A chapter from

A Meeting Place

The History of The American Association for Public Opinion Research

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ISBN: 0-89089-479-5

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The Imperfect, Durable Union David Sills

I have borrowed this rather poetic description of AAPOR from Jean Converse, who also notes in her brilliant 1987 history of survey research, that AAPOR is a "successful effort to span the academic/commercial divide of survey research." The word "divide" accounts for her use of the noun "union;" the adjective "imperfect" applies as well to all voluntary associations. AAPOR's status as a voluntary association in this sense is the focus of this introduction.

It is obvious to the most casual observer that organizations and associations are essential to modern society, in fact, to any society larger or more complex than a face-to-face band of hunter-gathers. For this reason, organizations have frequently been examined by social scientists, and as frequently criticized.

Max Weber viewed organizations in part as manifestations of the inexorable process of rationalization, a process that results in the construction of what he called an "iron cage" in which modern man is imprisoned, "perhaps until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt." He also saw organizations as social inventions essential to the functioning of a specialized society. Robert Michels, in his Political Parties (1911). promulgated what he called "the iron law of oligarchy," which states that "it is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators." "Who says organization," Michels intoned, "says oligarchy." More recently, the sociologist Philip Selznick has written of "the organizational paradox": the tendency of organizations to defeat the very purposes for which they are established. Ever since the publication of *The Organization Man* (1956), by William H. Whyte, Jr., "pop" sociologists have been compelled to point out that large organizations are destroying individuality in America. And perhaps most pertinent to AAPOR, Mancur Olson, in The Logic of Collective Action (1965), maintained that it is logically impossible for one kind of organization, voluntary associations, to work the way they are supposed to work, since rational individuals will not voluntarily seek a collective good for a large group.

These are only a few of the observations that social scientists have made about what may be called the "dark side" of organizations—and particularly about voluntary associations, of which the American Association for Public Opinion Research is a prime example. These observations are all made by outsiders, looking down on voluntary associations from Olympian heights. The concrete reality, seen closer to the object of scrutiny, is of course quite different: brighter, more lively, looser in form, created by individuals we know personally rather than by impersonal societal processes.

It may be useful to sketch out a background against which the distinctive features of AAPOR can be more clearly seen. This book is the history of one voluntary association, AAPOR, told not by outsiders but by a selected group of insiders—members who have been more active than most (many are past presidents of AAPOR) and who have given a great deal of their time, willingly and joyfully, to AAPOR affairs. Although they cannot be described as "objective" historians, the stories they tell are both factual and interesting.

A voluntary association is generally defined as an organized group of persons formed in order to further some common interest of its members. Membership is voluntary, that is, neither imposed upon them nor acquired through birth, and the association exists independently of the state. Even this broad definition admits some exceptions. Membership in labor unions and professional societies may be a condition of employment or professional practice and thus may not be truly voluntary, and membership in a church may be "inherited" from one's parents and, in that sense, not voluntary. In spite of these marginal cases, however, the definition provides a framework for considering the distinctly sociological importance of voluntary associations such as AAPOR.

Recall Tocqueville's famous observation in *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835-1840: "In no country of the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America." James Bryce echoed this fifty years later in 1888, in his *The American Commonwealth*: associations are "created, extended, and worked in the United States more quickly and effectively than in any other country." In 1911 Max Weber expressed the opinion, "What is, in qualitative terms, the association-land par excellence? Without doubt America."

AAPOR is only one among countless examples of American voluntary associations. Casual observation of what goes on in the hotel lobbies in downtown America on busy weekends reminds us that we are

indeed "a nation of joiners." What kind of an association do we AA-POR members belong to?

AAPOR may be described, in sociological language, as an interstitial or mediating association. In contrast to such "primary groups" as families and friendship cliques, voluntary associations are "secondary groups"; they mediate between primary groups and the wider society. Professional associations mediate between their members' interests and the actions of government, especially in such matters as licensing, research funding, and legislation. They also mediate between their members and the general public, through their programs of public relations and public information.

But AAPOR is an interstitial association in another sense as well: it mediates between quite different segments of a distinctive professional community. Public opinion is an interdisciplinary field of study, like demography, communications research, or urban studies. It is inhabited by commercial market researchers, by academic social scientists, and by government employees, all different constituencies with different goals and career paths. They meet through AAPOR and at AAPOR meetings and, without surrendering the identity provided by their training or place of employment, they take on an added, shared identity through AAPOR. To ensure that no constituent group takes over or dominates AAPOR, candidates for the president, for the conference chair, and for two councillors-at-large have for many years been drawn alternately from the "commercial" and the "noncommercial" sectors.

How does it happen that an organization with members drawn from so many different work settings, and with such a vague goal as an interest "in the methods and applications of public opinion and social research," has been so successful? One explanation is provided by a major function served for members taking part in AAPOR's activities: mutual intellectual enrichment, occasions for pollsters to learn about academic theories and for academics to give their theories some reality testing. AAPOR has from its inception been a fruitful meeting place, a crossroads for all manner of professional exchanges.

Another explanation is grounded in what the sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) has called "the strength of weak ties." He asserts that our acquaintances (weak ties) are less likely to be socially involved with one another than are our close friends (strong ties). When we have some form of social contact with an acquaintance, we tap into his or her network of friends and acquaintances, all of whom are likely to be new to us. This is what is meant by the strength of weak ties: they enable ideas and influence to be disseminated widely and more rapidly

through a community than do strong ties. Participants at AAPOR meetings evidently like to make "new friends;" and it is these encounters that constitute the weak ties that in short order link them to others in a constantly widening set of overlapping circles.

Membership in a voluntary association is segmental and part-time, but, through the mechanism of weak ties, its ideas, its goals, and its activities become quickly known throughout the public opinion community. Since most members belong to different social networks, the results of a gathering attended by, say, a dozen people, may be disseminated among a dozen independent social networks. Voluntary associations often achieve their purposes, and get things done, precisely because their members are "only" acquaintances and thus can work together in a more focused, purposive way.

What has come to be called "networking" in contemporary society is clearly a major value of AAPOR for its members. But if we look beyond the membership to American society at large, what is the general, nonspecific function of AAPOR?

One answer is provided by the doctrine of pluralism, as a historical fact, as a political creed, and as a mode of analysis. The doctrine asserts that the power of the sovereign state must be balanced by the power of independent, dispersed associations.

In spite of all our shortcomings in America, it seems to me that we have largely validated the theory of pluralism. Across two centuries, we have escaped totalitarianism; centers of power are dispersed throughout the country; and the tensions between the federal and the state governments, between the state and interest groups, and among voluntary associations themselves enliven our national life, and both stir up and channel our passions. What AAPOR does, therefore, lies at the heart of the greater "imperfect, durable union" that is contemporary America.

Most scholars agree that two global social trends will continue into the next century: social and economic power will be gained by new classes of people and the power of central government and large organizations will increase. Only the Bourbons among us will challenge the first trend; only the utopians among us will question the second. The trick, of course, will be to avoid an Orwellian future by continually creating, then sustaining, new sources of power and authority in society. As Tocqueville presciently put the problem, based upon his observations in early 19th century America:

Among the laws that rule human societies there is one which seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.

By stating the relation between power and equality in the form of a scientific law, Tocqueville earned the right to be called one of the first truly modern social scientists. And by calling for an improvement in "the art of associating together," he set the basic agenda for an understanding of the relationship of voluntary associations to democratic governance.

AAPOR is by any standard a successful professional association: it has an active and devoted membership and it raises the intellectual, the professional, and the ethical standards of public opinion research. Nonetheless, it is intrinsically "imperfect," for a wide range of reasons. The sectors of professional life that gave it birth can never be truly joined; participation in it is part-time and segmental, and each member's loyalty must thus be conditional upon obligations to an employer or profession; its goal of elevating the technical standards of opinion research is made difficult by its limited didactic forum; because its attempts at enforcing high ethical and professional standards in the conduct of research are sometimes thwarted by a near-absence of police powers even over its own members; and its activities are somewhat tangential to those of the major institutions of American society: the government, the political parties, business, and industry, the media, and the universities. But to be both tangential and interstitial is also to be powerful—consider the mortar in a brick wall—and AAPOR proudly reigns as the major professional association for a central institution of American democracy: the scientific study of public opinion.

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