Are Organizations Unlibertarian?

A few weeks ago YouTube suggested that I watch a 1988 episode of William F. Buckley's PBS TV show, "Firing Line," featuring Ron Paul, who at the time was the Libertarian Party candidate for president. I had to chuckle right at the top when Buckley introduced Rep. Paul by striking an ironic pose: while "libertarians specialize in non-organization…," Buckley said, "to run for president of the United States, which Dr. Paul is doing on the Libertarian ticket, does require organization, *to be sure uncoerced*." (Emphasis added.) Buckley flashed his trademark impish smile while his guest remained silent looking bemused.

This wouldn't be worth mentioning except that I've heard people make similar comments over the years. I have no doubt that Buckley was trying to be funny. The tip-off is in his final words, "to be sure uncoerced." Buckley was too smart and too knowledgeable not to know that libertarians–and this includes free-market anarchists–have no principled objection to organizations per se. *Uncoerced* is indeed the key point.

Amazingly, not everyone seems to know this. Many times I've heard people wonder how libertarians could have a political party or any other organization for that matter. It is one thing to wonder about a libertarian party, but quite another to wonder about all organizations. Maybe some of the questioners were trying to score a cheap debating point, but I suspect that for others, sheer misunderstanding was at work, as if libertarians favored self-sufficiency and social isolation. (They don't.) At the least, it is a sign of insufficient thought.

Why did Buckley say, "libertarians specialize in non-organization"? *Specialize*? Please! One of thing that libertarians do specialize in is enthusiasm for markets as an essential part of a free society. Markets are filled with organizations, if by that term we mean purposeful associations. (With respect to F. A. Hayek, we can distinguish organizations from institutions, the word he reserved for spontaneous, bottom-up social and economic regularity with accompanying expectations.) The overall market order, which is highly complex, is such an emergent institution rather than a designed organization. It was not constructed with a single conscious purpose, but within it are countless organizations that one or more people created for specific purposes. That's what a firm, a co-op, and many other kinds of groups are. The unplanned order of the market, which is an arena for purposeful conduct that has no end explicit in itself, is full of planned associations. What libertarian would reject them in principle? We'd be a lot poorer and certainly no freer without them. Again, the standard is consent. Organizations can be good, and so individuals ought to be free to choose with whom they will associate and for what purposes.

What's said about the market is also true of society in general. Obviously, people form associations for all kinds of reasons, not just to make money through production and trade. Tocqueville noticed this on his visit to the young United States and reported on it in *Democracy in America*. Americans, he said, formed organizations whenever they wanted to accomplish things they couldn't do individually. To hear him tell it, Americans were organization-happy. In those days, keep in mind, they were in large measure radically and classically liberal in temperament, yet that did not stop them from doing things together whenever it suited. They understood that organizing per se infringed neither their liberty nor their integrity. No surprise there: human beings are social animals.

I don't mean to say that organizations pose no risk to people. Risks and temptations lurk everywhere. Leonard E. Read, founding president of the Foundation for Economic Education, wrote a remarkable essay long ago titled "On that Day Began Lies," in which he pointed out that the danger of even private organizations lies in the temptation of individual members to believe that are not responsible for the acts of the group they participate in them–as though they could merge into a mass without personal accountability. Think of a mob, which is not typically thought of an organization but whose members act in concert toward a particular end. One can see how those members might distance themselves from their own actions by regarding the mob as an agent.

Read headed the essay with a quote from Leo Tolstoy:

> From the day when the first members of councils placed exterior authority higher than interior, that is to say, recognized the decisions of men united in councils as more important and more sacred than reason and conscience; on that day began lies that caused the loss of millions of human beings and which continue their unhappy work to the present day.

Read then asked: "Is it possible that there is something of a wholly destructive nature which has its source in councilmanic, or in group, or in committee-type action? Can this sort of thing generate lies that actually cause the loss of 'millions of human beings'?"

He noted that personal integrity and honesty are key to avoiding trouble and suggested that this will determine the moral quality of any group. He asked:

> What makes persons in a mob behave as they do? What accounts for the distinction between these persons acting as responsible individuals and acting in association?
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> Perhaps it is this: These persons, when in mob association, and maybe at the instigation of a demented leader, remove the self-disciplines which guide them in individual action; thus the evil that is in each person is released, for there is some evil in all of us. In this situation, no one of the mobsters consciously assumes the *personal* guilt for what is thought to be a collective act but, instead, puts the onus

> of it on an abstraction which, without persons, is what the mob is.

The organization certainly seems to provide the temptation for members to distance themselves from "its" actions, even though the mob cannot act if no member acts. Mobs are not alone in this phenomenon. Read went on:

> Persons advocate proposals in association that they would in no circumstance practice in individual action. Honest men, by any of the common standards of honesty, will, in a board or a committee, sponsor, for instance, legal thievery—that is, they will urge the use of the political means to exact the fruits of the labor of others for the purpose of benefiting themselves, their group, or their community.

As we can see, Read didn't mean political associations only. Private associations also can challenge less-than-conscientious members' integrity. In this connection, he had much to say about how majority rule and the call for group consensus can tempt people to shift personal responsibility to the disembodied group.

In sum, Read wrote:

> It ought to be obvious that we as individuals stand responsible for our actions regardless of any wishes to the contrary, or irrespective of the devices we try to arrange to avoid personal responsibility….
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> How to stop lies? It is simply a matter of personal determination and a resolve to act and speak in strict accordance with one's inner, personal dictate of what is right. And for each of us to see to it that no other man or set of men is given permission to represent us otherwise.

In other words, do not associate with a group that does or advocates things you as an individual would not do or advocate. Being outvoted does not get you off the hook.

Read touched on a related theme in "Conscience on the Battlefield," in which he argued that even soldiers are responsible for the actions they are commanded to perform, including killing.

The upshot is that people of character can avoid the dangers of association without avoiding associations entirely. A separate question is whether a libertarian political party is good idea, but that's not my concern here. My message is that nothing about the freedom philosophy rules out voluntary participation in a wide variety of organizations.