

The private stake in public goods: overcoming the illogic of collective action

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Americans mistrust public endeavor. Collective action in the service of shared interests rarely commands their confidence these days. They have come to suspect that their individual efforts to achieve what they all want will somehow add up to collective results that no one wants. The proposition that such perversity is inherent in collective enterprises has antecedents that stretch at least as far back as Machiavelli,¹ but the idea belongs distinctively to our own era. In the 1970s, the notion was invoked to explain why the well-intentioned programs of the 1960s had gone awry. In the 1980s, it has helped to reinforce a systematic and explicit challenge to public authority and public institutions – a conviction that public policy cannot work, that public institutions are a burden, that government is a problem but not a solution.

A consciousness of the intractable mismatch between individual motives and collective outcomes has entered the popular wisdom of our time. It has also found more formal and precise expression in voting paradoxes, in studies of the logic of collective action, and in such contrivances of game theory as the Prisoner's Dilemma. (See Schelling 1978.) All of these analytic exercises help to explicate the logical contradictions that bedevil the cooperative efforts of rational, self-interested people who attempt to achieve shared ends. In practice, of course, the logical difficulties do not prevent cooperative behavior. Collective action is commonplace. The problem is to explain how it resolves the mismatch between self-interest and group interests.

One widely influential account holds that collective action succeeds, not by resolving this conflict, but by activating extraneous interests to override the inconsistency. According to Mancur Olson (1965), the use of coercion is one means to force individual conduct into step with collective goals. Another is individual reward – providing a private inducement for public service. In Olson's view, collective interests by themselves cannot generate or sustain collective action.

Olson's argument rests on the indisputable observation that if collective or common goods become available to some members of a group, they cannot be withheld from all members of the group – including members who have contributed nothing to the production of these goods. Any rational, self-interested person will find it advantageous to be one of the fortunate people who consume

a collective good without bearing any of its costs. Since all members of the group are assumed to be rational and self-interested, they will all seek to become free-riders. The result, says Olson, is that even though all members might be better off if the group realized its collective interests, 'they will still not voluntarily act to realize that common or group interest' (Olson 1965: 2, 14–15).

Olson acknowledges that the dismal logic of collective action contains a few loopholes that may permit very small groups to fulfill their shared interests. In a small group, the contribution required from each member will be relatively large compared to the total cost of a collective good, and one person's refusal to pay her share can noticeably increase the costs or reduce the benefits for other members – so noticeably that the other members may respond by withdrawing their own support, forfeiting the collective good altogether. Anticipating this response, a rational member of a small group may voluntarily contribute to the collective enterprise because she knows that if she tries to become a free-rider, she may lose a collective good that she values more than the cost of her contribution (Olson 1965: 43–44).

Small groups may also evade the contradictions of collective action in a second way. When the benefits of a collective good are apportioned among only a few people, each of them stands to receive a relatively large share of the total. The value of a single member's share may be so great that it exceeds the cost of providing the collective good to the entire group. When this is so, one self-interested member may be willing to foot the bill for the whole group's collective benefit, even though other members pay nothing. Large groups, says Olson, are not likely to be so lucky. They also face problems of internal communication and coordination that small groups can avoid, and they lack the internal solidarity that facilitates collective action in small groups (Olson 1965: 48–50, 62).

The issue of group size has provided Olson's critics with an important angle of attack on the logic of collective action. They have consistently expanded the loopholes that Olson reserved for small groups so that large groups could enjoy similar advantages in their efforts to gain collective goods. Analysts have shown that large groups need be no less effective than small ones in securing certain types of collective goods (Chamberlin 1974). They have also suggested that a large group usually resolves itself, in practice, into a constellation of small groups, or that federal structures can be designed that convert large groups into hierarchies of small ones (Jackson 1987, Bendor and Mookherjee 1987). Finally, they have pointed out that the superior performance of small groups where collective goods are concerned is only an empirical and not a logical consequence of group size (Hardin 1982, Frohlich and Oppenheimer 1970: 119). It is conceivable, as Russell Hardin observes, that a group whose members number in the millions may nevertheless include someone who finds that the personal benefits of a collective good exceed its total cost:

Suppose that a Greek shipping tycoon dearly wanted to hear his favorite prima donna sing *Medea* at La Scala, but the press of business kept him on his yacht. The magnate might have paid Radio Milano to broadcast the performance and 50 million Italians would have been privileged to listen along with him (Hardin 1982: 42).

In Olson's theory, group size appears to be a shorthand term for several distinct assumptions, each of which has unfavorable implications for the ability of large groups to provide themselves with collective goods. One of these is the assumption that the total cost of a collective good will exceed its value to any particular member. No one will find it profitable to pay for a collective good all by herself. A second is the assumption of independence among group members' decisions to contribute. One member's refusal to support a collective undertaking should not be noticeable to others. Olson plausibly suggests that these two assumptions are less likely to hold for small groups than for large ones. But they do not apply with logical necessity even to large groups.²

In addition to these questions about the implications of group size, a second kind of argument has risen to challenge Olson's theory. It begins by recognizing that the decision to engage in a cooperative venture is often a recurrent one — made in repeated encounters with the same partners (Taylor 1976: ch. 3, Axelrod 1984). Since these partners may use future encounters to punish past defections or refusals to cooperate, a personal strategy of treachery or noncooperation that yields short-term benefits may prove disadvantageous in the long run. Collective action, in other words, can be sensible for rational, self-interested people when it occurs within a framework of enduring social relationships.

Still unsolved is the problem of explaining how and why rational, self-interested people initiate such relationships in the first place. A further difficulty is that even when continuing relationships have been established, cooperative efforts are still undermined in large groups (Bendor and Mookherjee 1987). The present inquiry addresses both problems by pursuing the two approaches to Olson's theory already mentioned and by adding a third set of considerations having to do with the nature of collective 'bads', the undesirable counterparts of collective goods. Briefly stated, the argument turns on three points:

1. For many collective bads, individual units of badness become less noticeable and costly as they grow more plentiful. A loud radio in a quiet neighborhood is an outrage, but if there are already twenty loud radios, one more makes hardly any difference.
2. Reducing the supply of such collective bads therefore increases the marginal cost and offensiveness of the undesirable condition to the members of a group. Conversely, it also increases the marginal value of contributing to the corresponding collective good.

3. By providing just enough of such a collective good to trigger these contributions, a group member interested in the maintenance of the good can induce fellow members to support it, thus initiating a continuing process of cooperation aimed at the upkeep of a common benefit.

In at least one respect, the person who takes the initiative in stimulating group cooperation resembles the Greek shipping tycoon who sponsors an opera broadcast. Both assume the role of group benefactor from considerations of self-interest rather than magnanimity. Challenges to the fundamental assumption of self-interestedness have generated another important line of attack upon Olson's logic of collective action. It raises questions about the meaning of self-interest and about the place of altruism in human behavior (Barry 1978, Sen 1977). Some analysts have shown that the theoretical obstacles to collective action can be overcome if the strict rule of self-interest is tempered by modest and realistic concessions to altruism or public spirit (Taylor 1976: ch. 4, Margolis 1982, Kelman 1987, Jackson 1987). While the approach taken here does not preclude altruism, it is compatible with conventional assumptions about self-interest. Men and women may not live down to these assumptions consistently, but it is reasonable to prepare for situations in which they do before accommodating more optimistic and complex conceptions of individual motivation. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to show that self-interest can sustain public-spirited behavior in circumstances that are neither theoretically nor empirically trivial.

When is collective action logical?

A recent study of urban neighborhoods (Crenson 1983) attempted to find out why people in some residential areas produced their own unofficial public services. In some neighborhoods, residents voluntarily cleaned up the trash on their streets, took steps to control neighborhood crime, arranged to supervise neighborhood children, or acted in other ways designed to promote public order, public safety, or public sanitation. The people who engaged in these informal public service activities were not distinguished by close social ties with their neighbors, and unofficial public servants were not concentrated in close-knit 'urban villages'. On the contrary, they seemed to be most plentiful in an atmosphere of mutual antagonism and interpersonal friction — perhaps because the people most likely to engage in public service were misfits within their neighborhoods. They were people who lived in poor residential areas but who were not poor themselves.

The same kind of explanation used to account for the opera-sponsoring activities of Greek shipping tycoons may also serve for these neighborhood benefac-

tors. It could be argued, in the first place, that they are likely to value public order, cleanliness, and safety more intensely than their less prosperous neighbors. The high levels of income, education, and occupational status that they enjoy are probably accompanied by relatively high standards of comfort or convenience. The exposure of relatively prosperous people to the problems of poor neighborhoods might therefore be expected to arouse a stronger-than-average interest in community improvement. Since these people frequently have larger-than-average investments in neighborhood real estate, their interest may be reinforced by an expectation that they will capture a disproportionate share of any increase in local property values.

Like the Greek shipping tycoon, therefore, the unofficial public servants of urban neighborhoods may be more intensely interested than their fellow residents in certain types of collective goods. They may also resemble the shipping tycoon in having the resources needed to obtain such goods. Money, of course, is the most obvious asset that may be useful for this purpose. But spare time, superior skill, or the sense of personal efficacy that often accompanies high social status may also provide unofficial public servants with the means to produce collective goods for their neighborhoods. What they have in common with the Greek shipping tycoon is not only a greater-than-average interest in some collective good, but a greater-than-average ability to get it on their own. The combination of these circumstances tends to undermine Olson's assumption that the cost of supplying a collective good to a large group will be greater than any single member is prepared to pay. The shipping tycoon finds it personally advantageous to underwrite an opera broadcast. For similar sorts of reasons, neighborhood public servants may think it sensible to clean up an entire city block, or even two or three blocks, singlehandedly.

The shipping tycoon analogy suffers, however, from one decisive shortcoming. An opera broadcast is a collective good whose benefits have been fully secured as soon as the music stops. But most neighborhood public services (and many other collective goods besides) exhibit no such finality. A clean block soon needs to be cleaned again. Sweeping a street may be a one-person task, but keeping it clean is an undertaking that inevitably involves one's fellow residents. The more fastidious they are, the longer a clean block will stay clean.

The contrast points toward a more general difference between the creation of collective goods such as opera broadcasts and the maintenance of collective goods, like public health or sanitation, that need to be continually renewed. Even though they qualify as collective goods, benefactions of the shipping tycoon variety are not products of collective action. The presence of 50 million eavesdroppers has no bearing on the tycoon's willingness or ability to pay for his broadcast. The obstacles to group cooperation that Olson identifies in his theory are therefore irrelevant to the tycoon's behavior. For the neighborhood public servant, on the other hand, the cooperation or noncooperation of fellow residents can

be critical, because they determine whether such solitary exertions as street-sweeping will have long-lasting or only ephemeral benefits. In effect, a clean street can be 'purchased' only on the installment plan, and the neighborhood residents collectively decide how large and how frequent the payments must be.

Unlike the Greek shipping tycoon, therefore, the neighborhood street-sweeper seeks a collective good whose net value depends on the voluntary cooperation of others. But if the others act according to Olson's theory, they will not cooperate voluntarily to secure collective goods, and so the street-sweeper has no reason to expect that her personal exertions will be justified by the personal benefits that they yield. It does not make sense, under Olson's assumptions, for a self-interested person to produce collective goods whose value is likely to be destroyed by selfish or indifferent neighbors. The street-sweeper's behavior can be reconciled with Olson's theory only if we are willing to assume that she values a brief golden moment of public sanitation more than the labor of cleaning up an entire street all by herself.

Neighborhood activists themselves offer a far more plausible account of their conduct. They generally begin by discarding Olson's assumption that members of large groups decide independently of one another whether to contribute to collective enterprises. Instead, they believe that their own exertions on behalf of neighborhood welfare are noticeable to their fellow residents, who respond by altering their own behavior where the relevant collective goods are concerned. One solitary street-sweeper in Baltimore, for example, insisted that her efforts to neaten up two city blocks were designed, not only to clean her street, but to communicate with its residents: 'I was trying to get a message across — to show people what was possible' (Crenson 1983: 202–203).

Her claim that her exertions caught the attention of her neighbors is certainly a plausible one. It is plainly reasonable to suppose that when one resident cleans up an entire block, she produces benefits that are noticeable to her neighbors. Such disproportionate contributions to the production of a collective good are almost certain to upset Olson's assumption that one group member's efforts on behalf of a common interest will be imperceptible to other members. More difficult to credit is the assertion that once a neighborhood public servant has produced a collective good, other local residents will feel moved to contribute to its maintenance. The situation, after all, seems tailor-made for free-riders, who can benefit from the labors of a neighborhood activist without any exertions of their own.

Olson's theory anticipates just such exploitation. It occurs, for example, when one group member stands to gain disproportionately from the production of a collective good. A large industrial firm in the midst of small-time operators may find it advantageous to lobby for import restrictions that would increase the income of the entire industry. The large firm's outsized share of the resulting profits may cover the costs of lobbying several times over. The small-time opera-

tors, of course, must settle for smaller shares of the industry's increased income – but they can enjoy these gains without lifting a finger. From Olson's perspective, their conduct reflects a 'surprising tendency for the "exploitation" of the great by the small' (Olson 1965: 35). The same tendency can be expected to surface, perhaps, in the exploitation of neighborhood activists by their passive or hostile neighbors, and it seems to undermine optimistic predictions about helpful neighborhood responses to public-spirited street-sweepers.

But in the case of a collective good like public sanitation optimism may be based on considerations of self-interest, not just hopefulness. The essential consideration is that slovenly behavior is far more noticeable on a clean street than on a dirty one. It is more noticeable, not just because its visibility is enhanced, but because the perceived cost of such careless conduct is likely to increase as the neighborhood becomes more tidy. On a dirty street, one more bag of garbage tossed from a fire escape can scarcely make much difference for the aesthetic or hygienic sensibilities of the local residents. But on a clean street the same bag of garbage represents a significant assault on public sanitation.

When a neighborhood public servant cleans up her block single-handedly, she changes the context in which her fellow-residents reach their self-interested decisions about the maintenance of neighborhood cleanliness. First, by making individual messiness more noticeable, she exposes her most slovenly neighbors to social pressure. Second, by increasing the offensiveness of trash on the street, she also increases the value of efforts to keep trash off the street. Finally, and probably most important, by making individual sloppiness more costly to her neighborhood, she has also created a situation in which residents are more likely to consider the effects that their own untidy behavior may have on the conduct of others.³

On a clean street, one resident's negligence where public sanitation is concerned can perceptibly diminish the neighbors' incentives for neatness. In order to restore the block to pristine condition, local residents must expend additional effort to compensate for a messy neighbor's indifference. The alternative is to continue their current exertions while settling for a neighborhood that is noticeably more dirty than it was. In either case, the ratio of benefits to costs becomes less favorable, and some residents are likely to cut their investments in public sanitation as a result. The first people to respond will be those for whom a clean street was only marginally more valuable than the labor of keeping it clean. Their defection from the cause of public sanitation will make the enterprise unprofitable for still other neighbors, and a widening epidemic of desertions will follow as the benefits of public cleanliness disappear and the costs of private negligence become less noticeable. The process of deterioration exemplifies a familiar pattern by which public civility, public institutions, and collective enterprises of many sorts have come unraveled in the past. (See Hirschman 1970.) It is also a process that can deter group members from becoming free-riders, because one

person's failure to support neighborhood cleanliness can lead others to defect from the cause and destroy the collective good from which free-riders had hoped to benefit.

Latent free-riders are not the only members affected. The circumstances that deter free-riders are the ones created when a neighborhood public servant cleans up her entire street, and this deterrent effect should certainly figure in her own estimate of the advantages to be gained by public service. It gives her reason to expect that she can enjoy the benefits of a clean street without bearing the full cost of keeping it clean all by herself. This consideration should make her more willing to engage in public service efforts than she would be if she took her cues from Olson's theory.

The behavior of the neighborhood street-sweeper and her fellow residents reveals a range of situations in which the pursuit of collective interests is consistent with self-interest, even for members of large groups. The reconciliation of group and individual interests does not require that the great, in Olson's phrase, must submit to exploitation by the small. The activist who sweeps up trash on several city blocks may contribute more than her fellow residents do to the cause of public sanitation, but she does so to influence the conduct of her neighbors, many of whom may not be so concerned about cleanliness as she is. Left to their own independent choices, they might prefer to invest their labor in block parties or neighborhood crime patrols instead of street-cleaning. But once the local street-sweeper presents her neighbors with a clean block, she changes the relative values of labor devoted to public sanitation and labor devoted to other goods, public and private. Half an hour spent tidying a clean street has more satisfying results than the same amount of time wasted in an attempt to turn back the tide of trash on a hopelessly dirty street. The activist's effort to 'show people what was possible' has achieved its end by reducing the dimensions of a task that most people regarded as impossible. In the process, of course, she has steered her neighbors toward her own preferences in collective goods. She is hardly a victim of exploitation. She does, however, add a new dimension of meaning to the precept that it is better to give than to receive.

Collective goods and collective action

In effect, the neighborhood street-sweeper pushes her residential area to a level of public cleanliness at which her neighbors will notice and take into account the slovenly conduct of their more negligent fellow residents. She creates circumstances in which the uncooperative behavior of free-riders tends to influence the conduct of other citizens, and thus voids Olson's assumption that group members act independently of one another when deciding whether or not to contribute to collective enterprises.

Olson himself acknowledges that there are some circumstances in which this assumption may give way. The exception that he makes for very small groups has already been noted. But there is an additional exception. The assumption of independent decision-making hinges, not only on the size of the group, but on the nature of the collective good under consideration. By their very existence, some public goods call attention to the conduct of free-riders, and enhance group members' sensitivity to their non-contributing colleagues.

The collective goods that have this effect all share a common character. They are paired with collective bads whose marginal costs decline as the bads become more plentiful. The other side of public sanitation, for example, is public trashiness. As the total volume of street trash grows, each additional unit of debris becomes somewhat less offensive than the preceding ones. What is true of trash on a clean street is also true of noise on quiet streets, crime or disorder on otherwise safe streets, real estate and mineral development in wilderness areas, and a sizeable family of other collective bads and goods. In all of these cases, the initial departure from a desirable public condition tends to be more noticeable and costly than the succeeding steps in the deterioration of a collective good.⁴ When a collective good conforms to this pattern, its devotees have some reason to provide it in sufficient quantity so that individual failures to maintain the good will be costly enough to call attention to themselves. Would-be free-riders must then consider whether their behavior might discourage others from contributing to the good's maintenance. Refusal to do one's share could result in losing the good altogether.

The inducement to cooperation is often inherent in collective goods themselves. By supplying such goods, one can highlight the free-rider's uncooperative behavior and encourage support for group interests. This is how neighborhood street-cleaners stimulate the collective exertions of their fellow residents. The same strategy has been adopted in a wide variety of other situations. Urban authorities, for example, have employed it in controlling the spread of graffiti. One of the guiding principles in these efforts is that there must be no delay in removing the first graffiti that appears on an otherwise clean surface. Such promptness presumably reduces the psychic rewards of the graffiti artist, whose bid for long-term notoriety has been cut short. But it also tends to deter potential graffitiists, who seem less inclined to deface a clean surface than one that has already suffered at the hands of scribblers (Gunn 1983, Brooke 1986, Levine 1986). One graffiti, more or less, makes a difference here, but it hardly matters if it is simply one more embellishment on an already crowded surface.

Misconduct far more serious than writing on walls or littering may respond to similar kinds of strategems. The spread of crime and disorder, for example, frequently follows the same pattern seen in the proliferation of graffiti or street trash. The pattern is one that James Q. Wilson and George Kelling outline in the so-called "broken window" theory of crime. It takes its name from a familiar

phenomenon in which a building with a single broken window soon suffers an epidemic of window-breaking. According to Wilson and Kelling, 'one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing'. The same kind of logic, they argue, can lead a neighborhood from minor disorder to serious crime: 'The unchecked panhandler is, in effect, the first broken window . . . If the neighborhood cannot keep a bothersome panhandler from annoying passersby, the thief may reason, it is even less likely to call the police to identify a potential mugger or interfere if the mugging actually takes place' (Wilson and Kelling, 1982: 31, 34).

The reasoning of thieves mirrors the reasoning of law-abiding citizens. In a neighborhood already lost to disorder, residents may see little reason to endanger or exert themselves in the cause of community safety or decorum. What good can it do to chase away one panhandler or one prostitute when the neighborhood is already home to dozens of their competitors? Like the additional broken windows that 'cost nothing', the odd drug addict or the extra drunk hardly make any difference when added to the disorder already present.

But in a tranquil neighborhood, individual breaches of the peace are likely to attract notice, and if allowed to persist, they may influence the peace-keeping efforts of fellow residents. A neighbor whose blaring radio goes unchecked diminishes the likelihood that other residents will have reason to control noise levels. If I permit my children to engage in vandalism, I reduce my neighbors' incentives (and ability) to prevent their own children from doing the same. In an orderly neighborhood, my own conduct can make a difference for the peace-keeping efforts of other residents. Police officers, community activists, and neighborhood busybodies may encourage these efforts by creating a level of order at which individual failures to keep the peace are clearly noticeable. Establishing public order may be the best way to enlist local residents in the effort to *maintain* public order.

The same principle, of course, can work just as easily in reverse. If some group members can induce their colleagues to contribute to the production of a collective good, others can act to make them stop contributing. An experimental illustration of the phenomenon comes from a study conducted by social psychologists in which two comparable automobiles, both lacking license plates, were left on city streets with their hoods up – one in the Bronx and the other in Palo Alto, California. In the Bronx, where abandoned vehicles were commonplace, the car was promptly stripped and vandalized. But the vehicle in Palo Alto remained unharmed for more than a week. The experimenters then did some preliminary damage to the car with a sledgehammer, in order to provide the Californians with more powerful 'releaser cues'. The response was almost immediate. Within hours, the car had been wrecked and overturned (Zimbardo 1969, Wilson and Kelling 1982).

By administering the sledgehammer treatment to the automobile, the ex-

perimenters reduced it to a state in which further vandalism no longer made much difference, and the unwitting experimental subjects responded in much the same spirit as they might to a broken window that no one bothered to repair or a dirty street that no one bothered to clean. Individual self-restraint would not reverse the vandalism already committed; joining in would not make things noticeably worse. Habitually law-abiding citizens, swept up in civil disorders, have probably drifted into looting and destruction because of a similar devaluation of their own conduct. It is not that they have lost interest in public order, or that they have abruptly discovered some added charm in mayhem, just that their own behavior no longer seems to carry any weight in the balance between the two. They have been reduced to the status of Olson's free-riders, whose individual decisions make no perceptible difference for the realization of collective goods or bads, but only for the attainment of personal advantage or disadvantage. The main chance has been defined for them in purely private terms.⁵

What the experimenters illustrated with their sledgehammer has a more general counterpart in the logic of political protest. Draft resisters, tax protesters, and civil rights demonstrators have all attempted to create the conditions that would induce their fellow citizens to withhold their contributions from collective goods whose goodness was disputable. The acts of defiance undertaken by protesters have often been regarded as largely symbolic and exemplary, designed to appeal to 'conscience constituents' whose political support might sway public authorities (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Lipsky 1968). But the appeal to conscience is not the only one that protesters make. Their disruptive actions can also call into question the efficacy of government coercion.

In Olson's theory, coercion is a substitute for voluntary cooperation. When it goes into effect, the logic of collective action is presumably suspended, and the mismatch between individual and collective interests is overcome by force (Olson 1965: 133–134). Coercion, however, is a notoriously ineffective means for achieving compliance – so unreliable that it can usually succeed only if supplemented by habitual obedience and substantial voluntary cooperation (Axelrod 1986, Hoekema 1986: 120–124). Instead of allowing government to escape the uncertainties of voluntary collective action, coercion is only a continuation of collective action by other means.

The means are roughly similar to those employed by the neighborhood street-sweeper. Government uses legal coercion to push society to a level of compliance at which instances of noncompliance are likely to attract notice. Among other things, this strategy gives the government's supporters reason to bear the personal costs of obedience. When compliance is widespread, successful disobedience stands out as a conspicuous breach in the government's coercive capabilities. Like the first broken window, it invites further noncompliance. For this reason, citizens who endorse the ends of government coercion may forego opportunities for successful noncompliance, or use informal sanctions against

people who take advantage of these opportunities. They have less reason to act in this way if illicit conduct is already frequent and one more violation will go unnoticed.

Official coercion 'succeeds' when citizens act voluntarily to preserve the impression that it is invincible and that crime does not pay. It fails when it is unsupported by voluntary compliance, and instances of successful disobedience become common enough so that further violations are scarcely worth notice – no more consequential than a having a second cocktail in violation of the Volstead Act.

It is partly by inducing such failures in the operation of government coercion that political protest occasionally succeeds in overturning public policies. In effect, the protesters' function is to break the first few decisive windows. After the initial damage has been done, further violations seem less noticeable or objectionable. This window-breaking strategy is evident in recent legal disputes between draft resisters and the government. Defendants charged with violations of the Selective Service Registration Act challenged the government's right to target the small vanguard of politically active draft resisters for prosecution (Greenhouse 1984). Although this line of attack did not sway the courts, it called attention to the inadequacy of the government's prosecutorial resources, and tacitly gave notice that discreet noncompliance with the draft registration law might go unpunished. The plaintiffs and government alike seem to have recognized the strategic importance of conspicuous acts of initial disobedience.

Political protest can of course amount to something more than political window-breaking. In their effort to undermine voluntary compliance, protesters may attack the belief that the collective goods to be secured through public coercion really are good. By the moral force of example and persuasion, they attempt to transform the principles by which the public defines its collective interests. But the public at large responds more readily to the call of principle when it is practical to do so, and this is what comes of the window-breaking function of protest. For those who do not value the collective goods that are under attack, successful protest makes disobedience feasible. For those who do, continued obedience may become pointless. As instances of noncompliance accumulate, the logic of the free ride takes hold. One more violation at this stage can hardly make any difference for the likelihood that others will disobey. Even for people who value the collective interests to be achieved by coercion, the path of compliance has begun to diverge from the course ordained by self-interest. Why bear the costs of obedience when disobedience no longer makes any difference?⁶

Political protest implicitly recognizes that there are circumstances, even in groups as large as a city or a nation, in which citizens' contributions to the maintenance of collective goods are not independent of one another. Protesters do not create these circumstances but only capitalize on them. Similar conditions for interdependence can occur in social groups of all sorts, and not just when

political protestors deliberately confront the coercive authority of the state. These conditions arise because the initial acts of disobedience in defiance of group norms have a disproportionate kind of social impact, and it is this impact that can link one person's violation of group standards with others' decisions to uphold or desert those standards. The first white merchant in town who served black customers demonstrated that the authority of local traditions was not impregnable. The decisiveness of this discovery increased only marginally when it was repeated by the second, third, and fourth merchants. In the eyes of local whites, moreover, the integrity of racial segregation itself was likely to have been compromised far more seriously by the first case of nonobservance than by subsequent instances, when desegregation had become commonplace.

The maintenance of group norms is a kind of collective good, and it belongs to the same family of goods as neighborhood cleanliness, public order, or graffiti control. Like the noisy household on a quiet street, the first violators of group custom are apt to have an exaggerated influence on their colleagues, because the withdrawal of their support does damage of a distinctive kind to group authority and to group interests. Their actions are likely to be noticeable to other group members, and for this reason the persons who first violate a group norm may also bring about a violation of Olson's assumption that group members decide independently of one another whether or not to contribute to the production of collective goods. This is not simply another exception to the rule, but an exception that bears on one of the essential experiences of group life – the struggle to maintain the norms that define the existence of the group itself.

Conclusion

According to the *Logic of Collective Action*, most actions in the service of common interests are either not logical or not collective. In a large group, the argument goes, individual action counts for so little in the realization of common interests that it makes no sense for a person to consider group interests when choosing a course of personal conduct. Only private interests are decisive. Their fulfillment, at least, depends in a substantial way on one's own behavior. Individual actions designed to achieve private advantage are therefore rational. Actions aimed at collective goods are a waste of time and effort.

Occasionally, of course, a person acting on the basis of private interests may inadvertently provide some collective good from which many other people derive benefit. This is what happens in the case of the Greek shipping tycoon. But it occurs only because one person's private good fortuitously coincides with the collective good of a larger group. From the tycoon's perspective, there are no collective interests at stake in the sponsorship of an opera broadcast, only his own private interests. Nor does his decision to underwrite a broadcast take ac-

count of the other people who will listen to it. His action is a solitary one designed to serve a private interest, and it is perfectly consistent with Olson's argument concerning the illogic of collective action, because it is not grounded in collective interest and is not a case of collective behavior.

Olson's theory permits people to share collective interests but not to act upon them voluntarily. The only acknowledged exception occurs in the case of very small groups, where each member's contribution to the common good represents such a large share of the total that any person's default becomes noticeable to others and may lead them to reduce or cancel their own contributions. In this instance, at least, one person's actions can make a perceptible difference for the chance of realizing collective interests, and it is therefore sensible for each person to consider these collective interests (and one another's conduct) when deciding whether or not to support group efforts. Outside of small groups, however, Olson finds no circumstances in which voluntary collective action is rational.

But in fact the conditions that make collective action rational are broader than this and perhaps more fundamental to Olson's theory. They are inherent in the very 'collectiveness' of collective goods – their status as social or group artifacts. In the absence of a group, there can be no such thing as a collective good. But in the absence of mutual awareness and interdependence, it becomes extremely difficult to conceive of a social group. The assumption that group members are uninfluenced by one another's contributions to a collective good is no mere theoretical simplification. It may be a logical impossibility. Being a member of a group, even a very large one, implies at the very least that one's own conduct takes place against a background of group behavior. Olson's assumptions do not acknowledge this minimal connection between individual and group behavior, and they inhibit recognition of the elementary social processes that explain why slovenly conduct attracts special attention on clean streets, or why the initial violations of group norms are more momentous than later violations.

It may be argued, of course, that the groups of Olson's theory are not functioning social groups with a collective existence, but only categories or classes of people who happen to share a collective interest. The logic of collective action is intended precisely to show why these 'potential' groups are prevented from converting themselves into organized social groups whose members act in a coordinated way. In such latent groups, perhaps, members are unaware of one another, and Olson's assumption that they are uninfluenced by one another's conduct becomes a reasonable one. Another implication, however, is that Olson's theory is subject to unacknowledged restrictions. The logic of the free ride is for potential groups. It may not hold for actual ones. The distinction is exemplified, in the case of public sanitation, by the difference between what is rational on a clean street and what is rational on a dirty one.

The logic of the free ride does not make sense for the members of an ongoing

group that is already operating to produce collective goods such as public order or public sanitation. While this represents a notable limitation upon the scope of Olson's theory, it apparently leaves the logic of collective action undisturbed where potential or latent groups are concerned. But suppose that a member of an unmobilized group wants her colleagues to contribute to the support of a collective good that she particularly values. Her problem is to create a situation in which such contributions make sense to her fellow members. As we have already seen in the case of the neighborhood street-sweeper, one possible solution is to provide the collective good herself. If it has the appropriate characteristics, its very existence may induce other members of the latent group to contribute to its maintenance. This is not one of those cases in which one person's private interest fortuitously coincides with the collective interest of a larger group. The neighborhood street-sweeper is acting on behalf of an interest that she is conscious of sharing with her neighbors. Her aim is to arouse collective action in support of that interest. She does not expect to pay for public cleanliness all by herself, or to enjoy its benefits all by herself.

Her role bears a general resemblance to the one that some analysts have defined for the political entrepreneur who seeks to profit personally by supplying a collective good to the members of a large group (Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Young 1971). Like the neighborhood street-sweeper, the entrepreneur finds it advantageous to confer a collective benefit on others. But the similarity does not extend to the nature of the advantage or the manner in which it is secured. The entrepreneur induces people to contribute toward the cost of a collective good by creating an organizational apparatus through which group members can pool their resources. The existence of this collection mechanism can also strengthen individual members' confidence that their colleagues' contributions are forthcoming. What the entrepreneur gains is private profit — the difference between the actual cost of a collective good and the total amount that group members are prepared to pay for it.

By contrast, the neighborhood street-sweeper induces support for a collective good, not by facilitating contributions, but by increasing the costs that come from the failure to contribute. As a result of her efforts, she gains a clean street whose benefits (and costs) she shares with her fellow residents. She takes her profit in the form of collective betterment rather than private gain, and her conduct, along with the behavior of her neighbors, demonstrates that effective self-interest can extend beyond private interest.

Self-interest can also give rise to continuing cooperative relationships. The street-sweeper, acting in her own interest, brings into being a cooperative enterprise in which she and her fellow residents jointly contribute to the production of a collective good. Cooperation in this case does not come about through negotiation or exchange among equal parties. It can be the work of a single actor who contributes the lion's share of the resources needed to establish a collective

good, in the expectation that its existence will induce others to join in maintaining it. The tactic is commonplace as a means of eliciting voluntary collective action, and it operates on a scale far larger than the street or the neighborhood. Government, paradoxically, probably relies on it more than most institutions. With its superior power and resources, it may be society's most frequent originator of voluntary collective action. Its policies, imposed through coercion and financed by compulsory taxation, generate a penumbra of cooperation without which coercion might become ineffectual. By providing certain collective goods, government authorities can move citizens to make voluntary contributions to the maintenance of these goods. The stark dichotomy between private voluntary action and public coercion — one of the mainstays of American political rhetoric — may be as misleading as the identification of self-interest with selfishness.

There is more at stake here than the voluntary production of collective goods. Continuing cooperative behavior can have other results as well. Once group members begin to expect cooperation from one another, norms of cooperation and fairness are likely to develop. Axelrod (1986) has suggested that modes of conduct which have favorable outcomes for the people who pursue them tend to evolve into group norms. Public-spirited action that serves self-interest could therefore engender a principled attachment to the common good, undermining the assumption of self-interestedness that gives the logic of collective action its bite. Laboratory studies of cooperative behavior have already demonstrated that experimental subjects have far less regard for narrow self-interest than rational choice theory requires (Dawes 1980). In one extended series of collective action experiments, however, Marwell and Ames (1981) found a single group of subjects who approximated the self-interested free-riders of Olson's theory. They were graduate students in economics.

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Notes

1. Machiavelli observed that a ruler who acted from personal intentions that were good generally led his subjects toward collective disaster. To achieve public good, the prince had to learn 'how not to be good' in his individual conduct (Machiavelli 1950: 56–57). A more fully developed

- version of the same paradox emerged from Thomas Hobbes' speculations about life in the state of nature. Individual human beings cherish peace and security, according to Hobbes, but in the state of nature, they acted collectively to create a war of all against all.
2. Olson himself seems to recognize that the two assumptions are not absolutely dependent upon group size. He points out that 'it is not . . . strictly accurate to say that [the willingness to contribute] depends solely on the number of individuals in the group'. He makes a similar observation about the relationship between group size and group members' awareness of one another's contributions. Whether the participation of one member is noticeable to others 'is most obviously, but not exclusively, a function of the number in the group' (Olson 1965: 45).
 3. Although the evidence is only anecdotal, it tends to support the street-sweepers' contention that their efforts influence the conduct of others. One informant, for example, reported that even the local derelicts altered their behavior after a few residents completed an informal program of street and alley cleaning on their block: 'A guy threw down a bottle on the street, and one of the other wins, if you call them that, chastised him very hard - "Damn man, you don't live around here. You live over there on [another] Street. Clean it up. Get it up." And then, as soon as he said it, the rest of them said it - "Clean it up. Pick it up"' (personal interview 1980).
 4. Many collective goods, of course, do not exhibit these attributes. A significant example is environmental pollution, which generally becomes acutely noticeable only after it has reached dangerously high levels. Cleaning the air and water could conceivably reduce the offensiveness of an individual polluter rather than highlighting it. A somewhat different set of circumstances may arise in the case of collective goods whose supply is marked by critical thresholds - levels at which the loss of one more unit of the good may be especially costly or noticeable. In theory, a person interested in inducing others to contribute to the maintenance of such a good might supply it just up to the critical threshold.
 5. Mason (1984) offers a different interpretation concerning participation in race riots, one which emphasizes participants' interest in the collective goods to be secured through civil disorder.
 6. The process outlined here parallels results obtained by Axelrod (1986) in a simulation of the evolution of group norms. Although Axelrod did not assign special weight to the initial defections from norms, his model assumes that successful disobedience will lead to a proliferation of violations.

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