



Engaging

(for) Social
Change

Towards New Forms
of Collective Action

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Collective Action

Edited by
Marjan Ivković
and Srđan Prodanović

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Social Engagement, Volunteering and Activism: Boundaries and Overlaps

Bojana Radovanović
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory,
University of Belgrade

Introduction

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Engagement entails a combination of attention and activity (Berger 2011). Etymologically, the noun *engagement* is related to the French verb *engager*, which means to bind or commit. We can be engaged as individuals (for example in our intellectual pursuits) or as collectives when we join forces with others for the same cause. Engagement may be turned towards and bring about social change, but it may as well be focused on the preservation of existing rules.

Civic (or civil, or citizen) engagement, a term that is most common in literature, refers to acting towards the amelioration of community concerns from a felt civic duty, responsibility or obligation, and it is usually equated with the term civic participation or civic involvement (Smith, Stebbins, Dover 2006). The term civic engagement (and synonyms) has been used more broadly by some to include all forms of volunteering, formal and informal, association participation, charitable giving, pro-environmental and various political and social behaviours (Cnaan and Park 2016).

Civic engagement has thus become a buzzword, both within academia and in public discourse. While encompassing many forms of behaviour, it does not clarify much. To avoid its ambiguity, Berger introduces three types of engagement: *political*, when the attention and activity are focused on influencing government actions, *associational or social*, referring to all forms of associational life without a political object, and *moral* that encompasses attention to and activity in support of a particular moral principle (Berger 2011).

Yet another concept that utilizes the term engagement, while avoiding the vagueness of civic engagement, has been developed – namely, the concept of *social engagement*. Starting from the assumption that the analytical potential of the concept of social engagement has not been fully realized in the modern humanities and social sciences so far, the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory focuses on the complex task of its conceptualization and operationalization.

The starting premise is that social engagement is always directed towards the other (person, group), and thus fundamentally a social phenomenon. Social engagement is conceived as a spectrum of ways in which citizens reflect on values, norms and rules of their own actions which form the basis of their institutional order and the whole social reality. On the basis of this reflection, citizens then act - either in the direction of changing certain norms and values, or in the direction of their preservation and empowerment. Thus, social engagement encompasses any collective practice that is characterized by a dual movement in a constitutive way: 1) reflecting on existing social values, norms and rules of action, and 2) acting in the direction of their change or preservation.

This paper endeavours to contribute to the conceptualization of social engagement, and particularly to its operationalization. More precisely, it aims at specifying what counts as socially engaged practice, and in what ways such practices are similar to, or different from, the activities that are called volunteering and activism. Some of the questions it addresses encompass: are volunteering and activism forms of social engagement? When is volunteering socially engaged? Is activism always socially engaged?

Volunteering

Volunteering is defined as an activity when time, labour and expertise are given freely to benefit another person, group or cause (Cnaan and Amroffell 1994, Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth 1996). There is little consensus in the literature over what counts as volunteering. The definitions of volunteering vary along four axes: 1) free will; 2) availability and nature of remuneration; 3) the proximity to the beneficiaries; and 4) formal agency (Hustinx et al. 2010).

Volunteering is a voluntary action, meaning that it is not required by law or done in response to threats, blackmail or other forms of coercion. There are no sanctions in terms of material fines or incarceration for refraining from volunteering. However, people often feel obligated to do something for the benefit of others or the common cause. We may consider it our (moral) duty to help those in need. Also, we may so strongly feel for the troubles of another that this compels us to provide aid. This is experienced as a form of internal pressure, where sanctions are in the form of guilt or remorse (Bowles and Gintis 2011, Richerson and Boyd 2005). In addition, our reputation often depends on whether we are helpful and there are certain social sanctions to

refusing to help, such as exclusion from the group (*ibid.*). Moreover, volunteering can be compelled by strong normative expectations to do so (Komter 2005). That is, we feel social or peer pressure to aid others. Since there are often certain internal and external pressures which compel us to dedicate our time for the benefit of others, volunteering is often somewhere between free choice and coercion. For such activities, Sebbins (2004) introduces the concept of obligation: “People are obligated when, even though not actually coerced by an external force, they do or refrain from doing something because they feel bound in this regard by promise, convention or circumstances” (Sebbins 2004: 7). However, it is an “agreeable obligation” (Rochester et al. 2010: 21), which in comparison to work or personal life is rather flexible.

Volunteering is not financially remunerated. Unlike market exchange, volunteering is not followed by a return favour, at least not immediately. However, organizations sometimes cover some of the costs related to volunteering, for example transportation costs. Material pay-back for volunteering, however, is not equivalent to the service provided nor is it the main reason for giving one’s time (Smith and Van Puyvelde 2016). When one gives her time, labour and expertise to benefit people she knows, it is usually done within a “gift relationship”, which implies expectations of gratitude and a return gift (Komter 2005). One can enter the gift relationship in order to gain more than she gives. However, since this return favour comes with a time lag, every instance of giving is experienced as a separate, non-compensated gift.

Although most scholars count only activities aimed at benefiting strangers, there are also those who under the term volunteering consider giving between individuals who know each other, while excluding household members (Hustinx et al. 2010, UNV 2001, Smith et al. 2016). It is also

recognized that, though volunteering should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, it can bring significant benefit to the volunteer as well (UNV 1999). The benefit that volunteer gets can range from subjective wellbeing through the increased reputation, to gaining skills valuable at the job market.

Finally, most scholars include under volunteering only time dedicated to formal organizations (non-profit organizations or other institutions). For example, Musick and Wilson (2008) and Wilson (2012) count under the term volunteering voluntary, unpaid, formal and public activities which benefit strangers. Public and formal volunteering is in this view distinguished from providing direct help. Should one for example prepare meals for an ill and elderly neighbour, this activity according to Musick and Wilson (2008) and Wilson (2012) is not viewed as volunteering, while cooking meals in the shelter for homeless counts as volunteering.

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However, there are definitions of volunteering which include informal practices of helping people directly, such as those definitions developed by the United Nations Volunteers in the *Expert working group meeting on volunteering and social development* (1999) and the International Labour Organization in the *Manual on the Measurements of Volunteer Work* (2011). Another encompassing definition of volunteering is offered by Smith (2016), who defines this phenomenon as “(a) a noncompulsory, voluntary (free will) activity or effort that is (b) directed by an individual toward a person, people, or situations outside one’s household or close family that is (c) intended to be beneficial to another person or persons, group/organization, the local community, the larger society, and/or the ecosystem at some scale of magnitude, (d) with the activity being unpaid (unremunerated) financially or in-kind to the full, current, market value of the activity performed, leaving a *net cost* to the volunteer.” (Smith and Van Puyvelde 2016: 61).

Those who count direct help within the concept of volunteering, usually make an analytical distinction between formal and informal volunteering (Leigh et al. 2011). While formal volunteering is managed and coordinated through formal organizations (association, non-profit organization, etc.), informal is carried out through loosely organized groups, often spontaneously gathered to address certain problem, or through initiatives of individuals. Thus, volunteering can take different forms, more or less institutionalized.

Finally, an important issue related to volunteering is the *motive* behind it. Motivation refers to a psychological process that triggers behaviour towards achieving a goal in a given situation (Batson 2011). The goal of volunteering is to benefit the others or to provide a common good. However, this can be the final (ultimate) goal, when we talk about *altruistic motivation*. It can also be only an instrument for reaching some benefits for oneself, for example in terms of psychological benefits, good reputation or gaining work experiences, when volunteering is motivated by *egoistic concerns*. In other words, although the aim of volunteering is the welfare of others, it is not necessarily done from an altruistic motivation. Nevertheless, volunteering always means going beyond oneself and meeting the needs of others.

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Activism

While there are ample definitions of volunteering, there is a lack of definitions of activism. *Activism* is usually seen as a voluntary action oriented toward reform (Smith et al. 2006), or an individual activity within social movement group/organization (Mati et al. 2016). The causes activism is oriented

towards can range from minorities' rights protection, safe working conditions to world peace, while the activity may be a boycott, protest marches, canvassing etc.

Concepts of volunteering and activism have developed independently from each other (Musick and Wilson 2008), even conflicting each other. Volunteering is related to the studies of voluntary associations and organizations and activism is associated with studies of social movements (ibid).

The main distinction between volunteering and activism is based on the distinction between political and non-political voluntary action. Activism is usually related to "contentious politics", which appears when "collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents around their claims or the claims of those they claim to represent" (Tarrow 2011:4). Unlike activism, volunteering is predominantly seen as not belonging to the world of political struggle. Scholars of volunteering have traditionally excluded political voluntary actions, especially more contentious social movements and collective activist-protest volunteering (Mati et al. 2016).

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While volunteering is seen as focusing on ameliorating individual problems through the provision of services, activism is perceived as oriented to broader social change (Leete 2006). Volunteering offers short-term solutions to the societal problems that target people, while activism provides long-term solutions that target structures and that would be built into official institutions (Musick and Wilson 2008).

Empirical studies show that the distinction between volunteering and activism is real to many people and that they choose between them, adopting the identity of one and rejecting the other (ibid.). Also, the distinction between volunteering and activism is implied by the way in which governments treat voluntary organizations, where tax

exempt status in many countries is granted only to those organizations that refrain from lobbying, issuing propaganda, and other political activity (ibid.).

To distinguish between a typical activity of volunteering from that of activism, let us examine the following example. There is a polluted river bank in a town. Faced with such a problem, an environmental non-profit organization initiates the action of cleaning the garbage, asking the local inhabitants to join the action. Those who join it are volunteering. Alternatively, the environmental non-profit could organize a street march calling for the reform in the environmental legislation, which would make polluters accountable. This is an example of activism. While cleaning the local river would make one river cleaner, introduction of a new legislation would potentially make the whole country cleaner. Despite their differences, it could also be argued that both kinds of activities are means towards the same end – cleaner environment. They are both voluntary activities for the common good. What prevents us from considering the street march as volunteering is the so-called “dominant paradigm” within which we analyze volunteering.

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Paradigms and Typologies of Volunteering

Rochester et al. (2010) distinguish between three paradigms of volunteering. These perspectives of volunteering differ alongside four aspects: 1) motivation for volunteering, 2) areas of activity, 3) organizational context and 4) volunteer roles (Rochester et al. 2010).

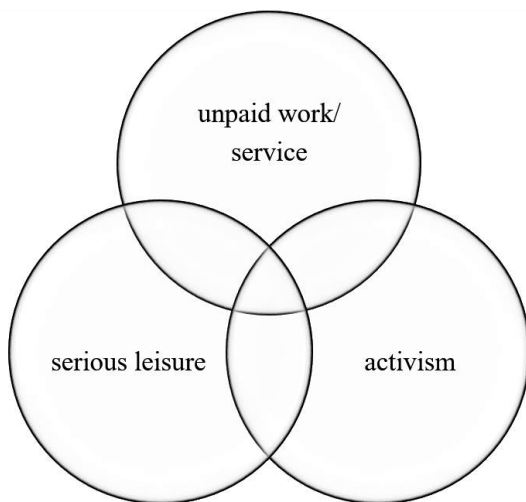
In the first – the *dominant or non-profit paradigm*, volunteering is seen as altruistic and philanthropic service to those in need, where people become volunteers in order to

help others (ibid.). It is a part of social welfare; it provides care and support for the vulnerable group. The organizational context under which volunteering occurs are large, formal and professionally staffed organizations, where the volunteer work is defined in advance. Volunteering is thus seen as unpaid work or service.

The *civil society paradigm* has a different view of volunteering (ibid). Mutual aid and the ability of people to address the common problems together are seen as the main drivers of volunteering. Instead of offering care for others, volunteers offer each other mutual support in self-help groups or through campaigning for improvements in the welfare provision. Rather than through non-profit organizations with paid management and professional staff, volunteering happens in the associations and grass-roots organizations, as well as through the self-help and community groups, which rely entirely on volunteer work, where work is rather seen as activism than as unpaid labour.

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In the third view, volunteering is seen as *serious leisure* (ibid.). Motivation is seen in an intrinsic satisfaction of volunteering. Leisure volunteers are usually involved in arts, culture and sports, while the organizational contexts include arts-culture or sports-recreation organizations, which may be large and complex organizations, but also small, local groups. The main volunteer work of leisure volunteers is related to performance and participation, but volunteer activities may also include teaching and coaching, acting as directors and coordinators, administrative tasks, etc.

Figure 2.

Source: Rochester et. al. 2010

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Volunteering is thus unpaid work, activism, and leisure. The conceptual map of this kind has two important roles. On the one hand, it ensures that when analyzing volunteering, especially when performing empirical analyses and measurements, none of the activities through which volunteering is expressed is left out. On the other, making a distinction between different forms of volunteering ensures that different theoretical frameworks are applied for their explanation.

Apart from these three paradigms, there are also many typologies of volunteering. For example, Smith distinguishes between five types of volunteering: 1) traditional service type, 2) mutual aid type, 3) leisure type, 4) conventional political engagement, 5) activism, 6) religious, and 7) occupational support (Smith et al 2016).

In order to encompass the full range of diverse voluntary actions, United Nations Volunteers make a distinction

between four broad types of volunteering: 1) mutual aid or self-help, 2) philanthropy or service to others, 3) campaigning and advocacy, and 4) participation and self-governance (UNV 2001). Each type of volunteering can be formal - coordinated and managed by an organization, or informal - carried out through informal groups, spontaneous action, or individual initiative (Butcher and Einolf 2017).

In short, voluntary activities may vary from preparing meals at the shelter for homeless people, providing free of charge legal advice in a trade union, unpaid acting as a referee at a volleyball play, participation in a street march, cooking a meal for a sick neighbour, etc.

While unpaid labour is different from activism, both types of activities are in fact voluntary actions for others without a compensation, and thus forms of volunteering. Therefore, the illustration of the boundaries and overlaps between volunteering and activism can be presented as in the Figure 3. How social engagement fits in the picture will be clearer after the examination of this concept in the next section.

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Figure 3.



Social engagement

Social engagement encompasses any collective practice that is characterized by a dual movement in a constitutive way: 1) reflecting on existing social values, norms and rules of action, and 2) acting in the direction of their change or preservation.

In order to see how this definition could be operationalized, let us apply it to the above outlined example of the polluted river bank. A girl named Mia, noticing the polluted river bank, reflects about the responsibility for the pollution and what could be done to protect the environment. She realizes that the environmental legislation is lacking, and that few people really care about clean environment. This reflection can make her do something about it. Believing that better laws would ensure cleaner environment, Mia could, for example, join the street march calling for the change in environmental legislation.

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Alternatively, she may think that such a march is useless. Even if a new legislation is adopted that would not change much. With the lack of the “rule of law”, as it is the case in the country she lives in, Mia does not expect that anyone is going to act according to it, nor would anyone be punished for breaching the law. Therefore, she could decide to join the initiative to clean the garbage from the local river bank and make at least one river bank a cleaner place.

In both outlined cases the definition of social engagement is applicable. Thus, both volunteering in the form of unpaid labour (cleaning the garbage) and in the form of activism (street march) are socially engaged practices. One can think of examples when each type of volunteering is a result of the reflection on the existing rules. Therefore, the boundaries and overlaps between volunteering, activism and social engagement can look like in Figure 4.

Figure 4.



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Let us now examine the following scenario. Mia has a close friend Emma, whom she invites to join the street march. Emma does not really care about environmental problems. She has not even noticed that the local river bank is polluted. In fact, there are many other things she would rather do than participating in the street march. However, she does care about her friend and, being a caring friend, she believes that it is her duty to support the issue that her friend admires. Also, knowing that many of their other friends will join the action, Emma is concerned what they would think of her if she refuses to join. Thus, she joins Mia.

Mia and Emma are marching for the environmental protection and an outsider cannot make a difference between their practices. Since volunteering is defined without reference to the motivation, both girls are volunteering.

However, while Mia's action is a result of the reflection on the existing norms and it is aimed at their change, Emma acts with an aim of supporting her friend. Thus, unlike

Mia's, Emma's action cannot be considered socially engaged, defined as a dual movement of reflecting on existing social values, norms and rules of action, and acting in the direction of their change or preservation.¹ We can think of many examples when volunteering is not a result of this reflection. Thus, the illustration of the boundaries and overlaps between the concepts can look like in Figure 5.

Figure 5.



Returning to the outlined example, the question that arises is whether Emma would support her friend regardless of the cause. For instance, to Emma's surprise, Mia has become a fascist. Assuming that immigrants pollute the river bank, Mia participates in a march against immigration and invites Emma to join it. Believing that Mia is deeply mistaken, Emma does not join the march on this occasion, despite the caring relationship with her friend.

¹ Emma's action is a result of reflection on the obligations of friendships, and thus on the values, norms and rules of action in the domain of friendship relationships. Arguably, her action is thus socially engaged. However, anything one purposively does can then be seen as socially engaged, which is overstressing the concept.

Though in the previous example Emma does not care for environmental protection, she nevertheless believes that this cause is acceptable, if not worth supporting, while when it comes to the march against immigration, Emma believes that the cause is wrong. Thus, it seems that a minimal reflection on the justification of the march is nevertheless necessary, otherwise Emma would join Mia without giving a thought about the rightness of the cause her friend supports. This poses another difficulty. Namely, what “degree” of reflection is needed in order for the actor to be considered socially engaged?

Without access to the internal processes that motivate the two girls to join the street march, we cannot say whether what they do is socially engaged, or to what degree they are engaged. While volunteering is defined without reference to the actors’ internal states, social engagement is characterised by the dual movement of reflection and action. Thus, the boundaries and overlaps between the concepts are never predefined.

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This poses a problem for the operationalization of the concept of social engagement. One possible solution to this problem could be to make a distinction between an engaged collective and an engaged individual. A collective is engaged when it is gathered to change social norms and rules (or to preserve them when endangered). Certainly, some initial reflection on the existing social norms and rules is necessary before the action for their change (preservation) is taken, at least among the organisers of the action. However, it is not necessary that each individual actor within the collective reflects on the rules and norms and acts with an ultimate aim of changing (preserving) them. Thus, we could define social engagement through the characteristics of the activity rather than the actors’ mental states.

Social engagement can be defined as an activity aimed at changing the existing social values, norms and rules, or preserving them when endangered. Although the aim of a socially engaged act is change of the existing social values, norms and rules, this can only be an instrumental goal. Participating in the street march for the change in environmental legislation would be a socially engaged act, even if the actor joins the march to support her friend, rather than because she is committed to societal problems. Because the collective (the group that marches) is engaged (it is gathered in order to change the existing legal norms), each individual participant could be considered as engaged, regardless of her motivation. Thus, both Mia and Emma are socially engaged.

However, it could be argued that not all members of an engaged collective are socially engaged to the same extent. In other words, there are different degrees of social engagement of individual actors. Mia is certainly more engaged with the cause of environmental protection than Emma.

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Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed similarities and differences between volunteering, activism and social engagement. Though in some respects contested, these concepts are deeply intertwined.

Volunteering is defined as an activity in which time, labour and experiences are given freely to another person, group or cause. Activism is a type of volunteering, related to political struggle and aiming at social change. Social engagement is defined as a collective practice that is characterized by reflecting on existing societal values, norms and rules of action, and acting in the direction of their change or preservation. It can encompass volunteering (and thus activism),

but only in cases when volunteering is a result of the reflection on the existing societal values, rules and norms of behaviour. However, one can volunteer for various reasons, for example to support the cause a friend cares for, or to meet the expectations of peers. In such cases, volunteering is not socially engaged. Thus, the boundaries and overlaps between the three concepts are never predefined.

Since without the access to social actors' internal states we cannot say if the act is socially engaged, the outlined definition of social engagement poses difficulties for the operationalization of the concept. This can be overcome by making a distinction between an engaged collective and an engaged individual. A collective is engaged when gathered to change an existing social norm or rule (or to preserve it when endangered). Certainly, some initial reflection on the existing social norms and rules is necessary before the action for their change (preservation) is taken, at least among the organizers of the action. However, to be considered as engaged, it is not necessary that each individual actor within the collective reflects on the rules and norms and acts with an ultimate aim of changing (preserving) them. Social engagement can be defined as an activity aimed at changing the existing social values, norms and rules, or preserving them when endangered, regardless of whether this is an ultimate or only instrumental goal.

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