



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

SEMINAR ABSTRACT **Revisiting the Roots of Voluntary Action**

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Colin Rochester

Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London
cirochester@macace.net

Despite the best endeavours of the Voluntary Action History Society, those who work in and with voluntary organisations remain almost totally uninterested in the concerns and forces that shaped their founding missions and the ways in which these have been adapted to changing circumstances. And those engaged in the ongoing debate about changes in public and social policy and the role to be played in it by voluntary action are similarly uninterested in the historical experience that has formed today's institutions and relationships. Even if this lack of interest could be overcome, however, existing accounts of the roots of voluntary action provide only part of the story: they are heavily skewed towards the history of philanthropy (and, to a lesser extent, mutual aid) and tend to focus on the role of voluntary organisations in the relief of poverty and on 'the moving frontier' between voluntary action and the state.

Drawing on Colin Rochester's forthcoming book, *Rediscovering Voluntary Action: The Beat of a Different Drum*, this paper addresses the shortcomings of the current historiography of voluntary action; attempts to sketch out a more rounded and comprehensive account; and explores some of the implications for theory and practice of a better understanding of voluntary action's past. It begins by summarising the generally accepted view of the sector's 'twin roots' of philanthropy and mutual aid and the key dynamic of the changing relationship between voluntary action and the state. It then introduces two further dimensions that are largely ignored in conventional historiography and argues that these are equally important to our understanding of the roots of voluntary action. The first of these perspectives focuses on efforts to bring about social change and greater social justice and stretches from the emergence of the modern 'social movement' in the later years of the eighteenth century through the great political causes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the engagement of voluntary agencies in shaping the agenda for economic, social and political change following the post war welfare settlement of the 1940s. The second is concerned with the role of conviviality and the creation of opportunities for expressive behaviours that have formed a significant element in the way we have used increasing opportunities for leisure.

This paper suggests that a more rounded view of the roots of voluntary action based on four rather than two 'impulses' goes further than the need to take account of a more varied set of functions and motivations and involves the acceptance of a more varied collection of organisational forms and ways in which people and groups interact and a more diverse set of relationships with the state. And it concludes by setting out some of the ways in which a better understanding of the history of voluntary action can inform and influence theory and practice.