



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 15(3) 2022: 1008-1018

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v15i3p1008

Published 15 November, 2022

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

BOOK REVIEW

Gary Alan Fine, *The Hinge. Civil Society, Group Cultures and the Power of Local Commitments*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021. 263 p. ISBN 978-0226745664

Practices and Institutions in Tiny Publics: Fine's Approach to a Local Analysis of Civil Society

Sebastiano Citroni
Insubria University, Como

This book invites both academic researchers and, to a certain degree, a wider non-specialist audience to reconsider the meso dimension of social life – namely, from the author's perspective, small groups' cultures and actions – and so fully grasp and acknowledge its functioning as a *hinge* that binds individuals and social structures. Through theoretical discussions, examples from popular culture and academic studies, Fine warns those interested in deepening their knowledge of current societies and their changes or specific social phenomena to avoid two mistakes that he sees as recurrent in social research. Firstly, studying societies and local communities focusing only on large institutions or on single individuals in their daily actions, and secondly, and more subtly, pursuing meso-level analysis as an end in itself (p. 5), *i.e.* ignoring how groups are embedded in local contexts and connected to other organisations at wider spatial scales.

The attention paid by Fine to different sorts of small groups – his *tiny publics* (Fine 2012) – is not just one topic among many addressed by the author. Instead, this issue lies at the very core of the author's main argument, which in a nutshell refers to the possibility of addressing groups' lives not just as a relevant domain in itself but as a privileged standpoint to highlight how the interconnections between individuals and social structures take shape. At the risk of being schematic, we can say that the book advances at least two general messages. The first concerns the benefits of a “semi-autonomous mesolevel analysis” (p. 8) of social life, and because this analysis covers a variety of tiny publics, the first message carries within it a second one – already

introduced in the author's previous works – concerning the pivotal role played by small groups in organising social life.

The small groups Fine investigates are extremely wide-ranging and not always formally structured as such: they include street corner groups, those gathering in bars and taverns, friends, terrorist cells, collaborating strangers, associations, gangs, agricultural workers, social movements, churches, parliamentary commissions, clubs, local chapters of large nonprofit organisations, mushroom collectors, voluntary groups, Internet forums, citizens' committees, crowds, Washington policy elite circles, Vermont town meetings, work colleagues, the Ku Klux Klan and anarchist formations. Clearly, not all these groups devote themselves to civic commitment or are in any way interested in what occurs outside their boundaries. Nevertheless, Fine argues that if studied both internally and in their (inevitable) external connections, they all nurture the links between individuals and institutions: they provide their participants with a sense of collective belonging, potentially empower civic engagement or civic attitudes, and sustain the social ties among groups that make up civil society. Equipped with the right lens, in small groups everyone can see a hinge between micro and macro, "personal preferences and structures" (p. 147), that gives this book its title. This clearly displays the theoretical dimension that characterises Fine's work; that is – in etymological terms – his effort to *see* apparently trivial phenomena differently, and to question and shift perspectives on them taken for granted in both common sense (e.g. the relevance of tiny publics contrasts with popular worries on the spread of individualism) and sociological thinking ("tiny publics are as significant as are persons and structures", p. 198).

The author's explicit aims include not only showing how *The Hinge* works with respect to a variety of tiny publics, but also "to provide tools and concepts for research" (p. 81), in particular offering the reader the categories to conduct the "semi-autonomous mesolevel analysis" to which the book is devoted. The pursuit of this aim shapes the overall structure of the book, in that the author has chosen to divide it up according to two criteria. The first of these is the book's division into (seven) chapters, each focused on a broad theme (which Fine calls the "building blocks" of *The Hinge*): *Coordination, Relations, Associations, Place, Conflict, Control* and *Extensions*. Each chapter introduces a theme, which is discussed theoretically and illustrated with three different empirical research studies, with a summary paragraph dedicated to each. The total of 21 empirical inquiries summarised by the author in the book were chosen to "justify the need for a local analysis of civil society" (p. 212), but also to show that the type of semi-autonomous analysis proposed by the author is already practised in a growing number of empirical studies.

The second principle underpinning the structure of the book (which Fine calls its "conceptual basis") is transversal to the division in chapters and corresponds to the four analytical strategies that the author has adopted to address each of the seven aforementioned themes. These strategies are four issues "about which the author had previously written" (p. 8): *interaction order, group culture, circuits of action* and *tiny publics*. These elements are intended by Fine to make overly broad concepts such as culture, interaction and structure more specific and to address different aspects of the linkage of micro and macro social analysis. Therefore, with respect to Fine's overall proposal of a semi-autonomous mesolevel approach, this second principle is the most prominent of the two: readers need to pay attention to *how* the seven topics are addressed, rather than the topics themselves, in other words the way the four issues listed above serve as analytical strategies for disentangling the connection between individuals and structures in tiny publics.

The Building Blocks of the Hinge

Although for the book's overall argument *what* it says (the topics addressed) is less relevant than *how* it is said (the way the chosen topics are addressed), it may nevertheless be useful to summarise the book's main

contents, especially for those who have not yet read it. I will briefly do this for each chapter, trying to highlight not just the topic addressed but also the specific nature of Fine's approach to it.

The introduction clarifies some basic assumptions that will recur in the following pages: the "expansive" definitions adopted both for politics (far "beyond voting, protesting and legislating" p. 7) and civil society (whose foundations are the relationships among groups); criticism of the Hobbesian vision that contrasts individualistic chaos with the vertical order imposed from above, and the author's alternative of a search for a civic order that stems horizontally from communal practices and relationships between tiny publics; the general idea that, although apparently irrelevant, the "little platoons" (mentioned in the quote from Edmund Burke that opens this section) constitute the fundamental link on which individuals develop large-scale identities and collective actions; and the growing awareness in contemporary social sciences of "group influence in public life" (p. 6) which will be documented through the 21 studies described in the following chapters.

Chapter 1 – *COORDINATION. The Dynamics of Collaboration and Commitment* – addresses the classic "tragedy" of the commons to discuss the limits of the rational choice approach to this issue, especially its neglecting of the socially embedded character of individuals. In particular, the author asks himself a typically interactionist question: what is the role of "interpersonal collaboration and group commitment in coordination" (p. 26) and therefore in shaping collective actions? With theoretical arguments and empirical studies on different forms of collaboration (from agricultural works to the writing of the US declaration of independence), Fine argues how collaboration does not just take shape because of personal calculation but, instead, is sustained by feelings of collective belonging, emotional ties between participants in common actions, and their willingness to carry out fluid, frictionless interaction.

Chapter 2 – *RELATIONS. Friendship and the Politics of Sociability* – focuses on friendships as an "instance of a broader issue: the social ties among citizens" (p. 58). In short, the author criticises the idea that affiliations and sociability in groups of friends are in themselves "apolitical or antipolitical" processes (p. 74), i.e. private dimensions as opposed to public ones. Instead, friendship may work as "a salient hinge between the citizen and the state" (p. 73), as philosophers such as Plato, Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault have argued and sociologists like Erving Goffman and Robert Wuthnow have convincingly illustrated. The empirical cases show how "the forms of friendship and their relation to politics differ widely" (*ibidem*): this relationship may be nurtured by the socio-economic needs of a disadvantaged community that self-organises itself to meet the basic needs of its members; or the public dimension of citizenship practices may arise from regular meetings among the elderly, where dissent may be expressed openly as it does not threaten the group's survival; or it may refer to the highly relevant policy influences exerted by a circle of colleagues over parties and other fun occasions.

Chapter 3 – *ASSOCIATIONS. Bonding, Banding and Bridging* – frames its theme in terms of an intermediate level "between the informal coordination of mutually aware actors and the formal, institutionalized bureaucracy" (p. 97). While the author widely recognises the crucial role associations play in establishing local civic engagement and how they are a "pivot for action and order", their dark side is also discussed at length in the chapter. Just as friendship may foster political commitment, so volunteering may nurture withdrawal from public engagement (Eliasoph 1998) and the development of what Robert Putnam called social capital may result in "banding" processes that create fragmented and polarised societies where a variety of exclusionary processes are prompted by self-segregating identity-based groups (Kaufman 2002).

Chapter 4 – *PLACE. Performance and Solidarity* – illustrates how civic commitment and collective actions unfold in situated performances, not in abstract terms. The point is to underline the non-neutral role played by space, as specific places legitimise certain collective actions and not others, allowing citizens to join together

through a limited repertoire of forms of sociability. The often-romanticised New England town meetings, the two-week summer camp for a heterogenous San Francisco Bay elite, English coffeehouses and French saloons, show the ambivalence of places for the development of civil society, as they serve both to open it up and to draw exclusionary boundaries, to emancipate it and to enact state control.

Chapter 5 – *CONFLICT. Scratching Consensus's Veneer* – problematises the idea that actors in interactions are always engaged in saving face, in other words seeking smooth and easy exchanges that avoid tension and dissent. Instead, open conflicts arise and may work as a “foundational aspect of social order and group culture” (p. 148). Given that “conflict, like consensus, does not inevitably strengthen communal life”, Fine asks himself “under what circumstances does conflict serve as a hinge connecting the individual and the institutional?” (p. 125). The three selected empirical cases illustrate the answer: when participants share and respect conflicts’ rules and procedures, and “accept their rhythm, tenor and moodiness” (p. 129).

Chapter 6 – *CONTROL. Patrolling Civil Society* – assumes that “social control, operating in local contexts, is part of all organized social systems” (p. 150). The point of the chapter is to argue how this control is implemented through tiny publics, both in democratic societies and authoritarian political regimes. In both cases, “control is not imposed from outside but involves collaboration” (p. 155), which unfolds through the activation of networks and group actions. The empirical illustrations delve into organisations’ lives to show their everyday working as “loosely coupled structures” in “which power is necessarily embedded in social relations” (p. 172).

Chapter 7 – *EXTENSIONS. Tiny Publics and Distant Worlds* – warns how “focusing on small groups to the exclusion of larger communities is misleading” (p. 196). Instead, groups must be examined in the wider environment in which they operate and to which they are connected through a variety of different extensions, including digital communication. The author’s processual approach to the whole book deployed by the author throughout the whole book is particularly fertile in this chapter: instead of speaking generically about “extensions”, Fine focuses on “extension work”, in other words the social construction of links that move “local concerns into a broader civic sphere” (p. 196). New forms of online communication are given specific attention as they “aid this process of extension, and allow participants to transcend local spaces” (p. 196). Moreover, the media supply the material the small groups discuss and thus “establish shared awareness for tiny publics” (p. 196), which, as I will explore below, is a crucial feature of Fine’s argument. The empirical cases show heterogenous groups engaged in different forms of extension work: from the Arab Spring to online political discussions, terrorism cells and democratic activists.

The conclusion summarises the content of the previous pages with respect to the two aforementioned principles that give the book its structure: the seven themes addressed by the chapters and the four “analytical strategies” that run throughout the volume. The afterword was written in May 2020, a few weeks after the outbreak of Covid-19, and is titled *The Covid Hinge*, as the pandemic is deemed as a possible turning point that – superseding September 11 for the USA – separates and at the same time connects a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ it. In this final section the author explores if and how the pandemic questions the importance of the group dimension as a meso level that acts as a hinge between the individual and institutions. Given the period in which this last section was written, the answer is necessarily pursued through the author’s suppositions and asserts that the strength of the “tiny publics in ordering society” would not cease (p. 220): even if the pandemic were to become a permanent feature, group life would continue to work as a hinge and its relevance could become even greater than in the past.

Each of the seven chapters seeks to show its subject as a meso-level realm that functions as a hinge between micro and macro. In particular, *Collaboration* reveals how group coordination works and hints at the collective

benefits of people working in concert (p. 49). “*Friendship* [...] creates a hinge between persons and institutions that sustains civil society” (p. 205). *Associations* work as a hinge in various senses: they “commit individuals to a civic system” (p. 76), create areas of conviviality, belonging and expressiveness for its participants; and they articulate the link between local and national and between spheres of action such as voluntary and government action that, seen up close, are much less distinct than one may have thought (Lichterman 2021). Taking seriously *space* shows how a “mesothory of group culture is not in the mind but on the stage: set in scenes” (p. 107); given that “civil society is spatially organized” (p. 100), space is the basic hinge, a condition that connects individuals in performances and joint actions. “*Conflict* is central to the metaphor of *The Hinge*” (p. 135) because it cements internal solidarity, it relates changes to the status quo, and is “one of the mechanisms by which groups formulate their relations with others” (p. 126). *Social control*, both in its vertical authoritarian version and in its democratic one, features in the basic mechanism through which individuals belong to general orders, as both stability and social order take shape through collective actions and relationships among groups. Finally, *Extensions* and in particular digital communication offer their users powerful new hinges to connect tiny publics at growing scales, although the nature of this type of hinge is highly controversial, as it offers new possibilities of action but also new risks of control (p. 180).

This Book as Hinge: five features

In addition to this first concept of hinge, openly declared by the author in relation to the different topics he addresses in each chapter, the same metaphor has a second, more hidden meaning, relating to the book itself and the type of operation it proposes to its readers. The elegant but simple writing style the author adopts, his efforts to popularise 21 pieces of empirical academic research, and the clarity with which he proposes the main argument and reiterates it with respect to a variety of domains all mean this book potentially works as a hinge or junction itself, in at least two respects. Firstly, it positions itself at the intersection of different research strands that normally do not communicate with one another much, such as symbolic interactionism and ethnography on the one hand and, on the other, those studying social institutions or personal interests and preferences. Indeed, the book pushes those studying interactions to look beyond their boundaries (both at wider scales and at people), and those committed to the study of social structures and individuals to dwell on situated exchanges and the interaction order. Secondly, and even more ambitiously, the book may appeal to a general audience interested in social research, thus connecting academic specialists – e.g. the authors of the 21 studies reported – with the wider public, which may find this book a relatively easy access point to otherwise more demanding texts. The author’s arguments therefore walk a tightrope between different (not necessarily tiny) publics. As I will discuss in more detail below, this is potentially risky, as it presents the danger of disappointing the different audiences the book addresses. The author seems to be well aware of this risk, as he claims to be dealing with a theme that is not particularly original (p. 198) and it is true that, for example, back in 1949 Talcott Parsons proposed interaction as an “independent domain that interacts with the other two [...], the individual level and the level of social structure” (Rawls 2022 p. 47). What is original in Fine’s overall proposal is the way its semi-autonomous meso-level analysis is advanced, and in particular the way it is fashioned to address a variety of empirical domains and publics, academic and non-specialist alike.

In addition to the above, there are at least five features of Fines’ proposal that deserve a mention. First, as scholars of Goffman may well expect, the author’s semi-autonomous meso-level analysis is firmly in the Durkheimian tradition: indeed, it draws on Goffman’s categories (e.g. Interaction Order) and clearly shows how their adoption led to a sociology that challenges the micro/macro division with its focus on constitutive practices that make fragile social facts (Ibidem). It is perhaps no coincidence that, in addition to Goffman, Fine

cites authors who mobilised a dramaturgical perspective prior to the well-known interaction sociologist, including Nicolas Evreinoff, a writer capable of showing the fragility of social life when observed from close-up. One of the original features of Fine's proposal is the way he uses and develops Goffman's categories in a way that makes their Durkheimian matrix most evident (Keck 2012; Giglioli 1969).

Second, in addition to Émile Durkheim, another classic reference that reveals the originality of Fine's approach is Georg Simmel and his formal sociology (Simmel 1983), with the associated heightened sensitivity to the shapes of group actions, not just their contents. In both this and his previous works, Fine theorises and directly practices a Simmelian analysis, where the forms of social exchange are relatively independent from their contents to which they nevertheless must refer. Although the attention to forms does not imply neglect of the contents, it is evident in Fine's book that the former is of primary importance. This can be seen in the type of argument Fine makes, continually juxtaposing groups with vastly different contents such as, for example, Jihadist cells and democratic activists, the Ku Klux Klan and anarchist groups. This prominence is even openly declared by the author himself, for example when he borrows Karl Marx's categories to argue that "the order of interaction is the structure, while the group culture is the superstructure" (p. 200).

A third element that characterises Fine's *Hinge* is his effort to provide an overview in the tradition of the grand narratives of twentieth-century sociology, but without losing the analytical depth and descriptive subtleties of interaction studies. Since at least the mid-1980s, various sociology scholars have made similar efforts following different approaches, in a common but heterogeneous struggle to reconnect practices and institutions. Fine's effort in this direction is not confined to this book, but here the originality of his take is probably clearer than in his other works: its focus on the mesolevel to show its incompleteness, and how the functioning of this domain – and especially group actions – needs to consider both individuals and the social structures it is linked to. The eclectic way Fine pursues this effort, and his ability to hold together scholars and approaches that generally do not communicate with each other recalls Richard Sennett's writing style in his book *Together* (2013), especially regarding the collaboration dynamics *The Hinge* addresses in its first part.

A fourth key element of Fine's approach is the non-dualistic – or oppositional – way in which the author approaches the relationship between practices and social structures, and more broadly the general classical sociological issue of institutionalisation. This matter is central to *The Hinge*, but not in an open or self-evident way; instead, the relevance of the institutionalisation process emerges subtly and shapes the rhythm of Fine's argumentation throughout the whole book. Indeed, especially in the first part, the themes addressed in each chapter reveal a growing degree of institutional character: from the collaboration between strangers in chapter 1, to relations of familiarity, friendship and kinship in chapter 2, before moving on to more formal and structured ones like those among the members of an association in chapter 3. The four "analytical strategies" discussed by Fine are particularly ordered in institutionalisation terms: from the ephemeral (but not random) dimension of the interaction order, to the recurrent models of group cultures, the routines of the circuits of action, through to the relative stability of the tiny publics, with their lasting character. Crucially, despite this centrality, the category of institutionalisation is never openly mentioned. This is not simply a stylistic choice to avoid specialist jargon; it is an epistemological decision to avoid facing the issue head on, instead preferring to tackle it indirectly. This is evident, for example, in the way the four analytical strategies are not considered separately, but rather by insisting on the connections between them (p. 202): avoiding contrasting the practices and the institutions but, on the contrary, insisting on their continuities and dense intertwining. This orientation is seen throughout the book, and in some passages it emerges openly, such as when Fine argues that "microlocal action and extralocal structures fit together with each operating in light of the other's constraints" (p. 3). In other passages, the same non-binary conception of practices and institutions appears more indirectly: for example, when Fine speaks of the institutionalisation of actions into "circuits of action" or with respect to the

“extensions” of local dimensions into wider networks. Essentially, Fine’s emphasis on how “groups constitute the fundamental foundation of social order” (p. 200) unfolds in a semi-autonomous meso-level analysis that systematically avoids any sterile individual/structure dualism. This is an important lesson not only in general cultural terms (de Leonardis 2009; Esposito 2021) but especially with specific reference to the theme of civil society Fine is interested in: indeed, many of the research trends that study this wide and heterogenous realm – e.g. third sector or social movements studies – are still widely informed by the opposition between bottom-up practices and top-down structures, movements and institutions (Alberoni 1984).

A fifth and final element that characterises Fines’ proposal is again not overtly evident but, nevertheless, is mentioned by the author in some passages of apparently secondary importance. This is the reflexive character (de Leonardis 2009) of group lives as a necessary condition that makes the meso realm of social life fully develop the public and civic dimensions Fine attributes to it, especially in terms of what he defines the “Civic Hinge” and its ability to order society. There are at least two points in Fine’s book where this message is particularly clear: the first is when, speaking about the collective memory that groups’ participants create through social media, Fine stresses the relevance of this creation as “it establishes shared awareness for tiny publics” (p. 196). The second passage is when – in the final lines of the book before the Afterword – Fine states “adherence to the local depends on awareness of an extended world. This recognition is the Hinge on which civil society depends” (p. 215). György Lukács’ distinction between the social class in itself and the class for itself resonates in these words, with a pivotal role attributed to the self-recognition process, in this case with respect to “the power of tiny publics to create civic culture” (Ibidem).

Walking on a Tightrope

Fine’s decision to adopt a position on the border between different audiences, as discussed above, lends itself to criticism from those within the specialist niches of each of the seven themes addressed in each chapter. As this would lead far away from the author’s intentions, it is instead more relevant to discuss this book with respect to the author’s format choices and how they may support this work’s effective functioning as a hinge between different scholars’ realms. In particular, it is possible to hint at four elements of Fine’s book that are useful for discerning which options the author adopted and which he discarded, and therefore what kind of operation Fine proposes to his readers.

The first such element concerns the almost exclusive US focus of the 21 studies illustrated, the examples and empirical references mobilised by Fine throughout the book. It may be that most American popular culture references – e.g. *Mad Men*, Hilary Clinton’s book and *Burning Man* – are probably known internationally. Nevertheless, the meanings of some fundamental categories on which Fine bases his arguments – such as local communities or the role played by interpersonal ties in official politics – changes significantly outside the US, and taking this into account would have helped the book act as a hinge for non-US audiences.

Secondly, Fine discusses a variety of empirical studies that, on the one hand, converge in showing how the meso level functions as a hinge among a variety of social domains; on the other hand, the same studies differ in terms of the topics addressed and, most importantly, the approaches they develop. In particular, they diverge in one aspect that is crucial for Fine’s Hinge: the assumptions regarding how joint actions connect individuals and social structures, and so how researchers may empirically grasp the semi-autonomous nature of the meso level on which Fine focuses his attention. Many of the empirical studies that Fine uses are – to different degrees – informed by Ann Swidler’s conception of culture as a toolkit (Swidler 1984), but they develop this general

conception into a variety of options, which could have been traced back to specific research strands with differing heuristic practices (styles, scripts, codes, patterns of interactions, etc...) and thus their link to broad institutions. Given the centrality of this link in Fine's proposal, it would have been useful if these differences had been openly thematised, clarified and systematised. At the same time, we need to recognise that this point is not easy to grasp, as it concerns epistemology and strategies of "totalization of the ethnographic data" (Baszanger, Dodier 2006). Therefore, to openly address this point would probably have made the book less attractive for a non-specialised audience.

A third characteristic that is worth highlighting to clarify the specific approach in *The Hinge* concerns an apparent contradiction in Fine's proposal regarding the relationships between, on the one hand, its aims (showing the benefits of a semi-autonomous meso-level analysis) and, on the other hand, the accessible format adopted to pursue it, diverse and potentially appealing to a non-academic audience. In particular, the fact it presents 21 empirical studies in seven chapters does a great service to the studies and gives the book a varied and fast pace. At the same time, however, these same characteristics also hinder its potential to demonstrate the functioning of the semi-autonomous meso-level analysis in detail, or to illustrate in depth the links between this dimension and individuals and structures. Here, once again, it seems the author leans towards accessibility over analytical depth, inevitably running the risk of causing the latter to suffer.

The fourth and final element also concerns the same equilibria, and refers to the apparently loose adoption of the term 'civic', which is used interchangeably with the word 'civil'. This is a central aspect in the focus adopted by the book, given its subject is often defined in terms of a "Civic Hinge" (p. 7) and its interest in "civil society" is made explicit right from the subtitle of the book.

It is true that from the outset the author declares that he intentionally uses these words in an open and loose way; at the same time, Fine adopts a specific definition of civil society he is interested in, with respect to exchanges and ties that link different civic groups together, thus aligning himself with previous scholarship on this subject matter (Cohen 1994; Diani 2015). Nevertheless, throughout the book, the expression 'civil society' seems to coincide with the idea of political society, thus taking on the original meaning of this expression used to oppose the 'state of nature' by natural law theorists like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the 17th century. It may not be a coincidence that Hobbes is among the most recurrent references in the book, even if it is to criticise *Leviathan's* vertical order and provide a horizontal one resulting from within society as an alternative. Another confirmation in this respect is the fact that such an order resulting from "communal practices" is sometimes termed as a "civic order" (p. 8): that is, the challenge to Hobbes' view posed by Fine (the relevance of the meso level against an exclusive focus on individuals and institutions) unfolds in the very same terrain as Hobbes' arguments, sharing the ground established by his categories in order to be more effective (Boltanski, Chiappello 2005).

The point is that Fine's use of the notion of 'civic' is so broad that it ends up including everything and loses its specificity and capacity for connotation: civic structure, civic realm, civic commitment and civic groups are all categories consistent with Hobbes' criticism in his own terms, but their meanings end up being too stretched and wide. For example, the category of 'civic groups' is also used to refer to violent gangs, as Fine says that "gangs may be the most spatially sensitive of all civic groups" (p. 106). Here one can see the author's Simmelian formal sensitivity and his intention to underline the public relevance of groups that apparently have little or no connection with civil society (such as the mushroom collectors Fine has studied). But in similar cases he risks neutralising the strength of a well-stratified notion such as that of the civic dimension, on which there is a specific US theoretical tradition that dates back at least to John Dewey and that has recently supported trailblazing research advancements (Frega 2019) and ethnographic outcomes (Lichterman, Eliasoph 2014).

The Benefits of a Risky Positioning

As already mentioned, in this book Fine sits on the border between two poles, on the one hand cultural sociologists and ethnographers and, on the other hand, other types of scholars or even non-specialists interested in social research and public life. This position is consistent with the arguments proposed in the book and especially supports the possibility that the work itself may act as a hinge between different audiences. At the same time, this is a difficult position, which exposes Fine to the risk of disappointing colleagues and being misunderstood by the wider public. For example, its main argument about group actions as a semi-autonomous meso-level domain seems to be at odds with two of Goffman's main conceptual pillars: firstly in its focus on Interaction Order and secondly in its pursuit of an alternative sociology of interaction that goes beyond micro/macro divisions, instead offering quite the opposite. As far as the former aspect is concerned, as recently illustrated by Anne Rawls (2022), unlike Harvey Sacks and Harold Garfinkel, Goffman insisted that to "locate the meaning of a social fact" (such as suicide) there is some "further reality" (ivi p. 52) beyond that available to the participants in the situation. Regarding the latter, Fine very rarely uses the terms micro and macro, and when he does so it is to quote other scholars or to insist on how his meso theory of group culture and actions requires a semi-autonomous analysis, equipped with moving scales of observation. When Fine does refer to micro and macro, it is to clarify what he means, and consistently with Goffman's approach, the words are never reified, i.e. assumed to be independent from the viewpoints adopted to discuss them.

The risks of being misunderstood diminish drastically when Fine does not discuss and try to clarify his approach to the semi-autonomous meso level, but instead directly practises it and allows the reader to appreciate it through its functioning. This partially occurs when Fine refers to his own empirical studies and in a variety of seemingly trivial passages, for example, when the author in few words hints at a specific theory of cultural change of group action:

"behavioural routines that provide consistent expectations for participants – while occurring in local spaces, can potentially diffuse as individuals participate in numerous such scenes: family, church, neighborhood, club, team, school, and workplace [...] Because organizations are isomorphic, having similar structures [...], the routines in one locale are often duplicated in others." (p. 3)

Although it may appear to be common sense, this passage resonates strongly with Antonio Gramsci's view of what he termed "group ethics" and their "universalising tendency" (Gramsci 1997 p. 285): both scholars, indeed, pave the way to a subtle cultural approach to civil society's functioning (Citroni 2020a), that locates its political value both outside and within the ordinary practices of everyday group life (Citroni 2020b; 2022).

This is just one example of the fertility of Fine's approach, and of the fact that its potential benefits outweigh the risks he ran of being criticised and misunderstood by the different audiences *The Hinge* can potentially connect. Indeed, for academic experts constantly threatened with becoming what Weber (2004) called "specialists without spirit", this book represents a great opportunity to move beyond or revise their own subfield of expertise and try to connect with new research strands: not just a generic invitation to take groups' lives seriously, but also a reminder to those already doing so not to limit themselves to such work but also to connect it to individuals and social structures. For the general public, Fine advances an optimistic view that focusing on group action and its power in ordering society invites us to question the darkest views on current societies, distancing ourselves both from those centred on the relentless spread of individualism and those that point to structural economic, cultural and political macroprocesses and their uncontrollable forces over individuals.

References

- Alberoni, F. (1984[1977]) *Movement and Institution*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Baszanger, I. Dodier, N. (2006) 'Ethnography. Relating the part to the whole' in Silverman, D. (ed.) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 9-34.
- Boltanski, L. Chiappello, E. (2005[1999]) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London-New York: Verso.
- Citroni, S. (2020a) 'Civil Society Events: Ambiguities and the Exertion of Cultural Power', *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 7(2), pp. 150-171.
- Citroni, S. (2020b) 'Water Socialisation at the Grass Roots. Prefiguration in Civic Action Styles', *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, n.2, pp. 329-353.
- Citroni, S. (2022) *L'associarsi quotidiano. Terzo settore in cambiamento e società civile*. Milano: Meltemi.
- Cohen, J. L. (2002) *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press.
- De Leonardis, O. (2009) *Le istituzioni. Come e perché parlarne*. Roma: Carocci.
- Diani, M. (2015) *The Cement of Civil Society*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Eliasoph, N. (1998) *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Esposito, R. (2021) *Istituzione*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Fine, G. A. (2012) *Tiny Publics: a Theory of Group Culture and Group Action*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Frega, R. (2019) *Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy*. London: Springer.
- Giglioli, P. P. (1969) 'Prefazione', in Goffman E. *La vita quotidiana come rappresentazione*. Bologna: il Mulino, pp. 9-10.
- Gramsci, A. (1997) *Pensare la democrazia. Antologia dai Quaderni del carcere* a cura di Marcello Montanari, Torino: Einaudi.
- Kaufman, J. (2002) *For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Keck, F. (2012) 'Goffman, Durkheim and the Rituals of Daily Life', *Archives de Philosophie* 75, pp. 471-492.
- Lichterman, P. Eliasoph, N. (2014) 'Civic Action', *The American Journal of Sociology* 120(3), pp. 798-863.
- Lichterman, P. (2021) *How Civic Action Works. Fighting for Housing in Los Angeles*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Rawls, A. (2022) 'Situating Goffman's «Interaction Orders» in Durkheim's social fact lineage. Grounding an alternate sociology of modernity in heightened awareness of interaction', *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa* 1/2022, pp. 27-62.
- Sennett, R. (2013) *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. London: Penguin.
- Simmel, G. (1983[1917]) *Forme e giochi di società*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Swidler, A. (1984) 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies', *American Sociological Review* 51(2), pp. 273-286.
- Weber, M. (2004) *La scienza come professione. La politica come professione*. Torino: Einaudi.

Author's Information:

Sebastiano Citroni is associate professor in Cultural Sociology at the Insubria University, Department of Law, Economics and Cultures, in Como (Italy). Holder of a doctorate in European Urban and Local Studies from Bicocca University, he was visiting scholar at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and he is currently part of the editorial board of the journal *Ethnography and Qualitative Research* (edited by il Mulino). His recent publications include "Civil Society Events" (*European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 2020), "The Emerging Civil Society. Governing Through Leisure Activism" (*Leisure Studies*, 2020), "Water Socialisation at the Grass Roots. Prefiguration in Civic Action Styles" (*Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 2020) and the book "Inclusive Togetherness" (*La Scuola*, 2015).

