied a theologically conservative Protestant network that organized different church groups to “adopt” families and support them as their breadwinners tried making the transition from welfare to work. I attended executive board meetings, meetings to plan special public events, and meetings of county social service workers, too. My earlier book had treated different kinds of activists. This time I hoped to learn about community groups of a sort I had not studied before, ones that make up a big part of ordinary civic life in the American cultural mainstream.

I especially wanted to find out how these groups created relationships beyond the group. How would people in my groups reach out to people they wanted to help, to other community groups, or to state agencies? How would they negotiate social inequality, religious and cultural diversity? Would the groups encourage members to spiral outward into relationships with people they would never meet otherwise? I listened carefully as the groups tried to create bridges out-

ward. Would these groups do what so many theorists and commentators had argued, and hoped, they would do—build a greater community?

My discoveries became this book. I saw how hard it was for well-intentioned groups to go out and create civic community. I learned that the different *customs* which kept the groups themselves together strongly influenced the kind of relationships group members could try to create in the larger community. I found that it took a very flexible, willingly self-critical kind of group, one with particular customs, to create bridges across big social divides. Deep caring was good but not nearly enough. The support of state agencies was important, but not enough. It was not enough to have the “right” civic-minded ideas, the right discourse, either. My focus on customs contributes a different perspective to the ongoing conversation about civic engagement in America, at a time when America’s social contract is being rewritten.

How would these religious groups bring religion into the civic arena? Would their very identity as religious groups promote divisiveness in Lakeburg’s community life or create friction with county social service agencies? In fact I did not hear a great deal that was obviously religious at all in these groups, outside the conservative Protestant network. If we imagine bringing religion into the civic arena, often we imagine people praying in public or expounding on what sacred texts say about what other people should do or not do. I found a different way in which people bring religious meanings into the civic arena: Simply by following their customary group routines, they signal to themselves and others that they are religious people. These quiet signals of religious identity sometimes help people carry out civic obligations together. Different ways of signaling religious identity also can widen divisions inside community groups, even when members agree on the religious beliefs behind their group goals.

In the time since I started on my research rounds in Lakeburg, many studies of both secular and religious voluntary groups have used the concept of social capital. In these studies, social capital refers to the social networks, norms, and mutual trust that keep citizens working together on common projects. When I began, I had been fascinated by political scientist Robert Putnam’s historical study of civic life in Italy; he used the concept of social capital to grasp the civic traditions that he argued were strong in some Italian regions and weak in others. I wanted to study the civic traditions of the United States. Like many sociologists, I read Putnam’s succeeding study of American civic life, which found that civic group memberships had been dropping precipitously for three decades starting at the end of the 1960s. America was losing its stock of social capital, Putnam argued. A tremendous scholarly debate ensued, just as I started going to Humane Response Alliance meetings, as some scholars became alarmed at the possibility that democracy and social solidarity in America were disintegrating. The debate has continued at the same time that Putnam’s version of the social capital concept has diffused widely.

As my own study continued I became convinced that the social capital concept

could not address some of the core questions motivating the whole debate. Didn't we need to know more about different kinds of ties, and the meanings of those ties, if we were going to understand what civic groups can and cannot contribute to a greater civic togetherness in America? This study will not catalogue all the social ties that people in the Lakeburg groups created. That was not my goal. My goal was to understand how different meanings that groups gave to ties might influence the relationships they could create as they reached out beyond the group.

Some scholars have argued that the recent attention to local voluntary associations is dangerously misplaced. Americans need to confront our problems with national politics, they say. Securing more affordable housing or jobs that pay a living wage will take far more than helping hands and caring hearts in the local world of church-basement homeless shelters and food pantries. These critics argue that people who exhort Americans to join more voluntary organizations only deflect attention from the cold, hard necessity of political work.

While this is not a book about how to change society, little in it would challenge the role of political work in addressing social problems justly. To study local civic groups is not to imply that these groups can answer all or even most of a complex society's problems. Studying local civic groups teaches us a lot, however, about how and why ordinary citizens distinguish "political" from "charitable but not political" activities; the lines are neither natural nor always so obvious. I learned in Lakeburg that drawing a sharp distinction between politics and charity can disempower critical political discussion while narrowing a caring sensibility. For readers interested in the political potential of civic groups, this book points out that a group needs much more than an incisive, articulate analysis of social problems in order to be a good conduit of consciousness raising. Groups need the *customs* that can welcome people to social criticism instead of scaring all but those already convinced. Lacking those customs, groups may remain critical, prophetic, and sincere, but small and lonely.

Having read about religion's place in American civic life, I supposed that church-based volunteers might have a well-rooted sense of social responsibility that would promote enduring, community-building responses to welfare reform. I did meet people with a noble, self-sacrificing sense of social responsibility. Yet many were frustrated a lot of the time, not just with the new political context but with their own efforts. I saw and heard much more disappointment and self-doubt than I had expected. This book's scenes from the field show hard-working people of goodwill getting frustrated, because that is what I saw and heard as a participant-observer. We can learn a great deal from following closely how they constructed their groups and how they tried to create relationships with other people beyond the group. While one group was succeeding, on its own terms, in creating new bridges to people outside the group, the others were not—or else were not trying to create new civic ties at all, even though some sociological writings would impute that goal to them. I learned that volunteering often did not build community.

As a citizen and sometimes fellow volunteer, I can say easily that all of the groups and projects showed their participants to be people of goodwill, often forbearing people, sometimes very open-minded people. As a sociologist, I find the groups were constrained as well as empowered by cultural customs that no single person changes immediately at will. Cultural customs played a subtle, important role in making a broader togetherness elusive for most of the groups.

A MESSAGE TO PEOPLE OF FAITH

Some group members wondered why a Jewish sociologist wanted to study Christian community groups. The answer was easy: In a largely Christian country, one whose religious groups have been considered a major bulwark of democracy, it is important to study Christian community groups.

It is also fascinating. Ever since Durkheim, sociologists have pondered the relations between religion and social togetherness. But as a non-Christian, I consider myself particularly well disposed to learn how those relations work in the groups I studied, by taking as interesting what other scholars raised as Christians might take for granted. Having introduced myself as a sociologist and Jew to the groups, I hoped that members might relate to me as a sympathetic and interested outsider. When they did so, I learned a great deal. After one meeting of an ecumenical antiracism coalition, for instance, an evangelical pastor confided to me that his “mainline colleagues” made him uncomfortable because they were willing to include nature worshipers in a multicultural celebration. If I were a mainline, liberal Protestant, or if I had put myself off as completely hip to the differences between strands of Protestant Christianity, the pastor might not have ventured this far with me. Of course I had read studies of different kinds of Protestant faith before setting out with this project. But my outsider identity probably made my participant-observer’s refusal to take things for granted all the more comprehensible to the people I studied. Parts of my relationship to the groups had little to do with religion.

I was also an academic amongst people sometimes wary of academics; a man in his late thirties amongst women and men in their fifties, sixties, and seventies; a short person with dark, curly hair and a prominent nose amongst people whose features more often than not bore out a Scandinavian or German heritage. I did not look, or sound, like a typical member. Yet, I was also a parent, like most of the people in this study; a citizen who read a local newspaper; a political progressive, like some though certainly not all of the group members. Not all my relationships in the field were relationships across religious or ethnic lines. Once we start to think about it, we will always find that researchers and the researched alike carry multiple identities, some more salient than others, some far more incumbent upon us than others. Being sensitive to multiple identities can help researchers understand the researched. That does not mean re-

searchers can or should zero in on similarities and affect an easy identification with the people we study. It does mean there are potentials for creating connections, slowly and painfully perhaps, that help us think or feel *something* like what the people we study think and feel, *some* of the time.

A MESSAGE TO PROGRESSIVE SCHOLARS

Historian Michael Kazin has observed that the American left is often more wary of religion than intrigued by it. Students of religion and politics agree that religion only rarely gets recognized for its power to inspire movements for peace and social justice—though that is starting to change. It would not be surprising if politically progressive scholars wondered why they should be interested in religious community groups. Aren't these groups part of the problem? Don't they counsel politeness rather than protest, the hereafter rather than the here-and-now? Unless religious community groups are sites of critical consciousness raising, why should political progressives care about them?

Few theorists of progressive political change have written more perceptively on consciousness raising than Antonio Gramsci. And Gramsci has sensitized many social researchers to care about civic activity outside of political groups. Our standpoint on the social world, no matter what political valence, develops not only in school and at work but in civic interaction, as we participate in neighborhood associations, sports leagues, religious congregations, service organizations, or activist groups. Anyone interested in the potentials for popular, progressive thinking in the United States should be interested in religiously based groups that occupy such a substantial part of the American civic arena.