

# **'The Inflatable Log'**

## **Volunteering, the State and Democracy**

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### **Introduction**

On 20 May 1920 Vladimir Ilyich, better known to the world as Lenin, was captured on a grainy photograph engaging in a spot of volunteering. It was May Day and he was taking part, along with several hundred thousand other Soviet citizens, in the weekly Subbotnik – a day of volunteering organised by the State to help rebuild the country after the devastation of the civil war. Seven years later the image had been transformed into an heroic painting in the socialist realist style by the painter Mikhail Sokolov. Widely reproduced throughout the Soviet Union it was dubbed the inflatable log because of the ease with which Lenin appeared to be able to carry aloft on his shoulders a vast tree trunk.

This vignette raises the fascinating issue of the relationship between volunteering and the state. It poses a number of complex and inter-related questions. Is it possible for volunteering to exist in the absence of democracy? Or is democracy a pre-requisite for volunteering? Conversely is it possible to talk about democracy in the absence of a healthy volunteer movement? Or is the active participation of the populace an essential ingredient of a thriving democracy? And what about the direction of causality? Which comes first? Is it the democratic conditions which give rise to volunteering? Or does volunteering lead to democracy? And, subsequently, what is an appropriate role for government in promoting volunteering?

For some commentators the equation is straightforward enough. The eminent academic and Liberal Peer, Ralf Dahrendorf, delivering the final Charities Aid Foundation Goodman lecture on 17 July 2001, restated his passionate belief that volunteering is essential for liberty and democracy. For Dahrendorf it is axiomatic that you can not have democracy without a thriving, independent volunteer movement. And not just any volunteering. In his address Dahrendorf draws a distinction between volunteering proper, carried out within independent voluntary organisations (ie agencies not in receipt of government funding) and state-sponsored volunteering (such as the mobilisation of 170,000 volunteers within the NHS). This latter form, he argues, cannot be seen as volunteering in any real sense at all. Dahrendorf did not address the issue of the direction of the link – the which comes first question. However, his description of the role played by voluntary action in the liberation movements of central and eastern Europe leaves little room for doubt that he sees volunteering as having had an important role to play in the overthrow of totalitarian regimes and an essential contribution to make to the slow and painful process of democratisation.

This paper addresses these important questions about the relationship between democracy and volunteering. It kicks off with a look at the two big concepts in this debate – civil society and social capital, neither of them synonymous with volunteering but both of which have something to say about it. It draws upon a range of evidence from the political sciences and

history and concludes that things are more complicated than Dahrendorf and others proclaim. In certain circumstances volunteering can aid democracy; but in others it can work against it. Conversely, whilst democracy would appear to be good for volunteering, it is not impossible for volunteering to thrive in the harshest of conditions. The paper concludes with some tentative recommendations for theory, research, policy and practice.

### **A Note on Terminology**

First a word or two about terms. We need to acknowledge that this debate has not been conducted in the language of volunteering. It is true that Dahrendorf did spend some time in his lecture on volunteering, but the main subject was not the individual act of volunteering but the institutions of the voluntary sector or civil society. In fact most of the academic debate has been on the link between voluntary organisations and democracy not on volunteering and democracy. Although we have to be careful about conflating very different concepts it is nevertheless possible to conduct a very similar debate in relation to volunteering itself. Partly because the debate has focused largely on the smaller associations (which almost by definition provide a home to volunteers), rather than the larger voluntary agencies often dominated by paid staff. But partly also because much of the debate has been on the role of active participation within voluntary agencies (ie volunteering) rather than on the institutions themselves. Nevertheless there is one element that is clearly absent from the debate. The focus on voluntary agencies means that there is no room in the debate for the role of volunteering in the public sector (nor the private sector), unless as in Dahrendorf's case it is to dismiss public sector volunteering as not proper volunteering at all. The unwritten assumption appears to be that the voluntary sector and the voluntary sector alone is the only generator of social capital. It is an assumption I will return to later on.

Let's look at the first of these big concepts, civil society. The concept of civil society, with its roots in Aristotle, has made a remarkable comeback in the last 20 years. Its previous heyday was in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when writers such as Tocqueville, Hegel and Marx used the concept in their very different expositions on the legitimate role of the state. It re-emerged in the 1970s as a critique of totalitarian governments in eastern and central Europe and Latin America, and of the failure of social welfare systems in the west to deliver on their promises. Heralded by both the pluralistic Left and the anti-state Right, the civil society concept proved difficult to pin down. For some it referred to everything outside the state, including the family and the market as well as the voluntary sector. For others it was taken to be synonymous with the voluntary sector, although there was disagreement over how tightly to draw the boundary. For some civil society was the voluntary sector with the politics taken out – so service delivery agencies were in but advocacy and campaigning groups were out. For others the political dimension of the sector was deemed crucial. I will return to this dispute below.

The second big concept we need to introduce here is social capital. Although its provenance is the subject of considerable debate (with claimants for Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam amongst others), there is little doubt that its popularity really took off with the publication of Robert Putnam's (1993) now famous study on democracy in Italy, *Making Democracy Work*. For Putnam, social capital was defined as the 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions'. One of Putnam's key measures of social capital was participation in voluntary associations, or horizontal 'networks of civic engagement'. By building trust and reciprocity between citizens volunteering was held to contribute both to a more cohesive, stable society and to a more economically prosperous one. It was higher levels of social capital which

Putnam believed was the explanation for the greater prosperity of the Italian North over the South.

Post Putnam we have seen the growth of a veritable social capital industry. Putnam (2000) himself has applied his thesis (less successfully) to the United States, which he has argued has suffered over recent years from the decline in social capital, brought about by a myriad of factors including the rise of television viewing. The social capital lens has also been trained on the UK by Putnam's Harvard colleague, Peter Hall (1999), who found little evidence to support the notion of a decline in levels of citizen participation. Of perhaps more importance social capital (almost unique amongst rather obscure academic concepts) has found itself transported from the lecture halls to the government chambers around the world. Social Capital has become the mantra of democratic governments of both Left and Right – as central to the Bush faith-based initiative as to the Blair/Clinton Third Way project. Even that bastion of economic liberalism, the World Bank, has got in on the act, and established its own social capital initiative (complete with dedicated Website) which has spawned a host of (rather good) academic studies on the contribution social capital can make to economic development.

### **The Case for Volunteering**

Proponents of a link between volunteering and democracy draw upon a variety of theoretical models and a wide array of supporting evidence:

- Theory number one is that engagement in voluntary associations and volunteering makes people more likely to participate in the wider political process. According to Pateman (1970) 'we learn to participate by participating'. Volunteering is a nursery for citizenship. Volunteering teaches people about how to be good responsible citizens, and schools them in the art of democratic involvement – how to influence meetings; make their voice heard; influence others. The evidence would appear to bear this out. Volunteers are more likely to vote in national and local elections, to join political parties, and to engage in the broader governance of local communities (eg Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). The authors of this study developed the 'civic voluntarism model' arguing that 'both the motivation and the capacity to take part in politics have their roots in the fundamental non-political institutions with which individuals are associated during the course of their lives'.
- Theory number two states that engagement in voluntary associations makes a vital contribution to good governance by drawing more people into the policy making arena than would otherwise get involved. The argument here is not so much that volunteering leads to greater involvement in the formal political process (voting, party membership and the like) but rather that voluntary associations, through which people volunteer, make up an alternative political world. This is pure Tocqueville, who argued in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, during his celebrated trip to the United States, that voluntary associations play a valuable role as a bulwark against the power of the state. So volunteering is good for democracy because voluntary agencies, which involve volunteers, provide an essential counter-balance to the power of the state.
- Theory number three states that volunteering is good for the democratic health of society because it helps to build up trust and reciprocity both among members of associations and among society as a whole – the 'so called 'generalised social trust'. Tocqueville said voluntary organisations were useful in creating 'large schools' for the development of

democratic values such as trust, tolerance and compromise. And this is the key argument in Putnam. Volunteering helps to combat the decline in trust in political leaders and institutions and leads to more harmonious and effective societies. Again there is some supporting evidence. An analysis of data from 13 countries from the 1990 World Values Survey found that volunteers were likely to be more trusting of fellow citizens and more politically interested than non-volunteers (Dekker and Van den Broek, 1998).

The impact of this increased trust can be far-reaching. According to Putnam crime rates are reduced when people know their neighbours first name, a theme which was echoed by David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, at the annual conference of NCVO in February 2001. Discussing a story from Costa Rica which suggested that the key factor which made one neighbourhood safer than another was the 'law of greeting' – simply that people agreed to say hello to four other people each morning, he commented:

*It was the connection – the act of speaking to other people and getting to know them – that built new forms of social capital... In turn this led to more co-operation and then access to resources to effect change.... These simple, basic connections between people led to a sense of community involvement which is very often characterised by voluntary activity.*

Increased trust is also good for the economy. Francis Fukuyama (1995) has argued that the most effective and efficient economies have high degrees of inter-personal trust, while numerous studies in the World Bank series show the economic benefits of social capital. For example, Deepa Narayan (1997) has demonstrated a link between involvement in voluntary associations and household welfare in Tanzania.

## **The Case Against**

So much for the case linking volunteering with democracy. What about the case against? Putnam and the neo-Tocquevillians have been attacked on a number of fronts – for being over-simplistic; for being selective in their choice of supportive evidence; and for confusing the direction of causality. Here I want to focus on two key criticisms – those emanating from the political scientists who accuse Putnam and co of ignoring the political dimension of volunteering and voluntary action; and those from the historians who accuse them of ignoring the evidence of the twentieth century.

1. Critics argue that the thesis linking volunteering and democracy is flawed because it glosses over the political dimension of voluntary action. They argue that too much attention has been paid in the civil society debate to the role of service delivery charities and leisure groups (choral societies and bowling clubs) and not enough to the role of advocacy and campaigning groups. Walzer (1992), for example, proposes a more inclusive model where 'all are included, none is preferred'. (As an aside, critics ironically point out that the neo-Tocquevillians have actually mis-read or mis-represented their hero who did not fall into this trap). By taking the politics out of voluntary action it is argued that they have glossed over the essential element of conflict which lies at the heart of much of the civil society/state relationship. Notwithstanding the fact that this conflict can in itself have positive implications for society, its absence from much of the debate has led to an over emphasis on consensus and harmony.

Let's consider for a moment the concept of trust. Putnam and the neo-Tocquevillians put great store by the contribution volunteering makes to the building up of trust in society. Indeed trust is the leitmotif running through much of the social capital literature. By coming together in voluntary associations individuals learn to trust not only those who they come into direct contact with but also society at large. And this increase in trust extends to the political institutions and leadership. In fact at the heart of the neo-Tocquevillian thesis is the notion that volunteering can help to rebuild the trust of the people in the political elite which has been under erosion for much of the post-war period. But is trust in the leadership a quality universally to be admired? Surely the lesson of the past decade in eastern and central Europe is that volunteering plays an important role in generating a healthy mistrust or distrust of the state. Even in mature democracies a strong case could be made for seeing the true value of volunteering not in terms of fostering ever more harmonious and trusting relations between citizens and state; but rather as acting as a check on an over-powerful and over-bearing executive.

It is also clearly the case that not all volunteering builds trust between members of communities. Some volunteering is patently divisive. One only need think of the Mafia; the KKK; or certain religious cults to realise that there is a less positive side to voluntary action. To be fair Putnam does acknowledge this reality although he fails to adequately reconcile it into his theory. The problem is not so much with the Mafia and the KKK which clearly reside beyond the democratic pale. What is more damaging to the neo-Tocquevillian thesis is the inherent anti-democratic nature of many mainstream voluntary agencies. Cohen and Rogers (1995) talk of the 'mischief of faction' – those self-interest groups (the NIMBY's of this world) which vie for political influence to advance the cause of their members interests, often at what might be seen as the expense of the interests of society as a whole. Many voluntary agencies could not even claim to be accountable to their members. It seems hard to hold up voluntary agencies as paragons of democratic virtue. And yet we are being asked to believe somehow that simply by existing, and by offering a channel for people to participate, voluntary agencies (almost without exception) are making a contribution to our democratic life.

Not all voluntary agencies are the same. Some are more democratic than others. Some are presumably better than others at generating trust and reciprocity. And yet the neo-Tocquevillians treat them all the same and accord the same social capital generating qualities to them all. The same surely holds for volunteering. Just as voluntary agencies differ markedly, so too do volunteering experiences. Some volunteers (perhaps as many as 30% according to the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering) are given repetitive tasks to carry out, with little scope for assuming responsibility or exercising initiative – not one would have thought the most conducive environment in which to develop the skills of citizenship. Others, such as the young Millennium Volunteers who have been given virtual free reign (and a budget) to develop their own volunteering programmes, would presumably be able to report a much more positive experience. And yet the social capital theorists insist on treating volunteering as a unitary experience.

And why exclude those volunteers active in the public (or indeed private) sector? There is virtually no mention of public-sector volunteering in the social capital literature. And Dahrendorf as we have seen has dismissed those volunteers operating in the NHS (and presumably by extension too in state education, the prison service and local government) as not real volunteers. But why should voluntary agencies be the only organisational forms capable of generating social capital? What makes voluntary organisations unique in

this respect? Studies have shown that some of the most innovative forms of volunteering are actually taking place within social service departments of local authorities. Isn't it entirely possible that some public agencies are at least as good as voluntary groups in building trust and generating social capital?

2. The other key challenge to the neo-Tocquevillians has come from the historians who have pointed out that that strong civil society has on occasions during the course of the twentieth century been damaging to democracy. In an explosive article Sheri Berman (1997) has argued that the Weimer Republic was undermined at least in part by the presence of a strong associational movement which was at first infiltrated, and later co-opted, by the Nazis. Civil society in inter-war Germany was strictly ordered or pillarised between different elements of society. There existed separate Catholic and Protestant and Socialist Bird Watching Clubs and (in a delicious irony, given Putnam's preoccupations) choral societies which, far from generating trust and social capital, served to cut people off from one another and reinforce prejudices and divisions, creating 'ferociously jealous', 'small republics'. Berman's sobering conclusion is that 'had German civil society been weaker, the Nazis would have never been able to capture so many citizens for their cause or eviscerate their opponents so swiftly'.

Another historical blow to the neo-Tocquevillians comes from the case of Spain which has been held up as a model of democratic development since Franco – 'the most successful new democracy to have emerged onto the world stage in the last three decades and the envy of every fledgling democracy' (Encarnacion, 2000). And this despite having a weak and 'impoverished' civil society and voluntary sector, the legacy of 'entrenched ethnic and linguistic cleavages', 'delayed industrialisation' and the repression of the Franco era which 'destroyed the nascent civil society of the short lived Second Republic'. If a strong civil society is a pre-requisite for democratic advance how do we explain away the Spanish example?

And what about South Africa? Here we have the story of a one-time strong and vibrant civil society which helped to overthrow a hated and discredited regime and which is now in a state of crisis following the democratic triumph. Short of funds and leadership (many of the key NGO leaders having made the move into government after the ANC's victory) and faced with a sceptical, if not openly hostile government, civil society is finding the transition to democracy an uphill struggle (Dangor, 1997).

### **Squaring the Circle**

So where does this leave us? What can we conclude about the relationship between volunteering (as a key element of civil society) and democracy? The first conclusion to draw is that things are messier than some commentators would like. It is certainly possible to make out a convincing case that civil society (and voluntary action) by generating social capital can be good for democracy. But a case can also be made for how in the wrong conditions it can be bad. Moreover, whilst it is clear that democracy can help civil society to develop it is also clear that volunteering can thrive in the most extreme totalitarian conditions.

In fact the cases of South Africa and central and eastern Europe suggest that adversity and opposition can provide a focal point around which civil society can coalesce. Now this of course is not to advocate that governments should adopt repressive legislation in order to provide a kick-start to voluntary action. But it does suggest that the relationship between civil

society and associational behaviour and democracy is less clear cut than has often been asserted. To return to Lenin. Although many would dismiss the Soviet day of volunteering as tantamount to a day of forced labour, one is tempted to ask just how much more coercion was involved in the Subbotnik than say in a present day school-based community service programme which requires students to volunteer as a core part of the curriculum, or an employee-volunteering programme in which promotion prospects for staff are tied to their participation in the company chosen volunteering scheme? Moreover, the idea that (independent) volunteering did not occur at all under the Soviet system can no longer be upheld. The conditions may have been harsh but many grass-roots and community based agencies found a way to exist (Rose, 1998). Encarnacion (2000) has argued that civil society is 'not the panacea that many make it out to be, especially those seeking to use it in their efforts to promote democracy abroad' The impact of civil society on democracy he says is at best a neutral one. It can aid democracy but 'it can harm and even help destroy it'. The main determining factor as to whether the impact of civil society will be good or bad is the prevailing political and economic conditions. Where political structures are strong, he says, civil society will have a positive effect on democracy. Where they are weak it will have a negative impact. This is because the political system will not be able to mediate between competing and conflicting demands from civil society and will add to (rather than heal) the fissures and divisions in society – just as happened in the Weimer Republic.

It is clear from this analysis that the social capital thesis as proposed by Putnam and other neo-Tocquevillians is in need of refinement. And indeed this has already begun to happen to some extent. One of the criticisms we explored earlier was the assumption that all voluntary associations were equal in their capacity to generate social capital. The Mafia dilemma for short. This is beginning to be recognised as absurd and attempts have been made to begin to isolate those types of agency which may be best at facilitating trust and reciprocity not only between members but throughout the broader community. In a study for the World Bank Narayan (1999) draws a distinction between 'bonding' social capital developed within groups and 'bridging' social capital arising from interaction between groups. For the benefits of social capital to be realised she argues there needs not only to be high levels of associational activity but also a dense network of cross-cutting ties among groups. The point is powerfully illustrated by Ashutosh Varshney (1998) in a study of communal riots in India. In seeking to explain why some towns with a mix of Hindu and Muslim populations remain free from conflict while others with a similar population profile erupt into ethnic violence, Varshney looks at the role played by voluntary associations and informal community networks in building social capital. He concludes that those areas with low levels of communal strife are characterised not simply by high levels of associational activity but by high levels of cross-cutting engagement between the Hindu and Muslim populations.

This is a useful refinement of Putnam and the neo-Tocquevillians. Associational activity or volunteering on its own is not sufficient to generate social capital. What is needed is broad-based associational movements which cut across community groupings. In other words, the Mafia and the KKK (and perhaps some self-help groups) probably won't be very good at generating social capital; while a community association which acts as a bridge between different members of the community probably will. Looked at in this way it is possible to see why civil society in inter-war Germany, with its plethora of rigidly pillarised agencies, was not able to generate the social capital necessary to ward off the Nazi threat.

## **Learning from governments' involvement in IYV**

Finally, in the light of these arguments, we come to the question of what governments can do best, and indeed what they should not do, to develop a healthy, independent voluntary sector and volunteering movement. What is an appropriate role for government in helping to support and promote volunteering? And, conversely, what are the limitations, or dangers, of government involvement in the volunteering arena?

Undertaking the evaluation of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001 gave researchers at the Institute for Volunteering Research (UK) a unique context in which to consider some of these questions by looking at the role of government in making IYV work. Through the evaluation it was possible to gain an insight into some of the strengths and limitations of government intervention.

IYV experience suggests that government can play a number of critical roles in helping volunteering to flourish.

Governments can play a crucial role as funders. Over 100 million US dollars were raised in the 126 countries participating in IYV. Central government contributed 64% of this total funding for IYV, with an additional 16% coming from regional and local government. In many instances this funding was used to develop the country's volunteering infrastructure.

Governments can also be instrumental in developing a favourable policy and legislative climate in which volunteering can flourish. They can also set an example for other sectors by encouraging staff to get involved in volunteering; by opening up the public sector to volunteers; and by stimulating debates on volunteering. For example, during IYV legal frameworks for volunteering were introduced for the first time in the Czech Republic, Colombia and Madagascar, while in France, Japan and Portugal, existing laws were revised and improved. In Tunisia, the Parliament devoted a special session to the International Day of Volunteers, and in Austria parliamentary meetings brought about the designation of permanent focal points for volunteering in all political parties.

Lessons from IYV also showed that government has an important role to play in stimulating volunteering by forging partnerships with the voluntary sector and commercial sector; through generating publicity for volunteering; and through recognising the contribution volunteers make to national life.

However, IYV also highlighted how government needs to recognise when to pull back – for volunteering to flourish it needs to retain its independence and ability to challenge, as well as work alongside government.

The eternal challenge of raising sufficient resources in a number of countries highlighted the difficulty for civil society organisations to generate funds without government support. Beyond this, one of the main challenges identified during the Year was just how difficult it is for future governments to strike the right balance between supporting volunteering and seeking to control it. Although overall government and civil society worked effectively in partnership to plan and deliver the Year, in a small number of countries the national committees set up to co-ordinate the Year were comprised predominately, or entirely, by government personnel, failing to fully engage the voluntary sector.



Further challenges thrown up in the Year included a lack of a central point of contact on volunteering within government in many countries, making it hard for the voluntary sector to make connections and build partnerships with the state. Additionally, in some cases it became apparent that some governments find it much easier to embrace volunteering in the form of service delivery than in the form of participation and campaigning.

The International Year of Volunteers thus offers an ideal test case of the importance of government support for the development of volunteering; but also its limitations and dangers. What remains to be seen, however, is the long-term influence on volunteering through the governments' role in the particular policies and developments that were undertaken during IYV.

### **Implications for theory, research, policy and practice**

This analysis raises implications for theory, research, policy and practice. It suggests we need to refine the notion that civil society, and by implication volunteering, is in all circumstances good for democracy. Research is required to identify the conditions under which a strong civil society will contribute towards democracy and the conditions under which it will hamper democratic development. We also need to refine the notion that all forms of associational activity build social capital. Building on the work of Narayan and others into the distinctions between bridging and bonding social capital, further research is required to identify the characteristics of organisations which give rise to the generation of trust and reciprocity and those which serve only to reinforce segregation and community divisions.

Linked to this we need to refine the notion that only voluntary agencies are capable of generating social capital. Further research is needed into the social capital generating potential of public sector agencies (and, indeed, private sector organisations) which involve volunteers. We also need to rethink the idea that all forms of voluntary activity are equally as efficient in building social capital. Further empirical investigation will help isolate those aspects of the volunteering experience – leadership, networking, training – which are especially effective in this regard. Finally, we need to refine the notion that democracy in itself will be good for civil society and voluntary action. Further research is required to identify what governments can best do (and not do!) to facilitate the development of a healthy, independent voluntary sector and volunteer movement. Building on the work currently underway within the United Nations, as part of the International Year of Volunteers, we need to understand more about the impact that particular government policies – legal, fiscal, economic and social - have (both positively and negatively) on the development of civil society.

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