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7   Organize Liberal, Think Conservative: Citizenship in Light Communities

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Analyzing civic engagement is often a nostalgic affair. Prominent points of reference are either the 1950s and its robust communities of dutiful citizens or the 1960s and the contentious action of rights-aware citizens. In the following, I try to construct a nostalgic-free take on civic engagement in the Netherlands in the early 21st century. Using a dataset of very loosely organized Dutch citizen groups, I demonstrate that the well-behaved practice of the dutiful citizen and the critical practice of the emancipated citizen are both alive and well, and often in the same person or the same community. I argue that civic engagement can be understood as a layered practice with sediments of both an obedient and a critical vocabulary. Modern citizenship is traditional in content and new in organization. 'Less weight, more embedding' appears to be the strategy by which a rather modest, social citizenship renews itself in light communities.

Variations of nostalgia

The picture of citizens disengaging from civic engagement and the subsequent social disastrous effects has a strong appeal to theorists of civil society and empirical researchers alike (Putnam 2000, 2004, 2007; Habermas 1992; Lane 2000; Walzer 1998). Citizens increasingly part from their capacities or their goodwill to create and maintain meaningful collectives. These meaningful collectives can be 'civic associations' in the 'neo tocquevillian' vocabulary, the clubs and organizations in which citizens meet on a regular basis to work on public affairs (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003; Bellah et al. 1996 [1985]). Or they can be the more abstract 'community' or 'communities' in the moral language of the culture critics, where a shared sense of 'we' is maintained (Etzioni 1996; Bauman 2000; Scheffer 2007). Where these meaningful collectives lack, so the reasoning goes, society's health is at stake, because it is in these robust communities that citizens learn and perform the duties that keep society alive.

Predominantly American as all these examples may be, they express the fears, feelings and perceptions of Dutch politics alike when the

need to reinstate 'values and norms' or to reinvent 'a new we' are debated. Or, as Amsterdam mayor Cohen would have it in a speech at Leyden University: 'We are more and more a society of individuals living separate lives. It occurs to me that a society of separated individuals, who are 'strangers' to one another, has to exert itself to truly live together again. Why? Because where there is no 'we' there can be no 'I', or put differently: an individual can only be a true individual within a surrounding community. And where this community lacks, it has to be recreated' (Cohen 2002).

In the following, I engage with this pessimistic perception. When this interpretation holds true, we witness a historical unique rupture in participation patterns. To overcome this rupture would demand doing away with the implicit determinism in the analysis. If institutional powers and / or culturally prescribed desires keep the citizen at home instead of on the agora, bringing him back into public life would require force rather than persuasion. How would a citizen without a sense of duty voluntary bow to social demands? Diminishing of civic liberties appears to be the only conceivable way to (re)construct community from the pessimistic point of view.

The more optimistic argument is first of all that the decline of the organizational degree of citizens is contented (Paxton 1999; Rotolo 1999; Dekker en van den Broek 2005; De Beer 2007). More in general, the argument is that our understanding of good citizenship changes with time, as laws, technology, education and culture in the broadest sense at the same time enhance our repertoire as citizens and change the environment in which we practice it (Schudson 1998; Sampson et al 2005; Duyvendak and Hurenkamp 2005; Dekker en De Hart 2004).

However, nostalgia is apparently hard to overcome. The critique of the pessimistic interpretation of civic engagement is well known: it longs for a time in which engagement was better, most often identified as the 1950s. More or less on the rebound, the alternative view tends implicitly to argue in favor of an evolutionary trend upwards: engagement becomes better. Modern citizens might refrain from lifelong commitments but they commit on a larger scale of activities. Scarcely hiding their appreciation of the 1960s, the prominent analysts claim that current citizenship taps participatory norms that are broader and more democratic than those of previous days, with modern citizens considered more likely to participate beyond traditional, norm-confirming practices such as bowling and voting, and turning to towards consumer boycotts, phone-ins, protest manifestations or writing letters to politicians (Dalton 2007; Schudson 1999; Inglehart and Wetzel 2005). Both perceptions are normative to a degree, valuing the temporary and informal aspects of citizenship as in itself either good or bad.

Below I make an effort to overcome this. I look at light communities (or small, informal citizen groups) as the result of good citizenship. This will help in understanding the practice of engagement without nostalgia.

Explanations of the practice of citizenship

As ideal types, I make a distinction between the 'dutiful citizen', who is a product of devoted participation and loyalty to society and 'the expressive citizen' who is the product of all the potentials society offers him.

The dutiful citizen, the good citizen from the perspective of citizenship in decay, has a job and a family. He votes every time an election comes up and has one or two clubs or associations he devotes a substantial amount of his free time to. He might very well enjoy his active citizenship, because he likes to do what society considers necessary in his eyes.

The expressive citizen is the good citizen from the perspective of citizenship in progress. He might have a job and vote as well, but more important is that he has a keen eye for his environment and the way he can contribute to make things better. He is not willing to sit on a board of an association in his free time, but is often willing to offer some of his expertise for free. This good citizen has many more capacities than visiting the voting booth. The crucial question is to what degree he is willing and able to express and develop his ideas about solidarity or tolerance.

For brevity, I understand 'dutiful citizenship' here as product of a vicious cycle: participation in robust communities is what brings it about and what it brings about is again participation in robust communities. For reasons explained above, I do not look further into this explanation. Of 'expressive citizenship' I suggest two explanations, again presented as ideal types rather than as matter-of-fact-descriptions of the highly various normative and empirical treatments of the subject. 'Citizenship as experience' puts the crucial weight on citizens willing and able to participate. 'Citizenship as possibility' considers as crucial for participation the presence of local institutions and civil society organizations. Figure 7.1 schematizes the three different understandings of the practices of citizenship

I take the work of Michael Schudson and Ronald Inglehart to be illustrative for the first type of expressive citizenship (Schudson 1998, 1999, 2006, 2007; Inglehart 1999; Inglehart and Wetzel 2005; Inglehart and Oyserman 2003; Inglehart and Cattenberg 2002). It is the deep cultural shift towards the appreciation of choice, emancipation and self-expression, institutionalized in civil liberties, that directs our

Figure 7.1

	Origins of social cohesion or trust	*Form of citizenship as a practice*	*Ideal of a 'good citizen'*
Citizenship as duty	Enduring participation	Robust communities	Enjoys fulfilling her duties on a more or less constant basis
Citizenship as experience	Citizens capable of engaging	Chosen communities	Monitors and guards his rights, acts when necessary
Citizenship as possibility	Institutions and civil society offering possibilities to engage	Temporal communities	Is willing to bring his expertise to events when he sees a possibility

practice of citizenship. Success or failure of citizenship is dependent on the degree to which citizens themselves can handle these resources. What matters is if they master the political language, know how to gain entrance into city hall or a local court, have the ear of decision-makers or media and, very importantly, have a developed sense of 'fair' and 'unfair'. This summary is rude and these authors do not only praise the development in that direction. But in the end, a firm liberal predilection informs the narrative of the 'engaged' or 'monitorial' citizen. In this view, the crucial constitutive characteristic of modern citizenship is choice.

In terms of causes and consequences this means that for citizens to become active, first of all capable and well-informed citizens need to be present, and subsequently the institutions, laws, parties and civil society organizations which they know how to use effectively. What accounts for the differences with previous periods of engagement, is the combination of the rising level of education and the growing possibilities to engage with politics or society at large, via media such as mail and phone, via collective strategies such as a public protest or via juridical action. Where there is no or little engagement, the blame is firstly on the reproduction of conformist attitudes and secondly on institutional dysfunction, but not on civic laziness or neglect of duties. 'Not a more compliant but a more emancipative posture is what most publics need to become more democratic' (Inglehart and Weltzel 2005, p. 7).

This explanation raises at least two sets of empirical questions or hesitations. DeJaegere and Hooghe demonstrate that on the one hand this 'monitorial citizen' is generally better-educated and on the other hand slightly less politically active than the average citizen (DeJaegere and Hooghe 2007). Does education become more crucial than it already was as a predictor for engagement? Wuthnow found that 'loose connections' were more or less forced upon citizens, that the average citizen would rather have steady communities but lacks time due to

changes in family life, organizational life and professional life (Wuthnow 1998). Would citizens rather participate in other, more stable ways? Are their informal connections nothing more than second best options?

The alternative explanation of 'expressive citizenship' is that it comes about as a consequence of institutional abundance. A once clear-cut civil society dissolves in organizations and activities of mixed character, operating in a business-like and civic manner at the same time (Dekker 2002). Hence community service centers, libraries, churches and schools are at the heart of modern citizenship nowadays (Sampson et al. 2005; Fung 2004; Oliver 2001; Dalton 2007). Where in the individualist explanation of expressive citizenship choice is stressed, here the temporal nature of engagement is the key characteristic. 'Events' rather than 'membership' account for a vibrant citizenry, and it is during the community breakfasts or barbecues, the sporting tournaments, the meetings around the reconstruction of a neighborhood that modern citizens practice their engagement.

Protest, gatherings or meetings of the mind will never last. But they do need the possibility to arise for democracy to stay healthy. In terms of causation, here participation in a certain neighborhood is a consequence of the processes in community-based organizational structures, especially non-profit organizations. These produce the 'blended events' (Sampson et. al. 2005) to which all types of organizations and citizens every now and then contribute. They carry the citizenship that is not or is poorly measured when you understand citizenship as a task performed in autonomous, clear cut civil society organizations. This 'empowered participation' (Fung 2004) has little to do with spontaneous action or individual ambitions, but everything to do with conscious planning of dialogue with and between citizens by professionals. Instead of the individual capacity, 'civic capacity' is stressed, the degree to which citizens are connected to the public domain in the broadest sense (Oliver 2001).

This focus on blended action also has its setbacks. When more or less any activity counts as a practice of citizenship, the consequence is that citizenship will not develop a distinct character. It might be predominantly a government agenda that is being carried out (Marinetto 2003). Mixing the practices of activism and traditional citizenship will somehow produce a rather middle-of-the-road type of engagement. (Sampson et al. 2005), Citizens who feel that government or 'the system' is completely against them will not consider participation a possibility but rather a surrender, or at least an unattractive option.

Operationalizing expressive citizenship

These two explanations allow the development of two hypotheses. Hypothesis one would be that individual capacities in the end are crucial to exercise modern citizenship. Where modern or recent practices arise, civically savvy citizens make for the tipping point of civic engagement. As a consequence, their practices will be informal, temporal and critical of the existing order on the one hand and homogenous rather than mixed, consisting of higher-educated rather than lower-educated citizens on the other hand. I will refer to this hypothesis as the 'experience hypothesis', as it is individual experience that gets engagement going, both in terms of civic know-how and in terms of encounters with situations judged as unjust.

Hypothesis two would be that institutional abundance is crucial for expressive citizenship to arise. The modus operandi of an increasingly porous civil society will be decisive for future civic engagement. As a consequence, this engagement is temporal in form. Due to the high degree of cooperation with professionals, this form of citizenship is predominantly compliant in content and participation is at least partly dependent on the quality of the dialogic and civic processes. I will refer to this hypothesis as the 'possibilities hypothesis', as engagement rests in the institutional processes that offer clues to citizens.

As a unit of analysis I take informal citizen groups, often known as 'citizen initiatives'. This is a clear choice against the social expressions in which the temporal aspect is stronger, such as so-called 'flash mobs' or the more traditional street protests, or against social expressions in which the individualistic character is stronger, such as writing letters or making phone calls to politicians as an alternative to taking malcontent to the streets. Hence a certain degree of engagement is already produced by my selection. It will not allow me to be compelling on the actual source of citizenship, as the choice to engage in one way or another has already been made. But it will give more than enough leeway to look into the practice of citizenship.

Subjects are thus the committees fighting for or against speed bumps in their street, the groups that collect clothes or shoes for a village somewhere else in the world, the acquaintances who every now and then come together to help local asylum-seekers, the friends who run a website with tips for squatting, a few artists who want to enliven their local environment with wall paintings, the neighbors that walk the street at night against burglary and other unrest, an elderly woman and her helpers who operate a telephone line answering calls from lonely people, a group of the visually handicapped that creates an exhibition to experience blindness.

These are groups that could tell us something about the conditions of modern citizenship, because they are small rather than big, informal rather than deeply structured, temporal rather than long lived, and, as such, the clear-cut opposite to the more traditional, enduring forms of engagement. If the too superfluous ambitions of modern citizenship would have to be discovered anywhere it would be among this species of light communities. Neither among the citizens who choose to stay at home nor among the citizens who dutifully pay their respects to the more institutionalized parts of civil society.

Around these, 'citizen initiatives' a dataset was gathered in the first half of 2006 (Hurenkamp, Tonkens and Duyvendak 2006). To contact respondents, we used three different databases compiled of initiatives that at a certain point in time had sought contact with one of the larger civil society organizations in the Netherlands, a set of addresses from Utrecht and two large sets of national addresses. As much as possible we left out the large clubs on sight, i.e. those that had somehow indicated having more than twenty members or volunteers. We also left out those that had visible formal links to existing social policy institutions. We proceeded by asking members of the initiatives about their goals, their motives, their contacts, their grievances, their ideas on citizenship, their other connections to civil society, the amount of time invested and whether or not they considered quitting their group. We did this by phone via a predominantly pre-structured list of half-open questions. All in all we managed to interview 386 representatives over a period of six weeks in the beginning of 2006. Next to that, we visited and interviewed twenty members and spoke for one to two hours about the ambitions and frustrations of their informal association.

Based on the 70 small informal initiatives we found after extensive snowballing in what is considered to be an average Dutch countryside village – Smilde (Drente) – one could make a rough estimation of the total number of this phenomenon in the Netherlands that would land us somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 informal communities of this kind. This is already an indication that too nervous fretting about the state of 'the social' is not justified. The Netherlands has always been a fruitful breeding ground for this type of small-scale citizen action (cf. Chanan 1992).

However, full representivity is not guaranteed. Where in the village of Smilde we did touch upon the most free-flowing of initiatives, the used databases led us to those clubs with at least a minimal ambition to engage the outside world, otherwise they would not have taken the time to present themselves on a website or one of the other platforms. But as will become clear, the variance of behavior among the initiatives and their members is substantial and yet there are some constant pat-

terns. Hence we think we can make a robust claim regarding the trend towards the conditions and consequences of looser citizenship.

As indicators for the different forms of expressive citizenship, I use the educational level of the respondent, the nature of the goal of the light community, the character of the motives that rest at the heart of its existence, the direction of longing for change of its own function- ing, the degree to which trouble is experienced with finding coopera- tive co-citizens, the degree to which respondents consider ceasing their civic activities, the degree of contact among members and with other organizations or associations.

For the 'experience hypothesis' to be meaningful, the educational le- vel should be high to very high, the goals and motives should be under- standable as substantially contributing to individual deployment and growth on the one hand and fairly critical of existing social relations on the other hand.

For the 'possibilities hypothesis' to stand the test, one would expect that the light communities thrive in densely serviced areas, but also that they are rather short lived and result oriented, and that they are harmoniously if not compliantly relating to government. Education would still be important, but as the light communities are in this view seen as 'events' made possible by civil society, it can reasonably be ex- pected that at least some institutional measures directed towards un- derrepresented minorities will correct for too strong distortions and that hence education will be less prominent as a predictor. Figure 7.2 collects the hypotheses and their consequences.

Figurre 7.2

Communities	Shape	Content	Members
Experience	Informal rather than formal	Contending elites	Higher educated homogeneous, considering leaving
Possibilities	Temporal rather than enduring	Celebrating community	Relatively mixed population, participation as long as process is considered meaningful

Traditional in content

With 25 percent of the respondents having finished university and 35 percent having finished higher vocational education, the initiatives are predominantly the affair of the higher educated. These are the people that usually master civic practices, whether it is negotiating with co-citizens or officials, thinking in terms of strategy, gathering some money or organizing public attention. This overrepresentation is on the one hand a result of the dataset, but it also confirms existing research on the subject of civic engagement (cf. Verba et al. 1995, p. 305-307) Hence, the members of these light communities might indeed seek to evade strong commitment – not because they fear it, but because they have learned how to live without it.

However, the goals the initiatives claim prevent instantly jumping to the experience-centered interpretation of citizenship. According to that explanation these types of modern engagement would, negatively put, predominantly consist of citizens disguising individual aspirations as collective action (Putnam 2000, p. 152; Wuthnow 1998). More positively put, they would consist of people that are activist in the way they consume, that are concerned less with social order than with autonomy, that are skeptical of government and authority in general ((Zukin et al. 2007, p 77; Dalton 2008, p. 162; Inglehart and Welzel 2005, p. 118).

But when sorted according to the goals they set themselves, 'helping out others' makes for just under half of the goals these initiatives set themselves, with 'livability' a clear second and only as a third goal the more or less selfish goals collected under 'having fun'. 'Helping out others' is here a container for primarily non-place centered activities; collecting clothes for the needy, organizing dance evenings for the handicapped, looking for ways to minimize violence on television, breaking cultural or sexual taboos among ethnic minorities, offering comfort to mothers of drug-using children. The initiatives often operate on a local or regional scale, but there is also a distinct group of people who, after having traveled abroad, decide to help a certain village or group of people in another (poor) country. Apparently really 'good' in their ambitions, all of the contributors have a certain personal plan as well – varying from killing time to developing new skills.

'Livability' captures the clubs that want to change things in the neighborhood. Think of the informal neighborhood councils that engage with local councils or housing corporations to reduce or enlarge the number of parking spots, that walk the streets at night in unsafe neighborhoods, the (sometimes mobile) cafés serving coffee and lemonade spontaneously as a way for people to get to know one another. In the initiatives under the heading of 'having fun', were motives that

were often of an artistic or sporting kind. These are more clearly selfish rather than outright civic, focused on things like skating tournaments for kids or offering people the chance to be part of a movie. Getting to know other people appears to be the ambition here rather than really changing things.

When asked whether they'd start their undertaking because of an 'experience in their own life', 'in their direct environment' or 'in the media', two thirds of the respondents indicated that it was not their own experience but something else that got them going, something they learnt from the media or an experience of someone they know. Hence, the idea that citizens under informal and temporary conditions work on matters that predominantly occupy them personally is not easy to substantiate.

Finally, the 'temporal' aspect of this engagement should not be exaggerated. Finding new participants or new volunteers to share in the work of their association is in 72 percent of the initiatives no issue or just a small problem, according to the respondents. And quitting what they are doing is not on the minds of the larger part of the respondents, with 60 percent reporting 'not thinking about quitting' and 20 percent reporting quitting 'maybe in a few years'. These citizens report no extensive trouble regarding their continuity. As lightly as they may be organized, these communities cannot be understood as the carriers or products of 'events' alone: their existence is more or less a goal in itself.

So a first conclusion would be that from both hypotheses mentioned in Figure 7.2, elements are found. These very informal associations are not vessels to achieve personal gain, but rather communities in which (generally higher-educated) citizens set out to enlighten the life of others. In terms of shape they are 'informal' rather than 'temporal' and their content is about 'celebrating community' rather than 'contending elites'. Their civic mind is set by an appreciation of freedom in the way they organize themselves, without that freedom leading to a constant or existence-threatening reshuffling of memberships.

But what matters as least as much is that there is relatively little expressed aversion of government and of elites to be found. This is not a Dutch phenomenon. 'Protest and collective civic engagement events tend to be overwhelmingly mundane, local, initiated by relatively advantaged segments of society, and devoid of major conflict' (Sampson et al 2005, p. 675). These light communities legitimize government by gently ignoring it or by more or less happily cooperating with it. This type of engagement is rather traditional in its ambitions. It is focused more on helping than on fighting, more on gathering than on self-expression. In this sense the dutiful character of good citizenship as portrayed by the interpretations of civic participation in the wake of Robert

Putnam is less an ideal than a fact. These active citizens understand their engagement as a very social affair rather than a political one. No matter how much they care for their individual liberty, when they set out to (re)construct society they soothe, feed, dance and play rather than march, write or talk. As a counterpoint, there also is an explicit 'not in my backyard' character to a part of the livability initiatives, in which a lot of discontent about the local state of affairs is concentrated. But in numbers they are outdone substantially.

This makes it attractive to explore what the organizing characteristics of this 'celebrating community' are exactly. Below I tap into the one-on-one interviews to shed some light on this (cf. Hurenkamp, Tonkens and Duyvendak 2006; Hurenkamp and Rooduijn 2009).

New in organization

What really got respondents going was the degree of cooperative behavior from adjoining institutions and communities. That appeared to have a more important function for active citizens' confidence and satisfaction than the highly mediatized villains 'individualism' or 'egoism'. As Mathilde, in her fifties, explains:

> I started out organizing illegal work for asylum seekers when I worked as a translator in the center where they live. At that time these centers still used to have a library, sports-facilities and other things we consider normal daily life amenities. But more and more these were held to be too fancy for asylum-seekers. These people got bored, lived in small rooms with many people and this caused great stress among them. Some of them asked for work and I realized there were small things to be done in my house. From there on, it was rather simple to maintain a small network of people I know from the church to provide odd jobs around houses from people in the neighborhood, distributing errands and the like.

There is relatively little effort in Mathilde's job and there is some clear efficient if not selfish thinking to distinguish. The people that make use of the offered 'service' by outsourcing their daily shopping for just a few euros get a nice bargain. Yet it would be out of touch to understand the informal group this woman formed in Utrecht as just a product of a rights regarding or 'monitorial' engagement vis à vis a considered malevolent government (cf. Schudson 1998). It is not that they are entirely happy with how society runs, on the contrary. But they do something they think is feasible, only to discover that local govern-

ment, being of another political color than national government, is silently happy with their activity and stimulates them in several ways, even rewarding them with a local prize. The five or six active members know each other from the church they visit, but yet they will not go to this church every week. They might only phone one another every now and then to maintain their small community. But they are not really considering changing this strategy.

In Velsen, Tina and Jan run the exhibition 'Seen in the Dark'. The goal is to give able-sighted visitors an experience of what it means to be blind, by walking a completely dark course with just a stick and their sense of hearing. Both visually handicapped themselves, their eight-year-old initiative could again easily be portrayed as a mere self-interested action, as it is not so much oriented towards civil society as towards the seeing society, and as only the visually handicapped can be active in it. 'Seen in the Dark' makes no effort to influence local politics, nor does it bang the drum about the visually handicapped community's lack of rights in general.

'It is about educating people in a way that was not available before we made it up. But we also use the exhibition for things like team-building processes,' explains Jan. He and his wife are more or less engaged full-time with their endeavor. Besides, there are always around twelve (visually handicapped) volunteers, active as guides, to assist with huge numbers of visitors. But these volunteers will often disappear quickly again, as they might be young and too curious to stay on the same spot for a long time, or as they have to travel a great distance and find this too challenging. Jan and Tina regularly have difficulties filling the vacancies. And without the support every now and then of local government, their idea would not have found a house, literally.

All the ingredients are there to understand the informal community around the exhibition as thwarted, with rather loose if not selfish connections dominant and continuity not guaranteed. But the whole process of creating the exhibition, with all the dialogues and negotiating involved, made them confident about the future of their small center. Addressing these forms of citizenship as the result of emancipated individuals striving for ties as loosely as possible would overlook the ambitions these citizens have to enlarge their initiative. It is not necessarily by more meetings with their own participants, more manifestations or more palpable results, but by more connections with their direct environment. More direct entry into local politics to organize more financial support, better entry in local welfare organizations to get help with finding volunteers or to overcome complex regulation. Improvement of their civic engagement is about knowing phone numbers and faces – or in this case, voices. It is not about having somebody prescribe to them what to do, or about getting more people engaged

with setting the agenda of the small community. Their quest is to maintain liberty while gaining continuity.

On close inspection, 'less weight, more embedding' is the way in which rather traditional notions of citizenship live on. Rather than grow big or raise cash, the primary goal of these communities is to get more or better contact with their surroundings: they can be 'light' communities because there are professionals, buildings, laws, schools or churches to carry a part of the organizational burden. To underline this qualitative finding quantitatively, I took into account the amount of contact the initiatives had among one another and the amount of contact they had with other organizations or the outside world. To measure contact among members I equally valued contact by meeting one another, contact by phone and contact by email. To measure the degree of contact with the outside world, I looked at participation in other civic organizations, cooperation with other civic organizations and contact with local government. This allows making a fourfold distinction of initiatives.

There is a group of initiatives with little contact among the members and little contact with the outside world – *feather light groups*. These are the people who in various degrees struggle to pursue a personal brainchild. The groups might consist of not much more than an advisory website and two people who sporadically maintain it, or two or three people who submit a phone number in local newspapers to offer lonely people a chance to talk. Their educational level is a bit lower than average. There is little money involved and most often also not very much time spent.

Then there are groups that have little contact among themselves, but relatively a lot with the outside world – *networked groups*. Higher educated than the average of the respondents, these are the groups that often concentrate on livability and similar measurable topics on which they have a concrete take. Active citizens in these groups do not care too much about socializing among one another. What matters most for these communities is the result, such as less traffic in the neighborhood.

The third group has a lot of contact among themselves, but relatively little with the outside world – *cooperative groups*. These are often place-centered, around returning festivities in a neighborhood or around a certain group (of elderly, migrants) in a certain neighborhood. The educational level is again a bit lower than average. Here, socializing among members rather than results play a larger role.

These three groups account more or less for just under half of the total, i.e. the feather light make up for twelve, the networked for nineteen and the cooperative groups for twenty percent. Then there is the group in which initiatives have both substantial contact among them-

selves and with the outside world – *nested groups*. The nested groups make for just over the majority of the set, surely partly as a result of the dataset. These groups again are dominated by the higher educated. The range of goals and motives is wide. They often have managed to establish a small tradition of their own, with regular meetings, clearly distinguished functions, identifiable connections with local government or with a company, a welfare organization or community centre or a church or a mosque. This makes continuity easy.

When related to the different ambitions the informal communities represent, a pattern becomes visible. The feather light initiatives are not overtly happy with their loose connections. On the question of what (if anything) they'd like to ask from government, the answer more often than not has to do with listening better or more, or having the chance to have a dialogue, getting more information. Whereas the answers meaning 'do nothing' were more or less constant among the initiatives, there is a rise in longing for some sort of contact among the lighter initiatives. Direct interviews underscored the rather modest claims, directed towards acknowledgement of the particular idea or ideas living in the feather light groups. Given that the degree of education in these feather light communities is lower than average, a lack of skills and lack of opportunities to actually fulfill these modest demands are more reasonable explanations than a lack of good will or time. They are not familiar with local politics or do not know how to make their community attractive to other citizens. The very light initiatives strive more or less in vain for more contact or more embedding, which is indeed predicted in the pessimistic interpretations of individualization or atomization (Beck 2002; Bauman 2001). But what is obstructing them is not so much a demanding personal agenda or an abundance of choice in their individual lives, but a very focused inability to find like-minded citizens or to connect to public servants or social professionals. It is not so much the egoism of others that bothers the feather light communities. Rather it is a lack of self-efficacy or a lack of entry into formal institutions.

To underscore this, it is instructive to make an explicit comparison between city and countryside. Predictably, the initiatives in the city are more oriented towards livability and those on the countryside towards more all-purpose social activities, such as sports. In the village, both the very light and the nested initiatives are relatively prominent, and both the networking and the cooperative types are relatively less represented (Hurenkamp and Rooduijn 2009). In the city the distribution is more even-handed when compared to the national distribution, with a slight overrepresentation of both the networking and the cooperative initiatives. Face-to-face interviews suggested that, in the village, feather light communities seldom were the result of choice, but rather of the

failure to enter the larger local civil society. As Gert, in his sixties explains:

> I organize these badminton tournaments for the kids. Basically, because you have to keep them off the streets a little bit. But it is difficult to find people to help me. My wife now does the financial administration. I don't know why it is difficult, maybe because I'm not from this village, maybe because there are not that many people living around here, and they live at quite large distances from each other. The people here will help you immediately when there is a problem with your house or something like that, the obligations as a neighbor are felt strong. But as for my badminton club, it just won't work out.

In the city there are more institutions, local services and co-citizens to connect to, to tap knowledge or aid from, to float on, so to speak. As a consequence, feather light communities are more often the explicit choice of their members and what is more important, more often translate into one of the socially richer structured initiatives.

This pattern can be summarized as a pyramid of needs.

Figure 7.3

It is more or less a citizen-based reflection of the 'possibility hypothesis', of the appreciation of citizenship as at least partly a product of institutional abundance. These light communities or their members turn for their needs to the professionalized parts of civil society. They hardly try to function autonomously as regular or traditional civic associations would, but make ample use of office space, telephones, sport fields,

meeting rooms and email lists of the churches, companies, local welfare institutions and schools in their neighborhood.

When the social density of the different communities rises, the longings are formulated more in the direction of acknowledgement of experience. The wish is no longer about being recognized as an active citizen, but about being taken seriously. These are regularly the higher-educated people who have gathered expertise on a certain topic, with bookshelves full of information. They not only want to be heard, they want to be taken into account. It is only among the nested initiatives that more money becomes a clear desire. Among these, there exists already a substantial amount of internal and external contact, and it is predominantly by creating more financial latitude that these active citizens see the quality of their civic work rise. They have outlets for their ideas, they know that these will land somewhere at least every now and then, and when it comes to thinking about enhancing their community, a newer computer or fees for traveling become attractive.

Conclusion

If I were a king and these citizens my subjects, they would make me by turns happy and sad. But they would not make me nostalgic, as they display substantial creativity in adapting to new circumstances. 'Organize liberal, think conservative' is a tempting summary of the practice described above: a comment on both the optimistic account of citizens becoming more emancipated and hence better democratic citizens and on the pessimistic account of citizens becoming more individualistic and hence less socially engaged. There is no demeaning connotation to be read in either the label 'conservative' or 'liberal': the light communities described here have a more or less liberal dislike of internal prescriptions and a more or less conservative approach to society in the sense that they are predominantly a- or anti-revolutionary in their ambitions.

At least in this particular kind of 'new' citizen action, there is less free roaming, high-spirited, critical, autonomous or other 'sixties' emulating anti-elite activity than is often suggested in the 'new engagement' literature. The experience of citizenship has become more an expression of individual rights than a mere follow-up of social duties, but the consequences in terms of the direction of their engagement are less rigorous than predicted. 'Rising self expression values have not brought a decline in all civic activities, ' Inlgehart and Welzel conclude, 'The bureaucratic organizations that once controlled the masses, such as political machines, labor unions and churches, are losing their grip, but more spontaneous, expressive, and issue oriented forms of partici-

pation, are becoming widespread. The rise of self-expression values is linked with higher levels of political action, focused on making elites more responsive to popular demands' (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, p. 294). Although this trend is unmistakably visible during elections and on the internet, I have shown here a far less ambitious side to expressive or informal citizenship, focused on acquiescent caring and protecting the neighborhood, eager to cooperate every now and then with local government.

There is nothing really new to it, accept for the fact that people organize their ambitions to share some of their time, safeguard parts of their surroundings or change elements of their neighborhood in a less strict matter. Partly because they want to. Partly because they can, because this mode of citizenship is made possible. It is not only a pressure of work and family that keeps people from participating in 'real' associations, i.e. bowling leagues. The more or less unhappily maintained 'loose connections' Robert Wuthnow is describing, are only an element of the story on modern engagement (Wuthnow 1998). The informal associations citizens can maintain because they are civically savvy and at times institutionally supported are just as real to them as the ones with regular meetings and membership cards.

It is in that sense not too surprising that these loosely organized citizens produce various kinds of social cohesion, more than one would suspect on the basis of the often gloomy 'social capital' literature. 'There is something to be said for the neo-conservative argument that in the modern world we need to recapture the density of associational life and relearn the activities and understandings that go with it,' Michael Walzer writes (1998, p. 142). Given the number of these light communities and their ambitions one can only wonder what point he is trying to make exactly. Citizens do associate. But they do this on their own terms. These terms are space to maneuver and tinker with their civic identity on the one hand and on the other hand an inclination to keep actual fighting or debating restricted to matters that touch upon their own lives.

This still leaves enough to worry about. But it is not so much their short-lived character or the coming and going of members these light communities report trouble with, as is implicated in studies of 'individualization', for instance when Beck describes the movement people make from 'communities of necessities' to 'elective affinities' (Beck 2002). Rather, it is the degree to which they are embedded in a larger civil society that predicts their (assessment of their own) functioning. Hence, alternating between trusting or distrusting individuals' capacities and willingness to participate in society is an unattractive analytical position to look at the effects of growing choice in participation.

If anything can kick-start contemporary, resilient citizenship practices, it is a structure of institutional and cultural possibilities. When looking for ways to reconstruct community ('a new we') under these circumstances, think of local services providing small budgets and organizational advice to (potential) active citizens without asking larger administrative acts in return. Think of training 'new' active citizens instead of complaining about the vested active citizens and their well-known repertoire. Think of the administrative institutions and vested civil society organizations professionalizing in the art of dealing with citizens – not just 'listening' but also 'talking back', not just receiving a letter or organizing a hearing, but actually relating to its content and outcomes.