



REVIEW ARTICLE

Volunteering and Social Class: The Case of Volunteer Fire Fighting[#]

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Abstract

This paper reports results of an ethnographic study of volunteer fire companies in small, rural, historically coal mining towns in the Eastern United States. The paper grows out of discussions of communitarianism where leading theorists like Etzioni envision communal values and behaviors arising from rich, densely networked social worlds. However, social scientists have long seen modern societies as trending in the direction of being more and more individualistic, where self-interest undermines voluntarism. This raises the question of whether the kind of rich, meaningful communities thought to be necessary for communitarian society are sufficiently common to allow for a communitarian society. While we do not have answers for broad questions about why people do or do not volunteer, our ethnography of volunteer fire companies shows that they are, indeed, densely organized, richly networked groupings that are highly meaningful to participants. Their strong internal organizational culture motivates people to engage in dangerous volunteering while that dangerous work also builds social structures that are enjoyable and deeply meaningful to participants. We interpret the vitality of the fire companies as related to the cultural history in the communities we studied of the coal mining industry and the perseverance of what residents call “coal cracker culture”. In this culture, experiencing danger in the company of small groups of fellow workers is central to meaning making and to the construction of personal identities. While volunteer fire fighters work at a diverse variety of jobs, the work of volunteer fire fighting pulls them together into a common organizational culture. We present this as a working class style of volunteering that is consistent with a Marxist interpretation of the relationship between work and working class identity.

Introduction

This paper originates from a discussion about how communitarianism relates to the social economy. We drew our understandings about communitarianism from [1] who has been one of the most forceful exponents of this perspective. A communitarian society is one where people are guided by a strong set of moral values that are created and defined by a “thick” social order. Moral values need to be shared and enforced by community members but they also must allow for individual autonomy and choice. Individuals may expect to have certain rights within the group, but they also must take responsibility for the whole. In an earlier context we argued that there must be a balance between rights and responsibilities [2].

When we consider the idea of communitarianism in the context of the economy, we face the problem that contemporary economic theory conceives of individuals as rational actors seeking to maximize their personal self-interest. This sets up the problem proposed by [3] who asked how community could occur in a society of self-interested actors. Etzioni’s image of a communitarian society is one where people are enmeshed in a thick social structure where relationships of mutual trust and reciprocity lead people to undertake actions for the common good. In the society imagined by methodological individualists [4], it is hard to imagine how this would happen. An interesting solution to the Olson/Boudon problem is the

“community of limited liability” proposed by [5], which we will discuss later in this paper.

This paper draws upon a different conception of the economy, drawn from Marx, where economic activity and, in particular, class identity are built on the social and communal context in which people live and act. In particular, we offer a conception of working class identity, in which the substance of labor itself is not interesting, creative, or a source of identity as work might be among members of the middle class. Rather, through the 19th and 20th century industrial labor tended to be geographically specific, organized around neighborhoods, and a complex of associations, political groups, and local relationships created the sort of thick social order Etzioni seems to have in mind [6, 7].

Social scientists have long argued that these kinds of socially dense, personally meaningful social worlds are in decline as societies become more urban, people become more mobile, and work becomes more industrialized, impersonal, and professionalized [8,9]. To the extent people do good works by volunteering, they do so because they enjoy collaborative work and they have internalized what are called “prosocial”

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values [10, 11, 12, 13]. The values are thought to come from socializing institutions that inculcate certain beliefs but the motivations to volunteer are psychological and individual [14]. They can be easily understood in economic terms as a form of consumption and there tends to be an inverse relationship between volunteering and socioeconomic status.

Volunteer Fire Fighting

This paper gives a contrary interpretation of the relationship between social class and volunteering based on an ethnographic study of volunteer fire companies in two small, rural, former coal mining communities in the eastern United States. Much recent analysis of the propensity for people to volunteer comes from survey research studies that cannot provide contextual detail about respondents and those studies also are mostly based on psychological theories related to attitudes, motivation, and specific life circumstances. The studies provide probabilistic predictions about who will volunteer and why they will do so. They report a tendency for volunteering to decline as we move down the socioeconomic status ladder and they also report a tendency for volunteering to decline over time as individualism and self-interested decision making increases.

We suspect these over-time trends are correct since those managing volunteer fire companies uniformly report a difficulty in recruiting new volunteer firefighters and ambulance crews [15]. But this paper is based on a counter-tendency, that volunteer fire fighters are passionately involved in and committed to the work, that they report strong group solidarity and pleasure from relationships, that despite life-threatening work they value the excitement and technical challenges of firefighting, and, at least in the communities we studied, there was a significant core of people actively involved in the work of fire companies. Many of the firefighters we met would identify with the working class and a significant number came from low-income family backgrounds. A challenge is that many young people who might join volunteer fire companies leave town when they finish high school, often to attend college, and few of them return. Carr and Kaffalas call them the “leavers”. Despite this, we find that many of these leavers, the more middle class members of the population, none-the-less take strong values about volunteering with them and the fuel a strong culture of service learning in colleges. Among these service-oriented college students, there is strong membership in college volunteer fire and ambulance clubs, groups that support and supplement the volunteer fire companies in towns where colleges are located.

These findings lead us to question probabilistic and psychological theories of volunteering. While there may be overall tendencies of volunteer decline, we find a strong pattern of volunteer commitment and heroism among working class volunteers [16, 17]. The designation “working class” is important because the inclination to volunteer and strong commitment over time is related to people being embedded in strong-tie, geographically based, local communities. This

harks back to ethnographic community studies from past decades where work, family, neighborhood life, and civic involvement were tied together to form communities where bonding social capital was strong.

People would volunteer because of long-standing family involvements in institutions like volunteer fire companies. They were involved in the ongoing social life of their community that centered on institutions and settings that provided places in which community could be enacted, places like churches, sports leagues, and social clubs like fraternal societies and the social clubs of fire companies. They volunteered because community members recognized a need for things like fire protection and community members wanted to pitch in to serve the community. Finally, leadership and political activity were personally important and much valued in the community so people would step forward to fill these roles.

Stability in work and family life is and was important in these working class communities. Earlier studies emphasized the way the institutional structure of industrial jobs built working class communities [18]. Lacking strong local work institutions, stable work was important to firefighters we met because it provided a strong economic platform for building their lives. Work generally did not provide a lot of intrinsic meaning and this is one of the things fire companies provided. Strong family lives were also part of the integrating patterns in these people’s lives. The intense social lives of fire companies that usually included families in weekend activities was also important. Neighborhood social life in our towns is weaker than it was when our older firefighters were growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. But cleaning the fire halls, running fundraisers, and providing things like evening cookouts for teenagers generated social cohesion that people valued.

The psychological motivation to volunteer and a prosocial attitude towards helping the community was strongly present among the firefighters we met. But those motivations and attitudes were also present among the “leavers” we interviewed [19]. We found that there were strong social-structural barriers to volunteering that both undermined the organizational structures of volunteer fire companies and militated against young people becoming active. Volunteer fire fighting requires extensive, time-consuming training. Companies neither explain to young people what is involved and why this training might be attractive nor do they pay them for their time. Teen age life has changed in the last half century with the growth of women’s sports and a broad array of youth-involving activities that compete for the time of young people who might otherwise join junior firefighting clubs.

Built into youth sports and many of the other youth clubs are strong procedures for teaching values of service and civic engagement. Upwardly mobile young people internalize these values and take them to college where they drive volunteer activities. We follow Etzioni’s argument that strong communitarianism relies on systems for teaching and enforcing

values of civic responsibility and community engagement. We heard about these values from the “leavers” in our fire fighter study—the teen aged children of fire fighters who were headed off to college. While strong values of volunteering exist among these people, they are not anchored in geographically defined local communities and they are likely to enter adult work roles where the kind of time consuming and place-based volunteering called for by volunteer fire fighting is not possible. They still are likely to volunteer but they are likely to do work that puts their newly developed professional skills to work in complex ways and that gives them time flexibility so they can integrate volunteering into work and family responsibilities.

Method

This paper is based on a year-long study of two communities that we call Wakanda and Mt. Scopus. We interviewed twenty firefighters, spent time in the fire halls and the social halls, and engaged in about twenty additional interviews with community members who were not directly involved in firefighting. It was important to talk to community members who were not firefighting since this project required that we do a whole community study. That some aspects of community life did not come into this narrative about fire does not change the fact that church life, bar life, and neighborhood teen gangs all built the narrative of how fire companies work and why they are important.

The history of the coal industry was very much present in our interviews even though the coal industry has not operated for fifty years. These are towns where the population is stable so individuals would have had several generations of forbears living in town and passing on a consciousness about what neighboring means, how low-income families help each other, and how churches build a sense of ethnic identity and give women a core institutional identity that somewhat counter balances the bar culture that was so central to the work processes of coal miners [20].

Local people expected to have low incomes but there also were strong values about hard work and mutual loyalty. At the same time, with poverty being the norm, people were competitive with each other when resources became available. This makes for complicated politics as people vie for leadership positions and they may attack each other sharply when political or economic spoils are up for grabs. At the same time, despite sharp conflicts breaking out people will quickly bring in a recent opponent to a group discussion should the need arrive. All the people in town depend on each other and they cannot afford for fights to break the solidarity of the group.

Volunteering and Social Class

Volunteering happens within a matrix of social relationships. Attitudes and motivations play an important role, but much more important are community and social relationships that draw people into service. This is especially true for residents of the former coal towns we studied. This is especially true

for the volunteer fire fighters we met who self-select to join the companies because danger and heroism, strong social bonds in a community, and a desire to serve are particularly important to their working class identities [6, 17]. There are, in fact, a few individuals that we could categorize as middle class in that they left their home towns, usually gained higher education, took jobs that require intellectual training and that could be categorized as “professional”. Some of these are people who left town for ten years or so to go to college and to take their first jobs but then returned to support family members or out of loyalty to the town. But the vast majority of volunteer fire fighters, men and women, have jobs that provide a stable income but they are different from each other, the work is not intrinsically interesting, and people do not find much meaning in their work.

Volunteer fire fighting provides them with passionate commitment related to work that their fathers and grandfathers might have felt as coal miners [21]. Going into the deep coal mines that characterized the lower anthracite region was dangerous work that was team oriented, drew people from similar ethnic groups, and that tended to draw people from single neighborhoods. Bars, social clubs, churches, unions, and political organizations had overlapping memberships with dense networks that produced great trust and social bonding.

Volunteer fire companies reproduce some of the important elements of coal mining culture. Residents today still call themselves “coal crackers”. This is a term that comes from the mechanics of breaking up coal once it was taken out of the mines. Residents identify strongly with coal culture and distinguish themselves from “newcomers”—about 20% of the town residents who have moved into these localities in the last ten years or so because of the low cost of living and who have no connection to the history of coal mining [22]. They also talk disparagingly of people from the cosmopolitan towns located in the valley of the large river that runs 20 miles away which is where most of the large industries and institutions are located [23, 24, 25]. Many firefighters have taken jobs along the river but they continue to live in the coal towns, commute to work, and have little identification with institutional cultures that exist in the prisons, universities, medical centers, and state departments where they have found their stable jobs.

We think of social class in terms of the opportunity structures individuals encounter, the way the economy structures local culture, and the way it fosters communities with strong bonding social capital [26, 27]. Cosmopolitans tend to be more individualistic, have more rational-actor styles of living, and minimize volunteering and participation unless it serves their self-interest and their esoteric set of hobbies and interests. Working class people value community for its own sake and participate in activities that serve the community and deepen and strengthen relationships. Cosmopolitans orient towards “communities of limited liability” where associations grow and thrive to the extent they foster residents’ self-interest and

build sentiments of local community [5, 28, 29].

Historically, working class culture grew out of the interpenetration of the organizational demands of work and the way this extended into local community life [30, 31, 18, 20, 32]. In the current times that connection between work and community has often been lost [33, 34] and strong feelings of *anomie* follow. Volunteer fire companies contrast with this pattern, producing passionate feelings of commitment and community that overcome feelings of disconnection.

One reason they are so powerful in Wakanda and Mt. Scopus is that volunteer fire work captures historical aspects of coal mining, particularly the aspect of danger. Respondents told us about the excitement they felt as late teen agers, in the 1990s, when the technology of firefighting changed dramatically. New equipment was introduced including clothing that was fire resistant and breathing equipment that together allowed firefighters for the first time to enter burning buildings. The new equipment was matched with a growth in technical information firefighters had to learn. Informants told us about a few middle-aged men who had mastered this knowledge and created informal study groups for young men where their knowledge was then their knowledge was then applied in their teaching. This instruction happened in the context of the fire hall social clubs where beer was served from the bar and where people would gather around open fire doors to have barbecues.

Going into burning buildings also heightened the dependence each person had on their partners as they went into buildings. One pair of brothers told of being on the second floor of a burning building where they went in together through a window. One brother followed as the other advanced and when the first brother suddenly fell through a burning floor the other grabbed him just in time to save him. Another fire fighter told of crawling down a hallway with his partner where the heat was so great that his helmet and coat started to melt. Their progress was blocked and he told of the horror of hearing a victim scream, burning to death just down the hall.

Another aspect of technical complexity involves the increasingly large and complex machines fire fighters use. Men like their toys, and there is excitement in riding up the cherry-picker to a high window or using the snorkel pump to shoot water from street level into a burning window. One informant who was getting too old to climb on roofs and do the more athletic things younger fire fighters do got pleasure, prestige, and the enjoyment of teamwork by operating the snorkel pump from the ground while younger men on the roof were chopping holes to allow hot air to escape and directing where the stream of water should go.

In a small community, a big fire is an event that involves the whole town. A female firefighter told of a house that burned across the street from their fire station. While she was directly involved in fighting the fire, she also realized that this was the home of her children's playmate. The playmate died

and there is a dramatic photo, described by the crime scene photographer, of the ambulance gurney being rolled up the sidewalk while twenty firefighters formed a line to block the public's view of the body to preserve the privacy of the family. Meanwhile six blocks away, in the district of the next fire company, a mother prepared to go fight the fire. Her sixth grade son was terrified to let her go because he could see the flames from home and was afraid for her safety. She assured him that she was just doing support work and would not be in danger. But it is striking how much these fires become part of the lives of everyone in town and how much the drama of one blaze reaches out to create fear and worry in other areas.

The work of combatting blazes bonds firefighters together much as working as teams in deep mines would have bound their fathers and grandfathers together [30]. After a shift in the mines men would come back to their neighborhood bar, go to the basement where there was a shower and men left clean clothes, then they would go up to the bar to wash coal dust out of their throats. Similarly, several of the fire companies we studied had social clubs where members gather after fires and during the week to talk over dramatic events. In the old days—in the 1960s and 1970s—firefighters were recruited from the social halls when a fire call came in. One of the challenges with volunteer fire companies is that the fighters must leave work and travel to the fire hall so they can get on a truck. Social halls in the old days would have daily gambling events where men had to come to the fire hall to bet and that would increase the number of people present. The social halls continue to be a focus of community social life where one must be a member to enter but people can join as “B” members—people who do not actually fight fires—contrasted with A members who do.

What makes volunteer fire companies in Wakanda and Mt. Scopus working class is that the physical, dangerous work is intrinsically exciting. It forces firefighters to work together in teams of ten or twenty people. At the point of entering buildings and confronting flames and structural damage strong bonds of teamwork are formed that then carry on outside of that setting. Those bonds become bases for friendships and family relationships when the fire is done. Firefighting requires continual maintenance of the fire trucks and the fire halls and members must be on call 24-hours a day, 365 days a year. Thus, much of firefighters' time and of their family time is concentrated in the physical space of the fire hall. Also they are always conscious that they must be available to serve so this volunteer activity is never far from consciousness. People like to reflect together on old fires, on strong leaders who socialized them into the community of firefighters, and of fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and adult friends who served as models for young people and who spent so much of their time and energy working with fire.

Social Class and Volunteering

When we say volunteer fire fighting is a working class activity

we do not mean to say that middle class people do not join volunteer fire companies nor would we say that volunteer fire companies do not exist in middle class towns—like our small college town. Rather, we emphasize a quality of community organization where physical, often boring, but sometimes dangerous work is core to the consciousness and commitments of community members. We said earlier that class memberships are related to opportunity structures. Middle class members of towns like Wakanda and Mt. Scopus are likely to be stars in high school and they are set up to leave once they have completed high school [19]. Activities of middle class young people may teach them values that make intense service activities attractive to them, but they do not remain local so they are not prime recruits for local volunteer fire companies. Their opportunity structures are outwardly focused.

As [19] tell us, the people who are not very successful in high school are likely to stay in the community. They may find stable work that allows them to marry and support a family. But work may not be located in the town where they live, the work is not likely to generate a local culture of work or a network of local relationships. These connections were important for the building of identity in past generations. Non-professional work does not provide these satisfactions today and it also does not support a matrix of local voluntary organizations that helps build a strong sense of identity, as we hear from [33, 34]

Class Solidarity in Volunteer Fire Companies

While this paper conceptualizes class in economic terms, we do not treat it either as a probabilistic measure in the sense of socioeconomic status (SES) nor in the sense of elite class dominance of the means of production and worker subordination. Rather we treat class as a cultural concept. Where middle class people often build identities around academic training and the complexities of professional work. For working class people the texture and texture of work often is not inherently satisfying. It is true that craft means of production often involve knowledge, creative skill, and a meaningful role in the division of labor in a community [35, 36]. But for many low and moderate income people work is repetitive, routine, and not inherently interesting. Our sociological accounts of this kind of work assert that to the extent work is deeply meaningful it comes from the context and organizations in which work occurs. Unions, neighborhoods built around workers who labor together in a specific industry like coal mining or steel production gain a strong sense of identity from work organizations like unions or neighborhood associations like fraternal societies, churches, ethnic associations, political organizations, and community protecting associations like volunteer fire companies.

Marxists criticize liberal conceptions of work where individuals are conceived as atomized and focused on advancing self-interest through wage labor or gaining specific benefits from community participation. The idea is that individual benefits from working or volunteering can build up into a collective

sensibility. There is a puzzle in of how community, a gift-oriented [37] relationship to a collective, can develop if people are self-interested and individualistic in focus [3]. Janowitz proposed the idea of a community of limited liability to address how sentiments of community can develop when residents or citizens are self-interested [5, 28]. In this theory self-interested actors run organizations whose self-interest and survival depend on residents of a surrounding community believing that they are part of a meaningful community. Symbolic events are created and supported to manipulate residents into building and believing in sentiments of community. Where the self-interested organizational stewards may be manipulative and cynical about the community they seek to build, community becomes real for the residents when they believe and act on the symbols of community [29].

We can find examples of community of limited liability organizations operating [38, 39] but they seem artificial and it takes a lot of effort to of effort to create the meaningful communities they generate. This work is unnecessary if we recognize that work is embedded in culture and in complex social matrices [40]

The historical and communal settings where people grow up provide them with ways of understanding and relating to community and social life. Some of these understandings may be painful, like the notion that African Americans with family histories reaching back to the slave traditions inherit feelings of trauma and oppression [41, 42]. Others may be embedded in a community's memory of its core industry, its styles of relating, the role of symbolism in motivating work, and the value of being part of an intense matrix of relationships and community. This is the case with the way volunteer fire fighting is compelling to the members we met. The personally relate to coal cracker culture and memories of danger, the craft skills that were part of coal mining, the strong sense of neighborhood relationships that people told about in terms of growing up in coal towns, and how firefighting provided a sense of passion related to this unpaid work and to the community it generated.

We can ask why some people do not connect to this history and sense of culture and simply become disconnected and anomic, as [34] finds in her interview study of working class people in the same towns studied here, Wakanda and Mt. Scopus (she gives them different names). Some individuals come from families and community contexts growing up that make coal cracker culture important and immediate for them. Quite a few firefighters come from families where there have been generations of fire fighters and their fathers or uncles served as important role models for them growing up. Other people came from families where parents were immersed in other community institutions and it is the commitment to coal-tradition communities that were transferred over to commitment to the firefighting community. Some people were exposed to the technology and the excitement of firefighting as teenagers and just found themselves fascinated and eager to be involved.

People were socialized into coal cracker culture growing up. This predisposed them to adopting and fitting into core cultural experiences they encountered in fire companies. The values are specific and symbolically powerful. People are attracted to dangerous, meaningful work. People like complex machines and technology like the whole apparatus of production that was core to coal mining. People are committed to their local community and refuse to move away, even though they would acknowledge that the decaying buildings, the giant gray slag heaps that dominate the landscape, and the fact that there is not much to do because local entertainment businesses have all failed. It is their devotion to coal cracker culture and to their personal histories in the community that lead to membership. Then the productive dynamics of firefighting keep them involved in volunteer firefighting.

It is this matrix of meanings and commitments that in our view defines volunteer firefighting as working class. Working class identity is built around a culture—in this case coal cracker culture—that has certain key components. The culture hangs together as a whole and it is fostered and supported by the persistence and meaningfulness of community and community rewards, like appreciation for service and personal exposure to danger. People want to be part of this culture because they grew up within it and people who were their mentors and role models made it clear that a meaningful life involved the actions, giving, and ongoing meaningful activities that make firefighting what it is.

The Psychological Theory of Volunteering

Much of the research on volunteering is built on psychological theories and emphasizes prosocial values and motivations to give to others. Certainly volunteer firefighters would express these values and motivations. But the psychological concepts used to explain volunteering are used mostly to define narrow, survey-research questions and variables that have no room to include context or culture as factors that helps us to explain volunteering. Volunteer fire fighters are not involved because they have personality qualities that incline them to help others. They are involved because they are part of an economic history and a community culture that makes involvement powerful, complex, and passionate. Whatever personality attributes they might have, they participate because they were drawn into the activity by childhood experiences and motivations that made firefighting a compelling activity and the community service and engagement that goes along with it a source of passion and compelling interest. [43]

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