Eiko Ikegami

Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/1. Tiny Publics, Networks, and Switching

Ente di afferenza:
()

Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/1
Tiny Publics, Networks, and Switching

by Eiko Ikegami

The question of macro-micro links has been one of the most challenging issues in contemporary sociological theory (e.g., Alexander, Bourdieu, Collins, and Giddens). In this context, Gary Alan Fine is known for his long-standing quest to connect an approach to sociology grounded on the micro level, in which dyads, triads and other tiny groups create social processes, to sociological analyses focused on institutions and organizations on the macro level. As exemplified by Fine's early article on Little League baseball teams [Fine 1979] as well as his 1993 review article, he places symbolic interactionist theory within the broadest possible context of sociological theory. Extending this perspective still further, Fine and Harrington's 2004 article offered a powerful theoretical reassessment of civil society – usually a terrain of macro political and institutional analysis – from the viewpoint of small groups and tiny publics. The authors emphasized that civil society can be parsed into small-group components in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of it. The current paper co-authored by Fine, Harrington, and Segre builds on this earlier work by offering a reassessment of classical sociology. It is a welcome addition to the development of a theory of civil society rooted in the micro realities of small-group dynamics.

When the editors of this journal invited me to respond to their article, I thought at first that I would be able to add some value to their interpretation of classical sociology and if possible, even challenge them on some points in order to invigorate public discourse in this journal. But I found the task difficult since I share many basic points with these authors in terms of my understanding of classical sociology. I also share a basic assumption with them, the centrality of fluid interactional processes in understanding social realities. My empirical research came very close to their topic

in terms of the importance of publics and small-group dynamics in forming political culture. There appears to be some differences, however, due to our different points of observation. For example, I often use the language of networks in describing the relational underpinnings of such large units as the state, social structures, organizations, and markets as well as small groups and publics as a way to connecting the micro and macro levels. In this context, I also analyse the interrelationships, hierarchical structures, and segmentation of publics. Thus rather than responding to the current article by itself, I would like to discuss the issue of publics from my own vantage point as it might offer a complementary view from a different angle.

My own perspective was originally developed within the framework of comparative and historical sociology. For example, one of my primary intellectual interests is related to the following question: How did such a non-Western society as Japan achieve its own version of political modernity without travelling the route taken by Western countries? This comparative question required me to reconstitute such categories as "civil society" and "the public sphere." Many analytical categories in macro sociology were originally distilled from the historical experiences of Western societies. For this reason the cookie-cutter application of established categories to non-Western societies often fails to articulate the vital qualities of social life in these societies. This observation led me to analyse the communicative activities of people with close attention to local categories and cultural productions in micro settings.

At the same time, case studies of political modernity in non-Western societies also involve comparative assessments of such macro topics as the varied routes of state formation, market systems, the roles of religious institutions, and the formation of national identities. Local tiny publics are embedded within these larger cultural and social institutional fields. Furthermore, complex network systems have a paradoxical feature on the level of epistemology. Although structures and institutions are in one sense nothing more than what is given on a lower level of descriptions, once they emerge as stable recurrent structures they can often appear as qualitatively different entities. It became clear to me that the mutual interaction of macro and micro processes in historical contingencies is central to an adequate description of political and cultural dynamics.

As I define the term, publics are communicative sites that emerge at points of connection among social or cognitive networks. Each person carries an amalgamation of cognitive, social, and symbolic networks in the course of daily life. Hence a public on the smallest scale emerges as the site of a temporary interaction between two individuals. Following the formulation of Harrison White [1992], I consider that the identity of a person engaged in interactions emerges and reemerges through frequent

switching among different network connections in publics. The public is the sphere in which the actions of switching, connecting to, and decoupling from networks takes place. By involving persons in many different micro publics, modern life compels them to switch continuously from one domain to another and among multiple sets of intersections without conscious attention to the process. Thus publics are sites for initiating changes. Having reformulated the concept of publics with the help of network language, I consider that the interrelationships and kinds of publics in any society are profoundly influenced by the macro institutional fields such factors as the organizational structures of the state and the structures of markets [Ikegami 2000; Ikegami 2005].

For example, I studied the unexpected roles of what I term "aesthetic publics" in early modern Japan. These publics unintentionally created favorable social and cultural conditions for political modernity. Early modern Japanese people particip- ated in numerous circles that engaged in such interactive artistic activities as the com- position of *haiku* poetry and tea ceremonies. These activities created bonds of civility without civil society. Recurrent participation in sites of aesthetic sociability in which ritual mechanisms allowed horizontal socialization in a society that formally enforced strict status distinctions outside these groups meant that people in early modern Ja- pan could temporarily decouple from their existing feudal ties. They could, for ex- ample, switch their identities from those of a dutiful samurai or humble merchant to that of a poet or artist. It was not unusual to find people who participated in a number of aesthetic groups and had several artist and pen names. The constant ex- perience of shifting one's identity from a formal feudal status to an aesthetic enclave identity made individuals realize that the feudal boundaries set by the authoritarian shogunate determined only one of many possible modes of socialization. Premodern Japanese people learned how to communicate with others, organize various public events, and maintain interactions based on weak ties through such artistic activities.

The reason that the interactive performing arts and poetry-making formed vi- brant publics was complex; it was related to the rise of large-scale commercial society within the framework of an authoritarian state that prohibited any political associ- ations defined as such. Although these numerous aesthetic circles remained as what I term "enclave publics" that were not directly connected to formal political processes, once Japan entered the process of modernization in the late nineteenth century, the endowments of the numerous voluntary groups and their cultural legacy of switching identities became resources for constructing modern political life [Ikegami 2005].

The Japanese aesthetic circles by themselves were organized for pleasure rather than for civic engagements. Furthermore, compared to feudal political ties or primor- dial territorial or kinship ties that enforced heavy obligation and commitments, these

small aesthetic circles were ephemeral, casual, and flexible. They also largely resulted from interactions formed by weak ties in Mark Granovetter's sense of the term. On the other hand, these cultural networks successfully paved the way for modern forms of civic relationships by forming open circuits in existing ties and providing opportunities for switching social cognitive affiliations. They thereby exposed individuals to different perspectives, simultaneously empowering and enriching their experiences of other people. It is at this point of emphasizing opportunities for switching that my observation of the Japanese case clearly overlaps the argument advanced by Fine and Harrington in 2004. They argue: "while the mere existence of small groups does not a civic arena make, high density of independent small groups can provide individuals with multiple, and often cross-cutting, opportunities for affiliations" [Fine and Harrington 2004, 350].

The historical study of associational life – in particular the formation of horizontal associations – has gained considerable attention in the social scientific literature because of its positive implications for civil society and democracy. Nonetheless, so far too little attention has been given to the importance of weak ties; of opportunities to switch network connections in this context; of casual and flexible social interactions; and of ephemeral voluntary ties, which have historically provided society with increased flexibility by providing open circuits. When strongly cohesive horizontal associations gain hegemonic power, they tend to impose suffocating disciplinary effects on their members while excluding others. In contrast, societies with network connections that allow relatively casual forms of shifting and reconnecting empower their citizens. They can be described as more open and flexible in nature.

References

Fine, G.A.
1979   "Small Groups and Cultural Creation: The Idioculture of Little League Baseball Teams." *American Sociological Review* 44: 733-745.
1993   "The Sad Demise, Mysterious Disappearance, and Glorious Triumph of Symbolic Interactionism." *American Review of Sociology* 19: 61-87.

Fine, G.A., and Harrington, E.B.
2004   "Tiny Publics: Small Groups and Civil Society." *Sociological Theory* 22: 341-56.

Ikegami, E.
2000   "A Sociological Theory of Publics: Identity and Culture as Emergent Properties in Networks." *Social Research* 67: 998-1029.
2005   *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

White, H.
1992   *Identity and Control*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/1

Tiny Publics, Networks, and Switching

Abstract: The structure of society is shaped within small groups, a feature of social order that we have termed "tiny publics." These tiny publics provide the basis of collective action and political change. Yet, in current sociological theorizing this meso-level of analysis has often been downplayed. In this article, we argue that classical sociological theorists, particularly Simmel, Durkheim, and Weber, recognized the essential role of small groups in political and economic life, creating a local sociology. To focus on small groups as a field of action recognizes the centrality of interaction and negotiated order as standing at the heart of the political process.

Eiko Ikegami (professor of sociology at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York) has been interested in the issue of civility and publics in non-western societies. Her book, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture* (Cambridge, 2005) won book awards in such widely different fields as Cultural Sociology, Political Sociology, and also in Asian studies. She is also the author of *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge MA, 1995).