

at the grassroots level: in civic associations, activist groups and non-governmental organizations. She is one of the most influential scholars in contemporary political sociology, and her latest book makes the reasons for this very clear. In *The Politics of Volunteering*, she tackles questions such as: What is the role of volunteering and civic associations in society? How can they promote democracy?

In the beginning of the book, Eliasoph presents three different theoretical perspectives on the relationship between civic participation and democracy. The first one is represented by the work of Alexis de Tocqueville and his observations in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. In his mind, civic associations train people to be good democratic citizens, willing and able to work together for the common good. The second key thinker cited, Jane Addams, emphasized that voluntary work should go together with political activism. As a volunteer struggling to help the disadvantaged in early 20th-century Chicago, Addams realized that charitable volunteering is not enough when the “whole situation is wrong”; one also has to strive to change unfair conditions through state and legal regulation. The third theorist, Emma Goldman, who

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## Beyond the Powerful Myths About Volunteering

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In her work, Nina Eliasoph has examined political phenomena

also wrote in the early 1900s, brought the workplace into the realm of civic activity. In her view, when employees are given the power to make collective decisions on essential matters in the workplace, they learn to make decisions for the common good as well as to appreciate the work itself.

These three starting points work as guidelines for the examination of volunteering in the book. However, Eliasoph introduces a number of empirical studies on civic associations that ultimately play an even greater role in the discussion. With her impressive knowledge of the research field, she shakes “common-sense” assumptions concerning volunteering and shows, in a very persuasive way, “how wrong common sense can be” (p. 77). One of these assumptions is that volunteering could be free from politics, often seen as a complex and messy business by volunteers wanting to distance themselves from it. Eliasoph points out that civic associations have played a central role in bringing out the political nature of issues that were previously considered non-political, such as sex and the family. She reveals how voluntary work in associations, even advising people on everyday issues such as cooking and healthy eating, can relate to larger societal problems

and to questions of collective decision-making. Yet, I wish the book had gone into greater detail on the kinds of volunteering that are most readily considered non-political.

Another common assumption is that a strong welfare state causes civic activity to wither. As Eliasoph points out, there is no real evidence for this view; in fact, some nations with strong welfare states, such as the Nordic countries, have high rates of volunteering. This is not to say that a withdrawal of the state from public services and social responsibility does not sometimes indeed lead to more civic engagement, as many politicians rightly assume. However, growing civic engagement has recently also led to the political mobilization of civic associations; they cannot be expected to just quietly take care of the people abandoned by the state but will also stand up to criticize the prevailing rule. Additionally, the book offers enlightening examples of how the excessive centralization of power in the market or, in de Tocqueville’s terms, the “aristocracy of industry”, has been destructive for democracy. One example of this destructiveness are cases where voluntary projects and campaigns have been manipulated by big corporations that through sponsoring volunteers seek for their own benefit, and

a “whitewash” of their public image.

Eliasoph brings to light several problems with volunteering, especially regarding non-governmental organizations and empowerment projects, many of which evoke Addams’ call to look at the “whole situation”. NGOs and empowerment projects often focus on solving a specific and concrete problem, but close their eyes to its root cause. In addition, these actors can choose certain popular issues and targets, while other, related or important problems are ignored. These kinds of observations make it clear how and why NGOs and voluntary projects are often inadequate to replace a withdrawing welfare state. Neo-liberal thinking also brings forth many problems for civic activity. For example, voluntary projects with insecure funding are compelled to show quick and convincing results to their sponsors. As a result, projects may resort to “cherry-picking”, that is, helping those who are the easiest to help, instead of those who are the most needy. When voluntary projects work under time constraints, they also tend to fail to train participants in democratic skills. Nevertheless, Eliasoph introduces empirical examples of civic participation with promising social and democratic results. What the

projects have in common is sufficient time and money. In addition, they take seriously the complexity of the issues they are dealing with. Furthermore, the projects recognize conflicts that they contain as well as strive to solve them.

*The Politics of Volunteering* represents the kind of sociological literature that is written with both academics and a larger audience in mind. Eliasoph manages to examine challenging and complex questions with admirable clarity. In particular, the careful illustration of these issues by using concrete examples makes the book very readable. I would like to warmly recommend it to anyone involved with grassroots volunteering. Even though Eliasoph writes about political dangers and challenges related to volunteering and civic associations, she does not give a totally pessimistic view of the possibilities of grassroots groups to make society more just, and democracy work better. Rather, she invites the reader to look at the bigger picture of the problems that civic groups are tackling. Even more, I hope the book will be read by political leaders who might think civic associations and volunteers will smoothly fill the gap left by “rolling back” the state.

**Janne Autto**