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# Global Perspectives on Volunteerism: Analysing the role of the State, Society and Social Capital

**Abstract**

**Purpose –** The paper aims to examine the concept of volunteerism in three different case countries namely that of USA, UK and China while highlighting the role of the state, society and social capital.

**Design/methodology/approach –** The paper reviews the extant literature on the volunteering traditionsin the chosen case study countries highlighting the idiosyncrasies while analysing implications for future research.

**Findings –** The paper highlights the role of the state, society and social capital in the chosen countries, each deriving its origins from the specific traditions in those countries.

**Originality/value –** The paper makes an original contribution by comparing and contrasting three important countries with different histories and traditions of volunteerism highlighting diversity of type and application.

**Keywords –** Volunteerism, Social Capital, Big Society, State, US, UK, China

## 1. Introduction

The voluntary sector has become a crucial element of what binds a society together (Billis and Harris, 1996). There are different terms used for the voluntary sector. Primarily the voluntary sector is also known as the 'third sector' or, from an international perspective, 'Non Government Organisations' (NGOs). Bridge *et al.*, (2009, p. 49) have also noted other people give 'different labels, including the 'non-profit sector,' the 'voluntary sector,' the voluntary and community sector,' the 'social economy' and the 'social enterprise sector.' The term NGOs is more familiar because of the power impact NGOs have. These organisations are non-profit and are nongovernmental (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). At the centre of this sector is the importance surrounding civil society.

In today's society governments from different political persuasions are keen to integrate the third sector into national and local politics. The third sector, in many regards, is seen as a lynch pin between the public and private sector (Kendall, 2003). For example in Britain in recent years the voluntary sector has acted as active citizenship. Johnson (1999, p. 92) has noted that 'The voluntary sector has already taken on a bigger and more formal role in the provision of social care...responsibility and civil obligation will push the voluntary sector even further to centre stage as the mixed economy of care develops.' In several ways the active involvement of the voluntary sector is perceived as a renewal of Social Democracy. This introduction of an injection into social democracy has been termed by the renowned sociologist Anthony Giddens 'The Third Way.' Giddens (1998) views 'The Third Way' as:

> "...a framework of thinking and policy-making that seeks to adapt social democracy to a world which has changed fundamentally over the past two or three decades. It is a third way in the sense that it is an attempt to transcend both old-style social democracy and neo-liberalism."

Today, there is a new element within this debate, the impact of the Global Financial Crisis. Since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 countries across the world are going through an 'Austerity' phase. Moreover, Castells (2012, p.1) has noted that after the Global Financial Crisis 'we are entering a world with very different social and economic conditions from those that characterised the rise of global, informational capitalism in the preceding three decades.' In other publications the authors have critically explored the impact of the voluntary sector before and after the global financial crisis (Cook *et al.*, 2015; Halsall *et al.,* 2014).

The aim of this paper is to closely examine the issues and debates of the third sector in the current climate. Firstly, this paper examines the key concepts that are involved with the third sector, namely: sociability, social capital and community development. Secondly, the paper moves onto discuss how the research was undertaken to write this paper. Thirdly, the paper has selected three country case studies - United States of America, United Kingdom and China as these countries have had a long association with the voluntary sector, notwithstanding their contrasting political systems. The United States, for instance, is very much associated with laissez faire capitalism, the UK with a strong welfare state and the rise of a 'Big Society' agenda, while China is run via the Chinese Communist Party, albeit via 'Market Socialism'

(Cook et.al. 2015). Finally, the paper will conclude by highlighting recommendations and future research agenda.

## 2. Theorising Sociability, Social Capital and Community Development

It has been argued that a vigorous associational life is beneficial for the creation and maintenance of democracy and provides a "training ground for new political leaders, help members practice compromise and learn tolerance, and stimulate individual participation in politics" (Paxton, 2002, p. 254). Theories concerning democracy's dependence on associations are long standing and this inter-dependent relationship has been explored in many different way, including, "civil society" (Habermas, 1989), "social capital" (Putnam, 1993, "pluralism" (Lipset *et al.*, 1951 and "civic culture" (Almond and Verba, 1963). Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1983) theorised social capital as a feature of groups, the central core being the notion that the relational resources within a community can be harnessed by certain actors to achieve desired outcomes. Putnam (1995, p. 667) defines social capital as "features of social life - networks, norms, and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" referring to then social connections and the attendant norms and trust." Putnam (2000, p. 290) later argued in his American study that "social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer and better able to govern a just and stable democracy" underlining the social and economic resources embodied in social networks that could be aggregated and influence effective government. Paxton's (2002) description of social capital involves both relations between individuals and the fact that these relationships must be subjective, trusting and positive.

Notwithstanding the theoretical interest in the relationship between social capital and democracy, empirical evidence is not yet conclusive to support the premise that associations affect democracy (Stocpol, 1997; Wollebaek *et al.*, 2002). Putnam (1993) studied social capital in Italy remains and his study is one of the few studies which studied associations. Paxton (2002) in her study using data from the World Values Survey and the Union of International Associations in a cross-lagged panel design, showed that social capital and democracy has a reciprocal relationship. She further documented that associations that are connected to the larger community have a positive effect on democracy, while isolated associations have a negative effect (IBID, 2002, pp. 272-273). The burgeoning role of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the policy arena of the developing countries including the newly established democracies in Eastern Europe is being seen as crucial to maintain and sustain stable democracies (Paxton, 2002, p. 255).

However, several commentators (Berman, 1997; Levi, 1996; see Tarrow, 1996) criticise the social theorists for downplaying the influence of government in civil society. It is argued (Skocpol, *et al.*, 2000; Schlessinger, 1944) that the American voluntary associations, for example, developed in close relationship to the representative and federal institutions of the American state.

Writing in the early years of the 20th Century, Kropotkin (1902) argued that, far from the state supporting and nurturing the rise of the voluntary sector, historically it had, in his view, undermined voluntary associations such as pre-state guilds, brotherhoods, federations and confederations. Voluntary associations thus survived

in spite of the state rather than because of it, 'flourishing in sometimes difficult and even dangerous circumstances' (Cook, 1994, p. 23, cited in Cook et.al. 2015, p. 5). Today, this may or may not be the case, and will largely depend on the nature of the specific state in question. For example, Cook et.al. (2015, pp. 89-91) studied the nature of the inspirational Grameen Bank, set up over 30 years ago in Bangladesh as a micro-finance facility for rural women in particular. Despite the success of this model, and its adoption in other countries, in recent years the Bangladesh Government has sought to modify the nature of the bank to ensure that it operates as a normal commercial bank. The Government argues that, because Grameen was created under a special law then it was a statutory public authority, hence a government bank (Al-Mahmood, 2012). Grameen's founder, Professor Muhammad Yunus, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2006 for so doing, was forced to resign, having reached the mandatory retirement age of 70 for bank directors and subsequently lost a court appeal to enable him to stay on.

Examples such as this raise many interesting questions for the development of theory. Because voluntary engagement is largely separate from the conventional waged institutions of the state on the one hand and of capital on the other, even though people within these institutions may of course themselves engage in voluntary activities in their spare time, is it inevitable that such voluntary associations will either come into conflict with these institutions, or instead become subservient to them, either to avoid regulation by the local state or central government for instance, or in order to seek funding from capitalist organisations? The recent demise of Kid's Company in the UK, for example, was instigated by civil servants concerned at what they perceived to be questionable practices such as poor accounting and, allegedly, giving money directly to vulnerable teenagers rather than buying for them the clothes or food they might need (BBC, 2015).

In their concluding chapter, Cook *et.al.,* (2015, pp. 129-131) note the potential weaknesses of such community-based alternatives as including legitimacy and leadership questions, professionalism, issues of funding and sustainability and size and remoteness. For example, and this may be relevant to Camila Batmangelidh of Kid's Company or Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank, though this is for others to judge:

> "Community leaders are often self-selecting. They have leadership qualities such as charisma, eloquence, drive and certainty. At best, they can lead their community to great futures; at worst, they are unelected and self-centred, too parochial, unskilled and set in their ways to be able to interact meaningfully with local authorities or local state, or engage effectively with wider agendas" (Cook *et.al.,* 2015, p. 129).

Despite such weaknesses, however, these authors argue that "the advantages of community involvement outweigh the disadvantages" (ibid., p. 130) and include the virtues of voluntarism, the 'soft support' that volunteers provide, identity with a community that can help ameliorate the negative impact of loneliness and isolation, and not least in an age of austerity, the cost effectiveness of voluntary associations, albeit with the caveat that they should not be seen as cheap, cut-price alternatives that enable the state to withdraw from essential welfare support for the needy and vulnerable in society.

## 3. Methodology

This paper provides a conceptual review focussing on the key literature in the field. The authors have examined various academic texts and published materials. As it has been noted by Ramdhani *et al.*, (2014, p. 48) a literature review 'gives an overview of what has been said, who the key writers are, what the prevailing theories and hypotheses are, what questions are being asked, and what methods and methodologies are appropriate and useful.' There are other studies that have adapted this approach (Cook *et al.*, 2014; Cook and Halsall, 2011; Dummer *et al.*, 2011; Cook *et al.*, 2010) in the sociological debates on social policy. For this research the literature review followed a systematic approach using four key steps. Firstly, the authors chose to examine the volunteering traditions from an international perspective by drawing upon the history and traditions of the voluntary sector in three countries- the United States, United Kingdom and China. Secondly, researching and identifying suitable published work was undertaken using electronic academic databases and searching the most up to date published work. Thirdly, the academic literature was analysed. This process involved reading the selected published material and pulling out the key points. Finally, the key points of the literature were thematically analysed to draw conclusions and implications for future research after examination of the results from the literature. The paper now moves on to discuss the country case study examples.

## 4. Case Study Example

### 4.1 United States and tradition of volunteerism

Schlesinger (1944, p. 24) once famously described Americans as a "nation of joiners". Gamm and Putnam (1999, p. 511) argued that probably no aspect of American democracy has been more celebrated than the long-standing proclivity of Americans to join voluntary associations. Tocqueville, during his tour of America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was deeply impressed by the levels of voluntary activity he witnessed in the United States and considered the American case as an exemplar for other countries. Tocqueville (1969) further contended that the vast number of voluntary organisations also had a stabilising effect on the American democracy. Gamm and Putnam (1999, p. 514-523) suggests that the late nineteenth century witnessed an extraordinary associational growth with a steep increase in most types of associations between 1850 and 1900, slower growth through 1910 and a period of stagnation and some decline between 1910-1940. There were average 2.1 associations per 1000 population in 1840 which rose to about 5.4 associations per 1000 population by 1910. Skocpol (1997) however holds that the strong networks of voluntary organisations flourished alongside party networks and in many ways were helped by the activities of the state.

Analysis of the evolution, growth and the role of voluntary organisations in the United states is a big academic endeavour in tracing the institutional history of thousands of the such groups ranging from the churches, lodges, clubs, choirs and many more (Skocpol *et al.*, 2000; Skocpol, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Paxton, 2002). Scholarship has developed on researching the development of the voluntary participation in America and elsewhere (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001; Ryan, 1999; Crowley and Skocpol, 2001) with commentators agreeing with the dynamic nature of associational

life rather than treating it as a constant over different periods (Gamm and Putnam, 1999). There is some disagreement amongst scholars about the development of voluntary associations in the United States. A historian view of the voluntary groups considers them to be "local, informed and profusely varied until industrial revolution brought standardization and accompanying bureaucracy" (Skocpol *et al*., 2000, p. 528).

Gamm and Putnam (1999) used the city directories from 1840-1940 from a sample of twenty-six cities and towns and analysed long-term trends in American associational development and the relationship of associational development to immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. Their study concluded that smaller cities and towns outside the US East coast had greater number of voluntary associations per capita. Disagreeing with Gamm and Putnam's (1999) account, Skocpol*et al*., (2000) provide an institutional and trans-local conception of American associational development and contend that large voluntary associations have flourished in all ears of the American history. Their study (p. 532) further concluded that nearly three-quarters of the American membership associations that grew very large before 1940 (34 out of 46 groups in their sample) developed "federated organizational arrangement" resembling the three tiered institutions of the U.S. government.

Putnam in his important book '*Bowling Alone'* observed a remarkable decline in the levels of civic engagement in the United States since the 1960s and argued that the Americans are less connected in voluntary associations' including in less formal settings.  Notwithstanding these differing perceptions, few however disagree with Tocqueville (1969, p. 513) that "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations".

Almond and Verba (1963) in their book *TheCivicCulture* found that mid-twentieth century Americans, compared with the citizens and Britain and Germany, were more likely to join and hold offices in voluntary associations irrespective of their gender or educational background.  The Americans were more likely to claim one or more memberships in church-related groups, civic-political associations and fraternal groups and were also significantly involved in cooperative and military veterans' associations which stood out in the US case (Skocpol, 1999, p, 4). The organisational base of voluntarism has been argued (Putnam, 2000) and contemporary studies also emphasising its individualistic roots and middleclass base (Wuthnow, 1991).

Civic associations have also been shown (Andrews *et al*., 2010) to have played a significant role a major both in creating civic infrastructure and also nurturing social movements while acting as the dominant organizational form into which movements evolve.  Skocpol *et al*., (2000) in their study demonstrated that of the 46 civic associations that encompassed 1% or more of the American population between 1776 and 1955, 17 of them reared or institutionalized social movements.

Putnam (2000) while arguing his case for the decline in the community volunteerism noted that the sharp decline in the number of donations to charities and volunteering since 1960 can be attributed to a decline in group participation. Addressing the call for researching the role of ethnic groups in collectivists-grounded volunteerism,

Eckstein (2001) analysed the role of a predominantly Italian American but ethnically diverse community in an inner suburb in the Greater Boston metropolitan area. She concluded that several factors in combination create conditions which are conducive to community-based group giving. These factors included community social and cultural homogeneity, shared values about giving, shared needs and wants, low turnover, class homogeneity, institutional overlap and insularity and leadership (2001, pp. 844-846). The trans-national ties noted amongst the 'new immigrant' groups have been found to be collective and both community-based and family-based (Levitt, 2001).

Not all such organizations are in decline and offer an opportunity for scholarly research into how they work and continue to grow (Andrews and Edwards, 2005; McCarthy, 2005). Andrews *et al.*, (2010, p. 1193) argue that some civic associations continue to develop leaders, engage members and make their voices heard in the public and policy arena. The authors conducted a comparative case study of the local organizational unites of the Sierra Club-a leading environmental organisation in the US. Developing a multidimensional framework for conceptualising effectiveness in civic associations, they used three-tiered conception of effectiveness namely: (1) public recognition, (2) member engagement and (3) leader development and presented it as a model for evaluating the effectiveness of civic associations.

Scholars have also expressed concerns about the recent trend replacing civic associations with professional groups and service providers which is eroding the valuable civic infrastructure (Walker, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Andrews *et al.*, 2010; Weir and Ganz, 1997). Concerns have been raised on the mushrooming of numerous professional groups and elite professional societies. Skocpol(2004, pp. 5-6) highlight three trends in contemporary civic reorganisation; (1) decline in the number of business associations and rise in categories including citizens and public interest; (2) sharp decline in blue-collar trade associations and fellowship federations with attended rise in specialized professional organisations involving educated Americans; and (3) structural shifts from membership groups to staff-centred associations and professionally managed organizations. Citizen participation has become more constricted owing to the professionalization of the legislative process in the U.S. Congress has also witnessed a new breed of college graduates, experts and researchers to provide expert assistance to Congressional committees. Foundation grants have increasingly become popular as a source of funding the voluntary associations. The rising power of citizen groups has adversely impacted the influence of the unions and other groups championing the cause of blue-collars workers (Berry, 1999).

*4.2 Britain and the idea of Big Society*

In post war Britain the new elected Labour government of 1945 implemented plans for the setting up of the welfare state. Today, the welfare state is a well run public body that serves the general public at the free point of delivery. Over recent times political discourse has focused on the public, voluntary and private sector involvement in the welfare state (Gaffney, 2015; Chaney and Wincott, 2014; Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Hills, 2011). This cultural turn has come about by the political and economic connotations of globalisation. Page (2007, p. 117) has noted that this cultural turn has created an increase of personal responsibilities and:

"Given its belief that in an era of globalisation the state is no longer able to provide a guaranteed level of 'social' security for all, New Labour has encouragedcitizens to assume greater responsibilities for maintaining their own well-being. Accordingly, citizens have been encouraged to remain in full time education, require new skills, follow a healthy lifestyle and make appropriate arrangements for old age."

Throughout the 1980s to the present day the Welfare state has experienced several measures around decentralisation. Particular decentralisation approaches have been applied in the past within the National Health Service. Central Government, from Margaret Thatcher government in the 1980s to Tony Blair's New Labour government in the late 1990s, encouraged decentralisation because it gave a process of redistribution of functions at a local level. In the New Labour period the government of the day were positively encouraging the welfare state being involved with the voluntary sector. Moreover, this process was moved forward with the Coalition and the current Conservative Government. Research carried out by Powell (2012, p.3) has noted that:

"Arguably the community, voluntary and faith based sectors infrastructure have come under unprecedented scrutiny during the past few years. Today a strong cross-party political consensus existsto support the role of the voluntary sector in the delivery of many aspects of public welfare. This contrasts markedly from post war era dependency on strong (local) state involvement in public services that eventually came under critique from both ends of the political spectrum as a deficient form of welfare provision."

Powell goes on to say that both the previous Labour (1997-2010) / Coalition (2010-2015) governments have meddled with the voluntary sector and how it works with the welfare state. The previous coalition and the current conservative government pushed the agenda of the 'Big Society.' The Big Society was dreamed up when the Conservative Party was in opposition (2005-2010). The idea behind the Big Society is giving people greater freedom in their individual lives (Zavos, 2014). When examining the Big Society, from a social policy context, the aim is to attempt to reshape the bond among citizens, the voluntary sector, the welfare state and the market. Lewis (2012, p. 179) has noted that there are three key components to the big society which are:

1. "The first is concerned with the promotion of volunteerism and philanthropy, with citizens being encouraged to give up more of their time for free and set aside more resources to help others.

2. The second is a new emphasis on localism and community-level empowerment, based on the principle that voluntary and community groups can and should play a more central role in running public services such as sport centres, fire and rescue, and libraries.

3. Finally, the Big Society brings a new and more aggressive approach to public sector reform that seeks to cut red tape and encourage innovation and

entrepreneurship, including promotion of the ideas of 'mutualisation' and floating off parts of the public sector into 'employee-owned' John Lewis-style partnerships in the effort to improve efficiency and job satisfaction."

Again it could be argued that the Big Society is another process of the decentralisation to the welfare state to the local level. There has been much political discourse on the policy ideology thinking of the Big Society (Gasparyan, 2015; Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley, 2014; Kisby, 2010). In the opposition period for the Conservative party (2001 to 2010) the party was arguing that Britain was 'Broken' and needed fixing. In many respects the conceptual idea of the big society is centred on 'One Nation Conservatism' whereby this school of thought helps the most vulnerable people in society. As Hancock *et al.,* (2012, p. 352) have noted:

"In contrast to the problem communities of the broken Britain narrative, the big society narrative promotes the idea of active, participative and responsible communities. It is a notion of a healthy civil society of families, communities, social networks, third sector organizations, charities and individuals coming together in an effort to enhance a somewhat vague common good."

*4.3 China and the role of the state*

Britain may talk of a 'Big Society' but of course China really is a big society, with a population of nearly 1400 million, notwithstanding the restrictions of the Single Child Family Programme (SCFP) that has sought to limit population increase. At the time of writing the SCFP has been abandoned due to a range of pressures including the rising proportion of old people in China, which gives rise to concerns as to how they will be cared for in future, plus the rise of a sophisticated urban middle class that desires greater choice of lifestyle including the right to have more children should they wish to. In addition, China historically has always been the largest country on Earth by population, and although one may not agree with Wittfogel's premise that this was a 'hydraulic civilization' (1957), nonetheless the struggle to control floods and develop irrigation to increase crop yield meant that Chinese society was obliged to come together *en masse* in co-operative endeavour to fight the twin evils of floods and famine. Whether this was 'voluntary co-operation' is, as Cook *et.al.,* (2015) note difficult to ascertain, given the role of local mandarins (officials) and feudal lords in leading or exhorting the peasantry to work together to control Nature. After the time of Confucius, around 600 BCE, there was an ethos/ quasi-religious underpinning via Confucianism for society to work together in a system of responsibilities that led in a patrilinear route through the male line up to the Emperor himself, who could be justifiably overthrown should he lose the 'Mandate of Heaven' via neglect or abuse the people and Nature itself. Natural disasters would often be the harbingers of dynastic overthrow and establishment of a new dynasty that would in turn rise, flower and eventually decay as many others had done before.

In the modern era the Communist Party of China (CCP) is dominant, and the new President, Xi Jinping is a 'princeling' whose father was a revolutionary leader so there are echoes of the Imperial past in the People's Republic (PRC). As Cook et.al. (ibid.) point out Confucianism was for many decades played down by the CCP leaders of China due to the association with a feudal past, but for the last 20 years or

so, Confucianism has become a key element in the drive to foster a 'harmonious society', and the PRC has funded Confucian Centres to be established in Universities around the globe as centres for learning about China. So the context of voluntarism in China is different from that of the US or the UK, with much more of a question about state intervention (or via CCP involvement) in voluntary associations or NGOs than is seen in these other countries. Thus, the legendary and successful '*Gung Ho*' movement of the late 1930s/ early 1940s (Clegg and Cook 2009; Cook and Clegg 2011) eventually ended largely due to the top down intervention of the *Guomindang* government. In similar vein, the currently successful volunteering effort in China has been stimulated by the State/ CCP which has become in recent years increasingly keen on volunteering because it helps build social capital and social harmony (UNDP, 2011, p. 29).

Social capital has been studied in rural China by Xia (2011) who found that Confucianist legacies included trust within the villages for those who shared kinship or location ties, but conversely (and typical of rural society in general) distrusted outsiders. Xu, Perkins and Chow (2010) suggest that in urban areas knowing one's neighbour is common, supporting Chen and Lu's (2007) view that social capital is 'abundant' in urban areas, thus forming a potential basis for greater grassroots self-government, as well as entrepreneurial activity (Batjargal and Liu, 2004). Others have studied the links between social capital and health and wellbeing in China (Wang et.al., 2009; Yip *et al.,* 2007), focusing on concepts of trust and distrust, and links or lack of links to organizational membership, respectively. It remains a moot point, however, as to whether the nature of social capital in China is different or similar to that found in Western society due to the specific cultural contrasts between Western individualism and Chinese collectivism (Xu, Perkins and Chow, 2010; Cook, Halsall and Wankhade, 2015), and Yip *et al.,* (2007) suggest that the past emphasis on economic aspects of social capital may need to be redirected to social activities.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, the authors have examined the voluntary sector in three contrasting case studies: the United States, the United Kingdom and China. Theorisation comes mainly via concepts of sociability and social capital. In the US, voluntary activity has traditionally come from a wide range of civic associations centring for instance on church groups, temperance movements and others. Today, there are concerns that such associations are declining, and thus threatening to erode the social capital within a wide range of communities. Professionalism, too, may, somewhat paradoxically, be a threat to the nature of voluntary groups which become less responsive to lay members and more directed by professional officers, with:

> "the danger of this approach is that 'our professionals' speak to 'your professionals' in a process that may move further from the wishes of the community itself, leading to remoteness or alienation from the community that the professionals represent" (Cook *et al.*, 2015, p. 129).

In the UK, the concept of the 'Big Society' has been a feature of recent political debate, in part due to concerns that funding in the aftermath of the global financial crisis is no longer viable for the Welfare State that Britain has developed in the post-war era. The aim is to create an overarching concept that brings together state, local

state and voluntary organisations in order to sustain vital services in a time of austerity and local government cutbacks. To an extent this concept is post-hoc rationalisation of existing voluntary endeavour in the UK, but this endeavour cannot exist completely separate from the institutions of state and capital. This point is illustrated in China, where much voluntary action is linked to structures of the Chinese Communist Party and/or the Chinese state itself.

In conclusion, we suggest that future research needs to explore further the linkages and relationships between voluntarism, state and capital in different countries. Whatever one's political stance and ideology, voluntary action is surely a *sine qua non* of a successful society despite, or because of, its diversity of type and application.

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