

EXPLORING THE “MESO-LEVEL”: GENEALOGY  
OF CIVIC COMMITMENTS AND BEYOND

---

G.A. FINE, *The Hinge. Civil Society, Group Cultures, and the Power of Local Commitments* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2021, 263 p.)

---

For historical reasons, American sociology has always engaged more than its European counterpart in the exploration of social transformations rooted in civil society, associations, groups, and local cultural identities. This standpoint has usually considered the social order to be a flux of adjustments and temporary constraints—more than as an oppressive and static machine embedded in the state—where domination and hegemony never have a permanent status, and where order is also related to the necessity for mutual trust. The issues of order and conflict do not have a dichotomic nature, and they are more likely to be analysed as components or functions of social processes. Hence, the connection of the single individual with larger social structures has been at the centre of the attention of many American sociologists, from Mead to Dewey, from the Chicago School to Goffman. As Tocqueville already realised, the *meso-level* of social relations, typical of civil society, is a focal point of American social sciences. Moreover, thanks to the interactionist tradition and a more explicit dialogue with social psychology, this approach has also provided an original interpretation of the European founding fathers of sociology, with a focus on how order is constructed through routines, interpersonal relations and group cultures.

The metaphor of the *hinge*—as a point of junction, mobility and contact—is the efficacious device chosen by Gary Alan Fine to explore this legacy: that is, the notion of commitment and collective identity as the cognitive and empirical medium between individuals and socio-political structures. Fine's new book analyses how communities and groups produce systems of knowledge, experiences, references, values and beliefs, in interaction with other communities, and how civil society and democracy itself depend on the self-organization of social relations, because behind the *demos* there are always local groups and everyday interactions. On this emancipative view, the individual is at the centre of a non-individualistic network of horizontal references. It is for this reason that Fine focuses on groups as an intermediate meso-level. He does so in order to understand how democracy can spring from local forms of affiliation, shared experience, common belonging, flows of interactions,

collective actions and collective representations in the Durkheimian sense.

This is usually more evident when the meso-level is analysed in regard to social movements as grassroots forms of solidarity and collective identity. Changes in terms of social orientations, habits and aims begin in everyday life and in unstructured situations. As Alberto Melucci<sup>1</sup> noticed, a collective mobilization can occasionally become visible in the streets and in the public space, but its roots are always “latent” in everyday life, in everyday social exchanges, in informal dialogues and moments of conviviality. If we take civic action beyond specific and more visible moments of performativity and demonstration into account, there is a seamless process of agency between everyday life and more structured political action. In a similar way, for Fine social capital is constructed primarily within community organizations and grassroots processes. Even though, following Eliasoph’s analysis<sup>2</sup>, Fine’s book also points out the limits of empowerment strategies based on too informal civic engagement, the theoretical framework relates the civic space directly to the Goffmanian interaction order, and to the inevitability of reciprocal mutual understanding. Contrary to Putnam’s worries about the “bowling alone” effect of weakening ties<sup>3</sup>, Fine thus takes a position close to Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality as a basic ingredient of democratic processes<sup>4</sup>.

Certainly, the idea that societies are organized through group coordination (or group rivalry) in constructing debates, and bottom-up processes of participation, is obviously a historical cultural notion that cannot be universalized and considered to be a model valid everywhere. For example, group cooperation and group rivalry have a different meaning in the Japanese tradition of *Uchi-Soto* opposition (in-group and out-group) or in the relation between the individual’s agency and the reference group<sup>5</sup>. Patterns of local commitment, friendship and acquaintance, free speech and conviviality are subject to cultural rules with different outcomes in terms of collective action. Indeed, in Fine’s book, despite the examples taken from other countries and situations, the

<sup>1</sup> Alberto MELUCCI, 1996, *Challenging codes* (Cambridge, Cambridge University press).

<sup>2</sup> Nina ELIASOPH, 2012, *Making Volunteers: Civic Life after Welfare’s End* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. PUTNAM, 2000, *Bowling alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon & Schuster).

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen HABERMAS, 1984, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (New York, Beacon Press).

<sup>5</sup> Frank J. SCHWARTZ and Susan PHARR 2003, eds, *The State of Civil Society in Japan* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

analytical model of the meso-level is constructed around the American case and its historical background. The focus is “on the American republic with its emphasis on associational life, a claim strengthened by the absence of officially sanctioned secondary institutions [...]; perhaps because of the less intrusive American state, citizens feel that they have the power and the responsibility to solve problems” [80]. The idea that individual or collective agency is primarily an attempt to solve problems is a concept transversally present in Dewey’s as well Goffman’s theoretical perspectives; and Fine’s book is firmly embedded in this tradition.

Taking this cultural standpoint into account, the aim of Fine’s book is mainly to investigate the role of group action, “tiny publics” and local space as the basis of civic and political commitment. Between the individual and the social structures there are groups, local communities, informal variations of “acting in concert”<sup>6</sup>. The local is the “hinge” able to link personal interest with the collective structures of a society, and the book’s aim is to criticize the typical dualism of a polarized tradition of investigation of civic engagement and belonging. For this tradition, institutional structures are at the basis of political action; or, on the contrary, everything depends on the agency, rationality and interest of the individual. Between the macro-level of institutions and social structures, and the micro-level of the single subject, there stands the meso-level of groups and “platoons” of local collective actions, where friendship, acquaintance and personal trust are at the basis of engagement, but more basically of “the ability of the individuals to sense a common purpose and coordinate their actions” (page 26). Such coordination is widespread; it is a dense network of relations rather than an archipelago of self-referential groups.

In markedly Goffmanian terms, the space of investigation is the intersection among culture, interaction, and structure. This interaction has its own order, and this provides the bases for social structure and cultural orientations. Fine investigates this process and especially how public engagement can rely on tacit mechanisms. In this regard, he identifies three main analytical elements: a) *group cultures* (or “idiocultures”, to use Fine’s term), i.e. beliefs and practices as cultural tool kits and cultural orientations of local groups; b) *circuits of action* as more general links between the individual and the social structures, for example in the interaction with local institutions, or between routines and group engagement; c) *tiny publics*, i.e. groups that share common aims and

<sup>6</sup> Hannah ARENDT, 1958, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, Chicago University Press).

interests which are not necessarily virtuous but whose mechanisms are always based on face-to-face interaction.

Furthermore, this threefold analysis of the meso-level is articulated around seven analytically heterogeneous references, to each of which a chapter is devoted: *coordination*, i.e. how people interact, do things together, negotiate common goals and internal order; *relations*, i.e. the communicative level of mutual exchange in terms of actions, words and emotions typified by sociability and friendship ties; *associations*, as more structured groups based on mutual recognition; *places* as physical areas, the stage, where interactions and meetings happen, such as houses, squares, gardens or cafés; *conflict*—because groups are not necessarily consensual entities, they can be in internal or external competition; *control* of the meso-level of groups by structural institutions; and finally *extensions*, a last category comprising the possible expansion of physical place in digital space, of oral communication in digital communication, of grassroots in netroots.

The most interesting part of Fine's investigation of the meso-level and its articulations concerns the topics of order, control and conflict. Fine's argument is that control and oppression also rely on interactional routines, and so too does democracy. Again, this is a claim in open contrast with the Hobbesian opposition between personal interest of the individualized subject, and the necessity for a repressive Leviathan to control the chaos of the violent conflicts among monades of *desiring machines*. Communicative routines are present also in oppressive structures of control and have to be analysed as such. However, Fine does not really clarify—at least in analytical terms—to what extent this means that control, hegemony or domination operate with the consensus of the oppressed and the subalterns, and to what extent this means that the oppressed and the controlled have margins to develop an emancipative agency by “acting in concert” and “doing things together”. In a similar way, the problem of conflict is mainly discussed in the Simmelian Coser's interpretation<sup>7</sup> as valuable for civic commitment, as a performative moment, and as a constructive rather than disruptive function of the meso-level. Conflict is fully part of the interaction of larger coordination processes. Disputes are not in antithesis to order, or to commitment and associative action; rather, they are possible elements of them.

Hence, discussion of the topics of control and conflict is the point where the hypothesis of the meso-level of groups, tiny publics and

<sup>7</sup> Lewis COSER, 1956, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, MacMillan).

grassroots processes of democracy is put to the test, with an implicit discussion of the nature of power. Indeed, it is evident that groups' activism is not necessarily a guarantee of democratic interaction; on the contrary, groups can be the supporters of tyrannies and dictatorships, or more generally of oppressive practices and forms of violence. To control means to assume mastery of someone else with psychological, ideological or physical means. Control can be coercive and explicit, legitimized or not; but it can also be interiorized and embodied in different ways. In this regard, Fine does not seem interested in a dialogue with Foucault or Gramsci, and he only briefly mentions Bourdieu. Rather than insisting on the topic of domination, on how individuals and groups use their power and hegemony to control—but also to annihilate and destroy—other groups and individuals, Fine discusses the issue of control mainly from the point of view of the consensus constructed within groups. Such consensus can be complicity or voluntary servitude, but the problem for Fine is first of all to contest the Hobbesian model of centralized control. Because of the complex mechanism of exchange and interaction of the meso-level, consensus and control can never be total or definitive. Hence the functioning of the linkage between individuals and institutions creates opportunities and spaces for reflexivity, dissensus or criticism. For Fine, the problem is to challenge an atomistic account of social life in which individuals are controlled by institutions. If power is always a collective product, it cannot be unidirectional; rather, it arises from the interaction of groups, and from the integration of the action of individuals with the agency of organizations and institutional fields. The micro-physics of power within social relations is considered less interesting than the opposite Arendtian tradition of conceptualization of power as the capacity to build together a democratic space.

Yet again, in this analysis of the meso-level it is not clear to what extent, in Goffmanian terms, cultures and groups inevitably create control as form of predictability necessary for recognition and participation, and to what extent such control can be the instrument of inequalities and symbolic violence, for example among genders, ethnic groups or social strata. A key point unfortunately overlooked in Fine's analysis—is the legitimation of control and related forms of power, even though this perspective decision-making—among individuals and groups—is always an open and unpredictable process because the meso-level is never sufficiently compact to create a self-referential totality.

To sum up, this is a book able to construct an original linkage and dialogue between Goffman and Arendt, Tocqueville and Habermas, and thus move away from both the rational choice approach and the French

theory's critique of power, and to reaffirm confidence in the western tradition of public agora, publicity of social issues and capacity to produce emancipation from situated forms of sociation. Certainly, "tiny" does not necessarily mean "nice and good": small numbers are also sources of danger and fear, prejudice and isolation<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, in the numerous case-studies discussed, Fine takes violent groups into account, but this is not the focus of his analysis. Local action as the hinge connecting the individual to the institutional agency and structure, the micro to the macro, is more interesting when it can produce social exchange and social change, and the focus remains on an emancipative public sphere rather than on microphysic forms of control. The problem is that both these processes, of emancipation and control, are often present at the same time, and they closely intertwine.

This intertwining is perhaps more visible in the last category taken into consideration by Fine's analysis: that of *extensions*. It is evident that in the past century the media have become a growing virtual public space, increasingly integrated with, but also competitive against, the tiny local publics of associations and groups. With the digital turn, the virtual civil society of social networks, platforms, blogs and websites has become paramount<sup>9</sup>. As Fine rightly claims, netroots are an extension of, and not a substitute for, grassroots social actions that persist in the civic meso-world; and online communications are not so radically different from face-to-face interactions because they are always based on the assumption of a shared set of meanings, aims and interests. Such extensions of the meso-level in the digital space can be virtuous and true extensions of civil society; but the neutral mechanism by which meanings are shared can also produce new forms of control and coercion, far more treacherous and pervasive in the digital space.

The book ends with a reflection on the Covid-19 outbreak written in the spring of 2020. This was too early to make predictions, but sufficiently recent to identify the changes in social relations and composition of the meso-level caused by the pandemic. Today, we know that coexistence with the virus has not stopped demonstrations, encounters in public spaces or activities of tiny publics; but it has disrupted the spontaneity and fluidity of such activities. Besides the growing importance of platforms and digital communications, one observes a fragmentation and segmentation of the meso-level. The availability of

<sup>8</sup> Arjun APPADURAI, 2006, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Durham, Duke University Press).

<sup>9</sup> W. Lance BENNETT and Alexandra

SEGERBERG, 2012, "The logic of connective action", *Information Communication and Society*, 15 (5), 739–768.

## EXPLORING THE “MESO-LEVEL”

communicative networks and opportunities for interaction has been transformed by the pandemic crisis, creating new zones of exclusion and isolation, and preventing the social participation of weaker individuals. Coordination, relations, associations, physical places, but also conflicts and especially controls, are modifying their dynamics and changing the topics of discussion in the public sphere. Since the onset of the pandemic crisis, democracy seems to have been not only a matter of participation and free interaction, of associative life and fluid dynamics between individuals and institutions, but also a matter of material elements, such as nature, non-human actors and technological tools, as well as access to complex information, big data and transparency of communicative processes.

With the metaphor of the hinge, Fine’s book conducts a fundamental analysis of the third space between the micro and the macro. It highlights the ambivalent mechanisms driving interactions and the construction of orders, while at the same time including opportunities and constraints. With regard to the history of western democracies, the acceleration imposed by the Covid pandemic in relation to the role of technoscience and management of big data opens new scenarios, and Fine’s book can help us understand our departure point better.

PAOLA REBUGHINI