Gary Alan Fine

*The Hinge: Civil Society, Group Cultures, and the Power of Local Commitments*, The Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021; 263 pages (including index): 978-0-226-74566-4

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**Reviewer biography and address:** Olofsson is a postdoctoral fellow at Lund University where they work on the Show & Tell project led by Dr. Alison Gerber. The Show & Tell project investigates how novel types of evidence travel across disciplinary boundaries and Olofsson’s contribution focuses on investigating how new digital tools for recording and modeling spaces, objects, and actors influence and challenge existing practices. Olofsson hold a PhD in Sociology from Uppsala University.

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**Keywords**: Civic engagement; Social interactionism; Meso-level analysis; Tiny Public; Circuits of Action

The distance separating individual acts and societal phenomena may appear endlessly vast and complex. At least that is how it appeared to me when as an undergraduate student I first learned about Coleman’s (1986) type 3-relation problem. Reading Coleman’s discussion of the micro-macro gap I was both puzzled and troubled. First by the Coleman’s own problematization, and second by the highly intricate solution that was offered up in the, at that time and that place, dominant perspective, namely, the social mechanisms program and the related attempts to model macro-outcomes through micro-level simulations (see, e.g., Hedström 2005). To my untrained eyes and ears, the direct jump from actor to large-scale phenomena such as capitalism or globalization sounded more like alchemy than sociology. Today I have read enough to better appreciate and navigate these questions, and if I could pick one book to send back in time to give to my undergraduate self – and to help them find ways to anchor their developing and flailing sociological imagination – it would be Gary Alan Fine’s The Hinge.

What I struggled with back then was to imagine the many ways in which actions of individual actors are embedded and how many embedded actions come together to shape macro level outcomes. In The Hinge, Gary Alan Fine outlines a conceptual framework for studying this embedded nature of individual actions, and it does so by focusing on friendship circles, neighborhoods, associations, and other meso-level collectives. After all, Fine writes, individuals do not act in isolation and although macro phenomena may appear distant and abstract, they unfold through the decisions made by small groups of people.

To outline how small world collectives form a metaphorical hinge between individual and society, Fine draws on a combination of his own work and the works of modern classics such as Howard S. Becker, Erving Goffman, and Alfred Schütz. Supported by this social theory version of a greatest hits album, Fine begins to highlight the holes left in the dominant literatures on civic life: micro-level rational choice theories, and macro-level structuralist approaches. Having laid out the shortcomings of these competing approaches, Fine moves on to outline an alternative approach in which interpersonal relations and interactions are made the focal points of civic life. This outline begins with a simple question. Asking whether egoists can live together, Fine draws on common truisms about humans as egotistic rational actors and to show that mainstream ways of approaching civic life, such as the classical tragedy of the commons argument, are wrong to depict civic life as a choice between unchecked egoism, as in the Hobbesian natural state, or a Leviathan government. Instead, civic life is about how actors come together in joint action, culture, routines, and politics to realize at home the macrolevel institutions that make up the building blocks of a political system.

To support his argument, Fine deploys a conceptual toolkit built around four central concepts. The first is the *interaction order* – a term borrowed directly from Goffman – which describes how the repeated performance routinizes and orders interactions. Two concepts, *group culture* (or idioculture) and *tiny publics*, are taken from Fine’s own work and denote, respectively, the beliefs and practices ‘held by people with ongoing relations’ (p. 10) and any group that seeks to play a role within civic structures and has a ‘recognizable interaction order and culture’ (p. 14). The final concept, *circuits of action*, describes the routine actions that a group deems culturally appropriate (p. 12). The concept draws on Alfred Schütz’s discussions of the type of predicative knowledge that consociates develop of their compatriots, that is, of the alters with whom they share a ‘we-relationship’ (Schütz 1967). Circuits of action is the sole conceptual innovation in The Hinge and is also the part of the book that is most vulnerable to critique as it is not immediately clear how circuits of action relate to or are different from ‘practices’ as defined by Schatzki. Nevertheless, because Fine deploys the conceptual framework on a broad range of phenomena and cases to illustrate its usefulness, weaknesses such as the unclear relation between the concepts of The Hinge and neighboring terminologies soon fade into the background.

What might surprise readers familiar with Fine’s previous work is that The Hinge is not an ethnography. Instead, Fine relies on existing literature to support his argument; and the literatures he draws on is both varied and rich and spans anything from ethnographies of retirees discussing politics over morning coffees to historical research on the United States’ failed Bay of Pigs invasion. What unites the different works that Fine calls upon to illustrate the many ways that The Hinge’s conceptual framework are that each case helps illustrate yet another way in which a focus on hinges may help social researchers in their work to analyze and synthesize civic life as it unfolds in impoverished communities, townhall meetings, social movements, policy-making groups and other meso-level collectives. Aided by the literatures he cites, Fine demonstrates how the Hinge’s conceptual toolkit draws out and highlights certain dimensions of civic life; and he does so in seven chapters covering the roles of coordination, relations, associations, place, conflict, control, and extensions in civic life. These seven chapters make up the main body of The Hinge and each chapter illustrates some aspect of how meso-level communities (i.e., tiny publics) connect individual actors to each other and to macro-level institutions. That is, each of the seven chapters illustrate a part of the metaphorical hinge that Fine argues links the micro and macro.

Ultimately, while The Hinge might read a bit like the social theory equivalent of a golden oldies radio station, this way of assembling existing theories and research to make a novel point is the book’s forte. After all, the way in which Fine draws together modern classical theory and a mix of new and not so new empirical studies and uses the resulting cocktail to claim a space for meso-level research on civic phenomena makes for a very convincing and enjoyable read. The Hinge’s contribution is, in other words, not that it offers new tools or concepts, but that it uses old ones to build a solid yet nuanced backdrop that any future studies of civic engagement can fall back on.

Lastly, while The Hinge offers up an insightfully designed toolkit with which one may approach the different ways that the meso-level connects actors and institutions, these contributions are surprisingly downplayed in The Hinge’s concluding afterword. Written in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the afterword discusses pessimism over the future of meso-level civic engagements. The introduction of lockdown policies and the subsequent disappearance of gatherings at the time undermined the workings of the hinge. Nevertheless, while Fine is uncommitted to making prophesies about the future, in his reflections on how the workings of the hinge may change in a mediated society, he underestimates the role that meso-level groups and associations would come to play during the pandemic. In some locations, people came together to show solidarity and community from their balconies. Others gathered online. And in Sweden, authorities launched a large scale campaign to mobilize civil society associations to help deliver food and other goods to elderly or otherwise vulnerable people sheltering from the virus (see, e.g., Olofsson and Vilhelmsson 2022). The Hinge’s almost paradoxical oversight when it comes to the potential (and actual) role that meso-level communities would come to play in the Covid-19 crisis stands out against the rest of the book’s convincing accounts of how the same types of engagements between friends, neighbors, associates, and groups helped shape and resolve previous crises.

**References**

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