

THE INDISPENSABLE DISCIPLINE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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In 1927 in the city of Nuremberg, six years before the National Socialists came into power, I was watching a Sunday parade on the occasion of the annual mass rally of the Nazis. Thousands of youth, as a sign of their vigor and patriotism, had walked from various parts of Germany to attend the mass meeting of the Party. As I watched the parade which lasted for four hours and which was punctuated by trumpet and drum corps made up of hundreds of Nazis, I asked some people on the sidelines to explain to me the meaning of the swastika that decorated many of the banners. Before very long I found myself engaged in a heated argument. Suddenly someone seized me from behind and pulled me by the elbows out of the group with which I was arguing. In the firm grip of someone whom I could barely see I was forced through the crowd and propelled down a side-street and up into a dead-end alley. As this happened I assure you my palpitation rose quite perceptibly. I was beginning to feel Nazism existentially. At the end of the alley my uninvited host swung me around quickly, and he shouted at me in German, "You fool. Don't you know? In Germany today when you are watching a parade, you either keep your mouth shut or you get your head bashed in." I thought he was going to bash it in right there. But then his face changed into a friendly smile, and he said, "If you had

continued that argument for five minutes longer, those fellows would have beaten you up." "Why did you decide to help me?" I asked. He replied, "I am an anti-Nazi. As I saw you there, getting into trouble, I thought of the times when in New York City as a sailor of the German merchant marine I received a wonderful hospitality. And I said to myself, 'Here is your chance to repay that hospitality.' So I grabbed you, and here we are. I am inviting you home to Sunday dinner."

This man turned out to be an unemployed worker. His home was a tenement apartment in the slums. To reach it, we climbed three flights up a staircase that was falling apart, and he ushered me into a barren room where his wife and three small children greeted their unexpected American guest in astonishment. We had the Sunday meal together, a dinner of greasy dumplings and of small beer drunk from a common jug. Within a period of two hours I learned vividly of the economic distress out of which Nazism was born. From this trade-union worker I learned also that one organization after the other that refused to bow to the Nazis was being threatened with compulsion. The totalitarian process had begun. Freedom of association was being abolished. "You keep your mouth shut, and you conform, or you get your head bashed in." A decade later in Germany I was to see at first hand the belated resistance of the

churches to this attack upon freedom of speech and freedom of association.

At this juncture I had to confront a rather embarrassing question. I had to ask myself, "What in your typical behavior as an American citizen have you done that would help to prevent the rise of authoritarian government in your own country? What disciplines of democracy (except voting) have you habitually undertaken with other people which could serve in any way directly to affect public policy?" More bluntly stated: I asked myself, "What precisely is the difference between *you* and a political idiot?"

Immediately after the Second World War the Swiss theologian Karl Barth made a speaking tour in Germany, and in his talks he stressed the idea that every conscientious German citizen should now participate actively in voluntary associations committed to the task of making democracy work. I do not know whether Karl Barth as a professor in Germany practiced his own preaching when Nazism was on the rise. But in giving his admonition to the Germans after the war, he pointed to a characteristic feature of any democratic society, namely, freedom of association.

Every totalitarian theory rejects just this freedom. Indeed, the rejection of freedom of association, the rejection of the freedom to form groups that attempt democratically to affect public policy, can serve as the beginning of a definition of totalitarianism. We are familiar with the fulminations against freedom of association by Hobbes and

Rousseau. Hobbes the totalitarian warns against "the great number of corporations which are as it were many lesser commonwealths in the body of a greater, like worms in the entrails of a natural man." The late Senator Joseph McCarthy worked in the spirit of Hobbes when he tried to smother freedom of association.

As against Hobbes the theorists of democracy have asserted that only through the exercise of freedom of association can consent of the governed become effective; only through the exercise of freedom of association can the citizen in a democracy participate in the process that gives shape to public opinion and to public policy. For this reason we may speak of the voluntary association as a distinctive and indispensable institution of democratic society.

How shall we define voluntary association? Speaking of the situation in the United States of over a hundred years ago, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed that "in no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or applied to a greater multitude of objects, than in America. . . . Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association." De Tocqueville gives the classical description of the multitude of associations in the United States at that time, associations for libraries, hospitals, fire prevention, and for political and philanthropic purposes. One could sum up De Tocqueville's description of the United States at

that time by saying that where two or three Americans are gathered together you may be sure that a committee is being formed. We have been "a nation of joiners."

Any healthy democratic society is a multi-group society. One finds in it business corporations, religious associations, trade unions, educational associations, recreational, philanthropic, protective and political associations, and innumerable social clubs. These associations are, or claim to be, voluntary; they presuppose freedom on the part of the individual to be or not to be a member, to join or withdraw, or to consort with others to form a new association. By way of contrast the state and the family, for example, are as associations involuntary, and in some countries the church also is virtually involuntary. Every person willy-nilly belongs to a particular state and to a particular family. It is not a matter of choice whether he will belong to these two associations. In this sense they are involuntary. There are other associations, to be sure, which it is difficult to classify under either category, voluntary or involuntary. Taken together, these associations, involuntary and voluntary, represent the institutional articulation of the pluralistic society.

The appearance of the voluntary association in Western society did not come without a struggle. The initial demand for voluntary association came from the churches of the left wing of the Reformation. These churches insisted that religion, in order to be a matter of choice, must be free from state control. Therefore they demanded

the separation of church and state. This struggle for freedom of religious association continued for over two centuries. It was accompanied or followed by a struggle for freedom of economic association, for freedom to establish political parties, for freedom of workers to form unions, and for freedom to institute reforms in society. Not all voluntary associations, to be sure, are concerned with public policy. Some associations are simply social clubs, others promote hobbies, and still others are merely status groups. Considering the voluntary association that is concerned with social policy, for example, with securing civil liberties or better housing, or with overcoming racial discrimination, we may say that this sort of association stands between the individual and the state and provides the instrumentality for achieving consensus within a group, and for implementing this consensus either through political or non-political means. This sort of association provides the opportunity for discussion for assembling neglected facts, and for scrutinizing and overcoming mere propaganda.

The voluntary association at its best offers an institutional framework within which the give and take of discussion may be promoted, an institutional framework within which a given consensus may be brought under criticism and be subjected to change. It offers a means for bringing a variety of perspectives into interplay. It offers the means of breaking through old social structures in order to meet new needs. It is a means of dispersing power, in the

that power is the capacity to participate in making social decisions. It is the training ground of the skills that are required for the social existence in a democracy. In short, the voluntary association is a means for the institutionalizing of *gradual* revolution.

We have spoken of the fact that freedom of association was fought by the churches of the left wing of the Reformation. Any adequate treatment of the free association demands theological interpretation. Such a treatment would show how the doctrine of the covenant in Old and New Testament was employed to sanction the priesthood and prophethood of believers, and thus to express religious and social responsibility. The covenant men responded to God's community-forming power. The prime example of the institutionalization of a doctrine of the covenant is to be found much earlier in Western history. The primitive Christian church illustrates many of the features of a voluntary association which I have mentioned. In one sense, to be sure, the primitive church was not a voluntary association as ordinarily conceived. It was believed to have come into existence through the work of God and not through the acts of men. Nor was it directly concerned with public policy as such, except that by its very existence it bespoke the demand for freedom of association. Yet the primitive church illustrates the dispersion of power and responsibility, and it illustrates also the breaking through of old social structures toward the end of creating new structures. The primitive

church broke through the bonds of the ethnic religion of Judaism: Jew, Greek, Roman and barbarian could be members. Moreover, the membership of the primitive church came from all classes of society, but especially from the lower classes (including slaves). The church also gave a new status to women. Besides all this, the primitive church gave the common man the opportunity to learn the skills required for effective social organization. The common people who were members had to learn the skills of preaching and teaching, of administration, of missionizing, and also of dispensing charity. The emergence of the primitive church represents, then, one of the great innovative movements of history, a great social revolution. Probably the recovery of the West after the Fall of Rome took place with greater speed because of the thousands of people who had been trained in skills that could be employed outside as well as inside the church organization. Here was an enormous dispersion of the capacity to participate in the making of social decision, and in response to a transcendent purpose.

By the time the church had come into its medieval form, however, a great change had taken place in its internal structure. Indeed, certain branches of the Reformation represented a protest against the monolithic, power structure of the church, and they carried through this protest by appeal to the model of the primitive church. So we see movement back and forth from one kind of social structure to another.

Thus an association originally intended to disperse power and

responsibility undergoes changes moving in the opposite direction, that is, in the direction of concentration of power. In the earliest essay in America on the structure of voluntary associations William Ellery Channing, the Boston Unitarian clergyman, pointed to this danger. The voluntary association so far from serving as an instrument of freedom may end in becoming a new instrument of tyranny and conformism. Channing could speak with experience in these matters, for a number of the great reformist associations of the early nineteenth century were organized in his study.

Robert Michels, the Italian sociologist, has given a memorable account of the internal shift of power that can take place in an association. His view is that in any organization the "eager beavers" can take advantage of the indolence of the average member. By this means they gain control of the organization. This process he describes as the operation of "the iron law of oligarchy."

We can observe the iron law of oligarchy as it operates in the great pressure groups of today. A few years ago some sociologists studied the centralized bureaucracy of the American Medical Association. They found a goodly number of physicians who said that they felt that the A. M. A. through its policies was damaging the image of the physician in the United States today. On being asked why they did not do something to change the structure and the policies of the bureaucracy, some of them gave the answer, "I trained to be a doctor, and I want to practice

medicine. In order to break the bureaucracy of the A. M. A., I and many of my colleagues would have to spend much more time than we can afford." It is a striking fact that the large business corporation functions by reducing the role of the shareholder. The average small shareholder surrenders his power by signing a proxy to the representative of the managers. This sort of phenomenon belongs to the pathology of associations, and we could find ample illustration of it by examining colleges and churches.

But the pathology does not end with the functioning of the iron law of oligarchy within associations. It can be observed also in the functioning of the great pressure groups as they affect public policy. Legislation regarding the pressure groups has corrected some of the evils. But the role of the special-interest pressure group today presents us with a major problem of the democratic society: the power of the pressure group is exercised through collusion with other pressure groups. The lobbyist of the wool-growers' association in face of some legislation he wishes to impede goes to the representative of the copper-producers' association and says, "I know that you are not interested pro or con in this bit of legislation, but if you will join us now, we shall give you assistance when you need it in a similar situation." In a society where the principle of freedom of association obtains, one must recognize the legitimate freedom of the pressure group. Besides this, we must recognize they do not always enter into collusion. In some

measure the great special-interest pressure groups function as countervailing powers that neutralize each other. This neutralization, however, does not appear when, for example, the issue has to do with the distribution of the tax burden. Here the little man gets short-changed.

This whole situation points to a major requirement for a viable and authentic democratic society. One can roughly classify the great voluntary associations concerned with public policy. The one type of association is called the special-interest group. Here the association is judged by its capacity to ring up money on the cash register of the member. These special-interest groups became very influential already at the end of the nineteenth century. Henry Demarest Lloyd pointed out this changing character of American society. Speaking of the great concentrations of business power and of the large special-interest pressure groups at the end of the century he said that the letters "USA" had come to mean "The United Syndicates of America."

The other type of association is the sort that directly aims to promote the general welfare. The member of the association does not expect to make personal gain through the association. For example, the average member of the American Civil Liberties Union seldom makes a personal gain from his participation in the organization. He spends his time and money to support the effort to re-define the nature of civil liberties in a changing society, and also to defend those whose liberties are violated

or threatened.

In some of the larger associations or pressure groups the broad constituency of the membership makes it possible for us to say that the gain of the members is a gain also for many non-members. For example, the civil-rights movement with its many associations that aim to promote the liberty of the Negro will in the long run increase the productivity of the entire nation and it will also extend the rights of other underprivileged groups. The award of the Nobel Prize to Martin Luther King served to recognize the contribution of the civil-rights organizations to the whole democratic society and even to the forces of emancipation in the world at large.

In face of these two types of association we can say that the health of democracy depends upon the capacity of general-welfare associations to function as countervailing powers against the narrower purposes of the special-interest associations.

Now, I would like to make three brief observations with regard to this demand. First, let me mention the findings of some recent studies of college graduates. These studies indicate that insofar as he is concerned with public policy the average college graduate in the United States is affiliated with special-interest groups. Besides, he gives little attention or time to participation in the organization; he simply pays his dues, and expects the bureaucracy to look after his interests. Now, a second observation. A minister in Denver has published an elaborate study of the associational behavior of the mem-

bers of his middle-class church. He shows that even the associations of philanthropic character to which his church members belong serve mainly to bring together birds of a feather, that is, to bring together people possessing the same economic and political prejudices. So far from extending the range of community across ethnic and class lines, these associations serve to keep the classes and races separate. A third observation: Mirra Kamaurovsky has studied the associational behavior of the residents of Manhattan. She has found that apart from membership in the church the citizens of Manhattan do not on the average belong to even one association concerned with public policy. She asserts that we have here a good definition of the mass man. Regardless of whether he is "educated" or not, a person is a mass man who does not participate in voluntary associations concerned with the public benefit. He is only on the receiving end of the mass media of communications. In the world of public policy he is a eunuch.

The sinfulness of man expresses itself, then, in the indifference of the average citizen who is so impotent, so idiotic in the Greek sense, as not to exercise his freedom of association for the sake of the general welfare and for the sake of becoming a responsible self.

Ernst Troeltsch has made a distinction that is of prime significance here. He distinguishes between what he calls subjective and objective virtues. Subjective virtues are virtues that can be exhibited in immediate person-to-person relations. Objective virtues

require an institution for their expression. Thus, from the larger human perspective we can say that the isolated good man is a chimera. There is no such thing as a good man as such. There is only the good father or the good mother, the good physician or the good plumber, the good churchman, the good citizen. The good man of the subjective virtues, to be sure, provides the personal integrity of the individual. Without it the viable society is not possible. But from the point of view of the *institutional* commonwealth the merely good individual is good for nothing. Moreover, the narrow range of responsibility of the man who confines attention merely to his family and his job serves to dehumanize him. This narrowness of range and of responsibility is neatly symbolized in an epitaph reported from a cemetery tombstone in Scotland:

Here lies John MacDonald
Born a man
Died a grocer

At the outset I spoke of the experience in pre-Nazi Germany when a man told me, "You either keep your mouth shut, or you get your head bashed in." In the democratic society the non-participating citizen bashes his own head in. The living democratic society requires the disciplines of discussion and common action for the determination of policy. The differences between men are determined by the quality and direction of their participation. In this sense we may understand the New Testament word, "By their fruits shall you know them"; but to this word we should add the admonition, By their groups shall you know them.