

Participation Is Not Enough

Civic Engagement and Personal Change

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In the United States, empowerment strategies emphasizing commitments that are brief, informal, and fun have proved tone deaf to the political importance of associations. If civic engagement is to play a role in social change, citizens must realize that voluntary associations also depend on conflict and professionalization—as well as a prominent role on the part of the state.

Review: Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers. Civic Life after Welfare's End*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, 308 p.

How does one transform underprivileged youth and selfless volunteers into citizens who are autonomous, tolerant, and masters of their own destinies? This is the ambition of Nina Eliasoph's latest work, which, at the same time, offers a remarkable portrait of American civic life. Civil society, to the extent that it promotes empowerment and fosters personal development, is often presented as a font of limitless virtues; yet Eliasoph, an American sociologist, describes with considerable panache the successive failures of these well-meaning enterprises. The task of forging citizenship often leads, in practice, to depoliticization and the acceptance of inequality. Yet she also offers a glimmer of hope: empowerment does occasionally occur, but rarely where one would expect it.

Empower What?

While the term “empower” has only recently been introduced in France (where it is translated as “*capacitation*” or “*encapacitation*”), it now completely permeates American civic life. “Empowerment” refers to “the process by which an individual or a group acquires the means to bolster their capacity for action, allowing them to accede to individual or

collective power. [This concept] connects two ideas: that of power, which is the root of the word itself, and that of a learning process, which is necessary to achieve it.”¹ Yet even this definition seems reductive, given the range of meanings the term has assumed. The term is used to describe programs financed by the state and international organizations, as well as organizations that are more “bottom-up” and autonomous. The term was first used by community organizers and feminists,² but, for over twenty years, it has been appropriated by international organizations (like UNESCO and the World Bank), management theory, and by American voluntary associations, for which it has acquired the status of a keyword.

A careful observer of American civic life, Eliasoph dwells on this discourse as a way of considering what she calls “Empowerment Projects.” She uses this term to refer as much to tutoring associations as charities and black or Latino community organizations. All aspire to emancipate their members through participation in community-oriented activities. By picking up trash along the highway, collecting food for the homeless, or organizing parties for sick children in hospitals, they maintain, individuals become true citizens—open, tolerant, and civic-minded. These organizations are essentially hybrid in nature, in their funding (i.e., public or private) as well as in their membership, which ranges from middle-class people who crave civic commitment to marginalized adolescents who need ways to spend their weekends or vacations. Such pluralistic membership is expected to promote individual empowerment, thanks to the change in hearts and minds that supposedly occurs through the encounter with otherness (be it social, racial, or generational).

The entire goal of Eliasoph’s book is to identify the norms of American civic life. To this end, for more than four years she studied a number of associations as a participant-observer. She unveils patterns in social interaction that reveal themselves when the normal course of events is interrupted by grammatical errors. Particularly attentive to discourse, she highlights the use of the “Empowerment Talk” that participants so often employ. This discourse places special value on participation, inclusion, diversity, tolerance, innovation, and

¹ C. Biewener, M.-H. Bacqué, “Empowerment, développement et féminisme : entre projet de transformation sociale et néolibéralisme,” in M.-H. Bacqué, Y. Sintomer (eds.), *La démocratie participative. Histoire et généalogie*, Paris, La découverte, 2011, 82-83.

² S. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals. A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*, London, Random House, 1971; P. Bachrach, M., Baratz, M., *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970; M.-H., Bacqué, “Empowerment et politiques urbaines aux Etats-Unis ,” *Géographie, économie, société*, vol. 8, n°1, 2006, 107-125 ; W. A. Ninacs, *Empowerment et intervention, Développement de la capacité d’agir et de la solidarité*, Laval, Presses de l’Université de Laval, 2008.

flexibility. Yet while it aims to be generous, one of the basic characteristics of this discourse is its tendency to downplay structural inequalities and power relations. Eliasoph offers numerous examples of this dynamic. No doubt the most striking is that of a minivan that was given by a local Rotary Club to a program named Community House in reward for the latter's charitable work. At the awards ceremony, the Rotary Club called the gift a "van to transport needy youth" (p. ix). This announcement troubled Community House's organizers, as they saw the simple fact of evoking the social condition of these young people—whom they refer to simply as "volunteers"—as unacceptably cruel. "If I'd have known," said one of the organizers, "I wouldn't have brought my kids at all." At the heart of empowerment talk lurks an effort to downplay structural inequalities in order to emphasize the opportunities available to those who seek emancipation through participation. Rather than dwell on statistics and the lesser likelihood that blacks and poor people will go to college or avoid jail or drug addiction, empowerment projects never cease, to the contrary, to point out that there are always individuals who pull through.

In other words, inequalities are ignored to avoid stigmatizing those who find themselves on the lower rungs of the social ladder, thus making communal life possible. Consequently, the conversation that takes place in these associations turns out to be quite bland: one must constantly recall all the good the association does for others and for oneself. Anything upsetting must be cast aside. But this corniness reaches new levels when, as Eliasoph explains, a decisive element is introduced: fun. Since not all volunteers are fully committed, participation must be amusing, pleasant, and uncomplicated. Indeed, the organizers emphasize fun relentlessly—a fact that is the object of considerable secret derision. Yet the problems with fun and communication become ever more evident the more one reads. Despite the organizers' best efforts, blacks and whites, the old and the young, and the rich and the poor have trouble communicating in anything other than the most superficial and phatic terms. While realizing that they are different from one another, participants are incapable of speaking about these differences and even less of describing inequalities: "They learned that [beyond the cultural barriers separating them] we all like pizza. They learned to value the friendly chatter on its own terms without expecting it to lead to any intense future bonding; not to expect to make friends with the strangers, but just to trim their temporal horizons and feel comfortable with them." (p. 180)

The Depoliticization of Civic Life

From this perspective, there is one trait that a French observer could not help being struck by: the almost complete absence of any discussion of politics.³ Building on her previous work,⁴ Eliasoph emphasizes how sharply civic and political life are separated from one another in the United States. The discursive norms in the organizations she studies requires one to speak of personal experiences rather than adopt a general or group perspective. This descent into particularity, which renders every intervention sincere and unique, prevents discussions from becoming politicized, as each situation is perceived as relatively idiosyncratic. In this way, the depoliticization of American civic life is tied to the individualization of social issues: if success is individual, so is marginality or failure—neither can be related to structural conditions. If the question of race still plays an important role—racial discrimination is acknowledged and must be fought—social inequalities have no place in public discussions. It follows that volunteers learn to separate social from political issues and to imagine them as autonomous spheres, even if this diverges from the association’s original goal.

Yet one may reasonably wonder whether these findings are not tied to the way the author presents her work. Demonstrating a concern for her subjects’ anonymity that is increasingly expected of ethnographers in the United States, she has changed the name not only of her protagonists, but also of the organizations and the cities that she studies.⁵ The result is a constant uncertainty that pervades the book from beginning to end. Through a stylistic *tour de force*, Eliasoph manages, like many other American sociologists, to erase the specific traits of the city she studies, so much so that it could be anywhere in North America. Such an approach certainly makes generalization easier. But is it really possible to imagine that what goes on in “Snowy Prairie” (the town she studies) would be exactly the same in New York, Dallas, or Chicago? Do local politics, urban history, and the immigration situation have no bearing on a town’s civic life? And how can one claim that what happens in one place also occurs elsewhere if there is no basis for empirical comparison? The social and

³ Even so, see Camille Hamidi, *La société civile dans les cités*, Paris, Economica, 2010, who identifies similar phenomena in France.

⁴ Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics. How American Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, Cambridge University Press, 1998 (which has been translated in French by Camille Hamidi as *L'évitement du politique. Comment les Américains produisent l'apathie dans la vie quotidienne*, Paris, Economica, 2010, 352 p). See, too, the excellent review on this site by Carole Gayet-Viaud, “Est-il devenu indécent de parler de politique?,” *La Vie des idées*, 2011 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Est-il-devenu-indecent-de-parler.html>).

⁵ Even if one can easily imagine that it is simply where she was living at the time...

spatial structure of Snow Prairie is well described, yet the town seems to have no history or elected officials. One cannot help being struck by the fact that political parties and politicians are barely mentioned. While this is probably due to the fact that they were not present in the ordinary interactions she observed, Eliasoph is interested in the ways in which civic life is financed, which is necessarily tied to local and national politics. Is the political allegiance of these financial supporters and grant recipients completely irrelevant? Can one really imagine that elected officials never set foot in the community celebrations that she describes with such flair? The disconnect between civic and political life may thus have as much to do with the eye of the beholder as with the norms that are specific to American associative life.

When “Empowerment” Falls Flat

In addition to the origins of the depoliticization of American civic life, Nina Eliasoph offers a careful description of the way in which participants use language, in an effort to understand what empowerment talk does and how it is used. She traces the varying ways participants use this language in order to understand how it affects individuals and circumstances and whether it actually results in empowerment. Participating without talking politics and without even really talking; having more or less of a good time; and doing good without reflecting on the origins of the problems one is dealing with: these trends, if repeated regularly, naturally affect individuals, but not necessarily in the ways one might expect. Far from producing empowerment, participation in these organizations seems to forge docile citizens. Eliasoph writes: “Some of the lessons, however, seem to be useful mainly for creating citizens who will placidly accept contemporary government’s increasingly short-term projects; who will not panic about short-term employment in an unsteady job market; who will feel calm about short-term marriage; not become too passionately attached to any people or ideas: citizens who will change their souls rather than their conditions. These lessons are also unintended consequences of participation, not the lessons that Empowerment Projects aim to teach” (pp. xvii-xviii).

How then is one to explain the successive failure of empowerment projects in the organizations that Eliasoph studies? She has one clear enemy, which her husband, Paul Lichtherman, studied at length in an earlier work⁶: “plug-in volunteering.” While this practice

⁶ Cf. Paul Lichtherman, *Elusive Togetherness. Church Groups Trying to Bridge America’s Divisions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005 ; see, too, the very stimulating review available on this site by Camille Hamidi,

is still exotic by French standards, in the United States it has become one of the most widespread forms of civic engagement. It consists of individuals donating a few hours of their time each week to offer help with homework, a soup kitchen, or fundraising. This practice is particularly widespread among teenagers, who must show abundant evidence of volunteering on their résumés to be accepted at a top university. While one might argue that these donated hours are still worthwhile, however self-interested they might be, Eliasoph demonstrates that they often do more harm than good. First, she calls attention to the fact that these organizations often spend more time discussing the best ways to count volunteering hours than they do deciding what to do. Moreover, these *à la carte* volunteers cannot offer in-depth and regular help to those they are assisting. The example of tutoring is striking. Because they typically show up for just one hour a week, volunteers do not work with any one child on a regular basis. The latter often receive contradictory advice and claim that such help is useless. Worse, volunteers who get involved to see poverty up close—particularly when it is African-American—are neither invested in nor prepared for interacting with the most un-socialized individuals. Consequently, the children who receive the most assistance are often the ones who need it the least. This critique of “plug-in volunteering” echoes the critique (which is not confined to the United States) of “intermittent citizenship,”⁷ which refers to the increasingly irregularity of involvement and activism that occurs only in reaction to problems encountered by participants or emerging collective causes. If these more flexible forms of involvement are a means of reaching those who are not prepared for lasting and regular collective participation, their social or political consequences are uncertain or even harmful.

When Empowerment Becomes Possible

As a counterpoint to her critique of *à la carte* volunteering, Eliasoph praises repetition and durability in the course of civic education. If empowerment talk proves incapable of emancipating individuals, learning processes nonetheless occur, not where one might expect them, but along the margins—in the interstices and “back stages” of associations, far from a public view emphasizing fun, diversity, and opportunities. Rather than these much heralded volunteers, Eliasoph emphasizes the role of social workers and professional organizers in transmitting knowledge and know-how to their charges. Instead of joining the chorus praising

“La culture civique sans le capital social. Styles de groupe, vie associative et civilité ordinaire aux Etats-Unis,” *La Vie des idées*, 2009.

⁷ See Marion Carrel, Catherine Neveu, Jacques Ion (eds.), *Les intermittences de la démocratie. Formes d'action et visibilité citoyennes dans la ville*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009.

the role of volunteers in American culture—while denouncing the role of bureaucrats and civil servants—she shows how professionals, because their actions are regular and recurrent, manage to build relationships of trust with their public, thus becoming conduits of empowerment. It is by meeting with children and following them on a daily basis that some learn to speak in public, to run meetings, to take notes, and to do their homework—none of which they could do at the outset. Yet in order to play these public roles, these initially marginalized participants must, like actors, rehearse, on almost daily basis, the same gestures, actions, and lines. Drawing on Arendt, Eliasoph implicitly promotes a quite classical conception of (civic) education, based on a top-down and relatively authoritarian transmission of knowledge. Contrary to the more flexible and horizontal vision of education embraced by empowerment projects—which, following Boltanski and Chiapello, she places at the heart of the new spirit of capitalism—Eliasoph demonstrates, with supporting evidence, that traditional educational methods are more efficient.

If these conclusions seem trivial, they nonetheless challenge a naïve faith in the capacity of participation—whatever form it may take—to educate and emancipate individuals. Taking part in a day-long discussion—however intense it might be—while serving on a citizen jury, attending a neighborhood association meeting once every three months, offering an occasional hour of tutoring—this is not enough to change participants in a profound way.⁸ What matters is less the form that participation takes—how procedural it is, whether it is deliberative or inclusive—than the intensity of the experience itself, which alone can mark participants in a way that might prove lasting. It is a shame, incidentally, that the author does not examine individual trajectories and their possible bifurcations more carefully. Because her analysis is focused on group interaction, she presents characters whose past and family background remain obscure. Indeed, Eliasoph refuses to rely on interviews, which would produce nothing but artificial discourse generated by exchanges with the investigator. She prefers, rather, to consider language used in concrete settings. Yet while the material she has gathered through observation proves to be unbelievably rich and her critique of interviews is accurate, it is still necessary, in order to grasp what is happening in public, to examine not only what is happening along the sidelines, but also what transpired before. She emphasizes the role of time in learning processes, but she might also have given greater consideration to

⁸ On this topic, see Julien Talpin “Ces moments qui façonnent les hommes. Éléments pour une approche pragmatiste de la compétence civique,” *Revue française de science politique*, 60 (1), 2010, 91-115.

her participants' pasts, as present competencies are the result of the totality of one's past experiences, be they remembered or embodied.

Beyond these considerations on time and duration, which are the book's most stimulating passages, she identifies three other conditions favoring empowerment, all of which are opposed to the dominant or official practices in the organizations she studies. First, an organization's key rules must be recognized and made explicit, contrary to the more fluid philosophy that prevails in American associations. These rules serve as props upon which participants can lean, making them so many levers of action. Secondly, rather than avoiding conflict, these organizations must learn to confront it. She shows how these associations maneuver to avoid the basic questions that lie at the heart of the problems that concern them. While they seek to fight poverty, pollution, or racism, they never take time to reflect collectively on the origins of these phenomena. To initiate such conversations, on top of discussions of internal organization—like counting volunteering hours—might mean having to assign guilt, lay responsibility, and identify structural inequality. This would run the risk of spoiling the fun and the façade of consensus that reigns in these associations, which posit that everything is possible, even for the most marginal. By accepting the conflict that would inevitably result from such discussions, associations would reinject politics into civic life, which could only enhance empowerment projects. Developing ideas that Michèle Lamont has sketched out,⁹ Eliasoph contends that the conscious and public recognition of social inequalities, barriers, and stratifications is the first step for overcoming them.

Such discussions do occasionally occur in empowerment projects, but never in public. Only behind closed doors, in the basements of community houses, and shielded from the gaze of impersonal *à la carte* volunteers does learning occur and critiques get leveled. The real quality of the author's ethnographic work lies in the fact that, over the course of four years of fieldwork, she became close enough to some participants to gain access to what goes on behind the scenes and to observe these close-knit moments directly. It is when a real sense of trust and familiarity is forged between adults and young people and when the atmosphere becomes relaxed and "natural" that transmission and learning become possible. Though she

⁹ Cf. M. Lamont, M. Fournier (eds.), *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequalities*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992. See, too, her interview with *La Vie des idées* : <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Retrouver-le-sens-de-la-vie.html>

emphasized this point in her earlier book¹⁰ and quotes James Scott, who sees infra-political spaces as essential to the way the dominated resist oppression,¹¹ the material she presents in this book might also have led her to emphasize the importance of close-knittedness in the empowerment process. This would have been all the more interesting as the organizations she studies particularly affect minorities—blacks, but also *latinos*—and ceaselessly promote diversity, intermixing, and openness to otherness. Yet it is precisely when groups find themselves with their own kind that jokes are cracked, critiques are made, and, occasionally, politics is discussed. In this way, empowerment and diversity no longer seem to imply one another. Yet this insight is not fully explored by the author.

The final condition for an effective empowerment process is the recognition of the virtues of expertise. Whereas civic organizations promote the idea that everyone is an expert and that everything is a matter of opinion, which leads to a rejection of vertical forms of knowledge transmission, Eliasoph shows that when effective empowerment processes occur, participants almost inevitably become experts, who are capable, in turn, of training others. In a nutshell, empowerment produces both emancipation and inequality. The refusal of most American associations to acknowledge the potential for unequal resources among their members prevents most empowerment processes from occurring. Eliasoph does not perhaps fully explore the consequences of this iron law of empowerment—emancipated individuals invariably rise above the rank and file once they become experts—as she does not place sufficient emphasis on the fact that citizen experts can themselves become a new elite that may be little inclined to participate.¹²

One can also question the book's choice of case studies, as certain organizations that originated the idea of empowerment, notably those tied to Saul Alinsky,¹³ insist, to the

¹⁰ Explicitly in keeping with Goffman, one of the central arguments of *Avoiding Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) is that discourses vary in accordance with the sites where interactions occur. Whereas in public the ordinary citizens studied by Eliasoph were incapable of discussing politics and systematically spoke on their own behalf, she found that in more private settings, surrounded by people they trusted, they allowed themselves to speak of society at large, to denounce injustice, and to extrapolate from their personal experiences to higher degrees of generality. Civic competence thus appears to be not only a question of individual or collective dispositions, but also a function of sites of interaction.

¹¹ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, 1992.

¹² See Julien Talpin, *Schools of Democracy. How Ordinary Citizens (Sometimes) Become Competent in Participatory Budgeting Institutions*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2011.

¹³ See Thierry Quinqueton, *Que ferait Saul Alinsky?*, Paris Ed. Desclée de Brouwer, 2011. On the continuation of this tradition in Great Britain through the organization London Citizens, see the work of H  l  ne Balazard. Balazard H., and Genestier P., 2009, "La notion d'empowerment : un analyseur des tensions id  ologiques

contrary, on the importance of creating leaders and experts who will in turn train others, as well as on the virtues of conflict and collective action. The rejection of expertise that Eliasoph discusses is indeed far from being unanimously shared by the empowerment community. Conscious of this limitation, she emphasizes in her conclusion that empowerment can occur elsewhere—she mentions on several occasions the participatory budget of Porto Alegre,¹⁴ which she seems to hold up as a model—but she still prefers to focus on more ordinary (because more representative?) spaces found within American civic life.

Unfavorable Structural Conditions

Repetition over time, clearly defined ground-rules, and acceptance of conflict and expertise: these are the four pillars of empowerment. In a gesture of commitment, Eliasoph offers in conclusion several practical suggestions for making empowerment possible. She adds an additional and more structural element: the financial conditions of American civic life. Indeed, many of the obstacles that she identifies along the way are tied to the precarious financial circumstances of associative life. If the organizations she studied have so little time to discuss substantive issues, rely on *à la carte* volunteers, and accept financing from multinational corporations like Coca-Cola or Pepsi, it is because they are constantly fighting to obtain new grants and are unable to plan their financial future. This project-based system of financing is all the more pernicious as it undermines, in an almost structural way, the necessary conditions for successful empowerment. Whereas empowerment requires time and repetition, grant-hunting demands, to the contrary, permanent innovation and new initiatives. Eliasoph implicitly evokes her dream of a more lasting form of associative life, financed more permanently by the state or directly taken over by public services. The obstacles that she discusses are merely the consequence of the sloughing off of social services onto civil society, a trend tied to the dismantling of the welfare state. If this theme pervades the entire book—and is referred to in its subtitle—it is a shame that it is not addressed more directly. But once again, because the study hews closely to participants' practices, this omission merely reflects the lack of reflection within her organizations on more efficient means for providing social services, tutoring, or clean roads. The wisdom of sloughing off onto civil society services that

britanniques et des tâtonnements philosophiques français,” *Séminaire ‘Politisations comparées : Sociétés Musulmanes et ailleurs.’ Séance 2 : Empowerment et Politisation : Politisation par le haut et politisation par le bas*, EHESS Paris, December 14, 2009.

¹⁴ Marion Gret, Yves Sintomer, *Porto Alegre : l’espoir d’une autre démocratie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2002 ; Gianpaolo Baiocchi, *Militants and Citizens: the Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

could be provided by the state is rarely discussed in this book because it is a question that the participants themselves do not ask.

It is nonetheless worth emphasizing that Eliasoph, despite her fairly pronounced pragmatist lineage, characterized both by an exclusive recourse to participant observation and by frequent references to French pragmatic sociology,¹⁵ takes into consideration a number of structural factors that the latter often overlooks. The author quite frequently employs the categories of race, class, and gender, as they are inevitably relevant (albeit in changing and unstable ways) to the interactions. Eliasoph in this way adheres to the recent direction taken by pragmatic sociology,¹⁶ by attempting to further integrate power relations and inequalities into her thought. Yet the question of power is rarely raised in her book. Yes, we understand that her participants subtly avoid it, but Eliashoph could have raised it by questioning her choice to study these particular cases. Should we really be surprised, in the end, that the empowerment of participants is impossible in spaces that are themselves powerless—the charitable organizations she studies do not contribute as such to changing the conditions of marginalized groups and individuals—and which do not question power relations in contemporary society? Even if these organizations had political discussions and articulated public critiques, as the author admonishes them to do, the condition of the participants would probably change little. For critique to become the infra-political foundation of revolt rather than a safety valve, one must inquire into the social conditions that make possible the transition from critique to collective action. Only then can, “[u]nder the appropriate conditions, the accumulation of petty acts [...], rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche.”¹⁷

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¹⁵ An annex is devoted to *On Justification* and the work of Laurent Thévenot, Luc Boltanski, Daniel Céfai and their colleagues is discussed throughout the book. Over the past decade, Eliasoph has developed close ties with French social science and has frequently attended conferences and seminars in France, her work having received a particularly enthusiastic welcome there.

¹⁶ See Luc Boltanski, *De la Critique. Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009 ; Cyril Lemieux, *Le devoir et la grâce*, Paris, Economica, 2009, notably chapters 7 and 8 on the place of critique which, while it should be secondary, must nonetheless not be absent even from an analysis that seeks to follow participants in their interactions.

¹⁷ J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 192.