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Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/3. Sociological Miniaturism and the Meaning of Democracy

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Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/3

Sociological Miniaturism and the Meaning of Democracy

by Massimo Rosati

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The article authored by Fine, Harrington, and Segre aims at showing basically two points: *a*) the virtues of sociological miniaturism in the understanding of politics, and *b*) its theoretical roots in classical sociology. More recent contributions to a micro-sociological approach to political sociology will be addressed, this is the authors' promise, in a subsequent article. Point *a*) is discussed by means of a theoretical illustration of the importance of tiny groups in the working of public spheres, and by means of an empirical example, while point *b*) via a short presentation of Simmel's, Durkheim's and Weber's consideration of micro-level processes within particular groups, and their effects on a broader, macrosociological level. My comments (and questions) have to do with a small range of sub-issues: 1) what exactly is a tiny group, 2) under which conditions does it foster a democratic public sphere (and so democracy at large), and – above all – 3) how should we understand the meaning of democracy from the perspective of sociological miniaturism.

1) Sociological miniaturism “assumes that processes transcend levels” of analysis [see also Stolte, Fine and Cook 2001, 388], so that it is perfectly legitimate to analyse large-scale social forces, institutions, organizations and so on, by means of the investigation of small-scale interaction domains. Sociological miniaturism is a form of sociological social psychology [*ibidem*, 389] that tries to bridge micro- and macro-sociology, by means of a “recursive” mutual foundation: macrosociology is necessary in order to “prevent claims of randomness and unpredictability,” and, in turn, microsociology is necessary to prevent bracketing agency [Fine 1991]. Sociological miniaturism's virtues – shown in details elsewhere [as its limitations too, see

Stolte, Fine and Cook 2001] – are meant to show that the micro-macro divide is in a sense misleading. Maybe it is not just a coincidence that classical sociologists “did not specialize in levels of analysis” [Fine 1991, 163], as subsequent sociologists did.

From the point of view of political sociology, sociological miniaturism has to show, as Fine, Harrington and Segre maintain in this article, how politics, even democratic politics, “ultimately depends upon the emotional entrainment, performance rituals, and impression management that occur within groups.” What the authors invite us to recognize is that “core constructs such as institutions, organizations, and social movements are grounded implicitly in theories of small group interaction,” so that we have to focus our attention on these small, sometimes very tiny publics, that provide space for the public sphere, civil society and ultimately democracy.

So far, so good. The authors’ emphasis on the socio-psychological dimension of interactions within tiny publics is a relevant way to cast a different light on those groups that concretely shape public spheres. It is a way to approach groups as “socio-psychological microcommunit(ies),” and not only as “incubator(s) of audience,” as in Habermas’ early works on the public sphere [see Fine 2004, 342 n. 4]. However, how we should conceive of tiny publics is not entirely clear to me. That they are part of public spheres, there is no doubt. They are entrenched, so to speak, within “‘third places’ [that] provide the necessary spaces in which focus talk can occur and lines of action develop.” Spaces like online chatrooms, coffeehouses, clubs and congregations are listed. In order to shape a public sphere, they have to provide “a set of known others, focused attention, shared knowledge (stories, gossip, rituals, traditions) and a space in which regular interaction can occur.” These are more or less the same features proper to, according to Randall Collins [2004, 48], interaction rituals, as they are derived from that living source that is *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (by the way, by far the most useful classical source among those discussed by the authors, at least in my understanding). What is not entirely clear to me is whether or not tiny groups require face to face interactions; whether or not physical co-presence is a necessary ingredient (as it was, strictly speaking, in the *Elementary Forms* and as it is, if I am not wrong, in Collins’ understanding). Fine and Harrington defined small groups as those groups that “depend upon personal (typically face-to-face) interaction with the recognition by participants that they constitute a meaningful social unit” [*ibidem*, 343]. Do online chatrooms satisfy this requirement? Or is face-to-face interaction not a necessary condition? I suppose the point has some relevance in order to provide a clear definition of the empirical field.

2) Discussing Durkheim’s contribution to a sociological social psychology, Fine, Harrington and Segre stress how for Durkheim society depends on “the ongoing

activity of interconnected groups participating in civic life.” However, they remind us also how in order to shape a broader social solidarity, face-to-face interaction situations have to be qualified, according to Durkheim, at least in three ways. First, they have to promote a feeling of belonging to a larger segment of society than the tiny group itself; secondly, they have to be not instrumental in nature; and, finally, they have to be under the control of the State. If these conditions are not satisfied, interaction groups do not foster civic and democratic life.

Fine, Harrington and Segre seem to rely upon Durkheim’s political sociology, above all as it is developed in the *Leçons de Sociologie*. But what happens to tiny groups when the State is not anymore the apex of society or, as Durkheim wrote, the “brain” of society? What happens when society becomes a summit-less and centre-less society, a collage of multiple global and differentiated subsystems (economy, health, education, intellectual research, professionals, politics, religions, arts and so on) that seem, for example, not to be dependent on the State to give life to constitutional processes [see Teubner 1997]? Are tiny groups still under this new condition capable of fostering civic life or not?

3) There is one last point I would like to raise, the most important one in my view. Tiny groups are crucial to democracy, as Fine and Harrington maintain [2004], because they have *framing* and *mobilization* functions. They, in other words, *create citizens* providing “essential resources – such as networks of participants and the construction of identity – and link movements to larger political and cultural themes,” providing “a space for the distribution and maintenance of collective goods,” and being themselves “an outcome of civic engagement, with participation and proliferation of groups contributing to social and political health” [Fine and Harrington 2004, 344]. The empirical example Fine and Segre discuss in their paper seems to be perfectly coherent with these assumptions.

The example in point concerns local “political party volunteers members in an upper-middle class neighbourhood St. Paul.” According to the authors’ report, the meaning of democratic involvement and participation is sharing some common practices, being together “actively engaged in the mundane-but-essential work of democracy,” more than “discussing shared ideologies or the political implications of their work.” It is a very interesting point. It seems, if I am not misreading the authors’ assumptions, that democracy is more a set of common practices than a set of common values and meanings. Values and meanings may be plural, as they are as a matter of fact in pluralist societies, and are locally defined on the basis of the collective conscience of single (even tiny) groups. Local practices may have different meanings in different local contexts, so that what brings people together are the very local prac-

tices more than thick shared meanings. Speaking of politics, it is more the day-by-day “constructing political yard signs, stuffing envelopes, or writing postcards designed to encourage political engagement in others” that produces trust and a shared feeling of supporting democracy, than shared ideologies or political discussions, judged on the contrary divisive. It is a point that shows interesting parallels with, for example religious experience, where solidarity seems to be more the outcome of local shared practices (such as liturgical rituals) within sometimes tiny communities, than of shared beliefs.

I am just wondering if my interpretation, from the authors’ point of view, is correct, or if I am not pushing the argument too far. If this is also the authors’ point of view, it shows that sociological miniaturism may have very broad implications (that I cannot discuss here) for social theory in general. Coming back to Durkheim, the point would be that of drawing all the possible consequences from what David Kertzer recognized years ago, namely that “the common reading of Durkheim, that he identified solidarity with value consensus in his interpretation of ritual, misses the strength of his argument. His genius lies in having recognized that rituals build solidarity without requiring the sharing of beliefs. Solidarity is produced by people acting together, not by people thinking together” [Kertzer 1988, 76]. It is a point discussed in depth within Durkheimian studies, as in the broader fields of religious and ritual studies. If my interpretation is correct, sociological miniaturism adds its authoritative voice to this ongoing discussion.

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Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/3

Sociological Miniaturism and the Meaning of Democracy

Abstract: Rosati's comments aim first of all at reconstructing the main lines of Fine *et al.*'s paper and the virtues of sociological miniaturism; two critical points are raised, concerning the new conditions in which tiny groups are called to foster civic life, and the relationship between common practices within tiny groups and shared ideologies.

Keywords: sociological miniaturism, public sphere, democratic life, common practices, centre-less society.

Massimo Rosati teaches History of Sociology at the University of Salerno, and Sociology at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. He authored *Solidarietà e sacro* (2002), edited the new Italian edition of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* by E. Durkheim (2005), and co-edited with W.S.F. Pickering *Suffering and Evil. The Durkheimian Legacy* (2008).