

Chapter 2

Social Life and Politics in Voluntary Organizations: An Historical Perspective

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Abstract Civil society in general and voluntary organizations as its core organizational form are not a modern achievement. On the contrary, to voluntarily associate with others may be described as one fundamental way of organizing society in general, first theoretically reflected upon by Plato and Aristotle. Building on this framework, the first part of this chapter, discusses three arguments: (1) the basic definition of an association as opposed to a foundation, (2) potential role models for associations, and (3) the close interaction between community building and political thrust as specific features of associational life. In the second part, this interaction is shown as an uninterrupted history since the Middle Ages, with examples taken predominantly from Germany.

Keywords Voluntary organizations • Definition of association • Civil society • Role model for associations • Germany

To freely associate with other human beings is not peculiar to a modern, free, or open society, let alone to modern democracy. There is historical evidence both for associative life to have existed in history and in decidedly undemocratic and repressive societies and to have been suppressed as not being compatible with democracy. “Societies, clubs, membership organizations, [...] associations” (Zimmer 1996, p. 38) may well be described as the basis of human communal life. Ever since the “Axial Age,” first defined as such by Karl Jaspers (1953), when social contacts shifted from the immediate family circle to include outsiders, people have congregated either by the will of one leader or by voluntary action, and in many cases by a mixture of both. The Axial Age, as Karen Armstrong (2006) elaborated, was a global phenomenon. Everywhere, we may trace both in theory and practice a custom of people to congregate and eventually to organize the congregation in a sustainable fashion. This evolution may carry the seed of the eventual demise of an organization. As organizing, managing, and ruling overtake the purpose on the scale of priorities, the impetus to join may eventually wane.

But this is not the topic of this chapter. Rather, it will show that associative organizations are an organizational model to be found in any form of collective action,

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and may and will originate in very diverse sociopolitical conditions. Hegel's widely followed belief that associations are typical of civil society¹ (Keane 2007, p. 10) which in turn is typical of modern, i.e., post-nineteenth century society, is therefore to be refuted. Furthermore, the chapter will focus on different role models and most particularly will attempt to show with the help of some historical examples the as yet not much developed notion that a combination of community building and political deliberation provides a framework for societal development not to be underrated.

A Theory of Associations

It was Plato who attempted to reduce the final reasoning of existence to the ideas of "one" and "the indeterminate dyad"² (Flashar 2013, p. 23, 215, 236), marking the fundamental difference between the basic contrast. Although heavily criticized by Aristotle (and controversially debated as to its true meaning ever since), categorizing diverse models of organizations originated here. However, while Plato attempted to pronounce the unchanged "One" as the supreme goal of order, Aristotle (Metaphysics XIII, VI 11 3–4, 211, 1990) refused to rank the two principles. Karl Popper (1962, pp. 18–34) became one of the severest critics of Plato. Not least in evaluating the experiences of the twentieth century, he also maintained that a pluralist, change-orientated design of society is superior to one that sees change as a mark of degeneration and uniformity as an ideal to be pursued (Dürr 2004, pp. 29–37).

Aristotle, categorizing systems by whether their government was in the hands of one, a few, or many, built on his experiences in the Greek polis of his age, and was concerned with public governance. But his system of governance models can well be applied to any form of collective action. Hierarchy and heterarchy (Dreher 2013) exist under any circumstances as the two discernable models. The monarchies of old belong to the first, as the Greek poleis do to the second. Clearly, a monarchy may be aligned to the principle of "one," and the polis to the "indeterminate dyad." It is, however, equally clear that hierarchical and heterarchical types of governance may also be seen outside governmental models. In business, while privately owned and managed businesses follow the hierarchical model, joint-stock corporations are much nearer to a heterarchical form. In civil society,³ the basically heterarchical

¹ Hegel's term *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* is traditionally translated as civil society, while civil society is usually translated to *Zivilgesellschaft*, a much more comprehensive term with a very different meaning. Here, it is used in Hegel's sense to denominate *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*.

² "One" is the Greek *εν*. "Indeterminate Dyad" is the standard translation used for the Greek *αοριστος δυαζ*, dyad to mean "two."

³ The term is now used in its modern definition.

form of a membership organization contrasts sharply with the hierarchical form of a foundation. It would be an exaggeration to say, as some do (Hartmann and Offe 2011, p. 344), that membership organizations are the only form a civil society organization may legitimately have. I would contend that in looking at the state, the market, and the civil society as the three arenas of collective action outside the immediate family, both archetypes of organization exist in all of them.

Looking at these more closely, in practice they do not usually exist as archetypes. Indeed, Plato himself (Politikos 300E–303D) developed a system of six possible types of governance, contrasting three good ones (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy) with three bad ones (tyranny, oligarchy, unlawful democracy). Aristotle modified this system in respect to the democratic type, which he calls a polity, if good, and democracy, if bad, in this way attempting to make a divide between representing the common good and fighting for one's own interests. Oligarchical, tyrannical, and (in the Aristotelian sense) democratic elements may undermine a polity as much as a monarchy.

Again, while focusing on forms of governing a state, all these considerations are equally valid when applied to any other form of collective action. The associative form of organization in its narrower sense, as used to define a specific type of voluntary civil society organizations, therefore shares the typology and caveats applicable to forms developed in and for other arenas. Indeed, while describing the majority of organizations seen as part of civil society, associations are neither the only ones, nor can they theoretically be seen as inherently more legitimate than other forms, notably the foundation, the classical example of a hierarchical organization. Furthermore, hybrid forms exist in countless variations; in the history of individual associations, gradual evolutions towards an oligarchy may be witnessed as much as “polities” may develop into “democracies.”

It therefore needs to be understood that an overly normative approach will fail in describing the reality of associative life as much as in analyzing the full historical spread of this governance model. On the contrary, heterarchical and hierarchical models exist in many forms and nuances, under any given condition, and to a variety of ends, be they commercial, governmental, or other. It would be equally unjust to separate various types of organization by their potential longevity and sustainability, let alone by their wealth. In many Italian towns, membership organizations created in the thirteenth century to administer services to the poor, the sick, and the needy exist to this day (Grote 1972, p. 175), while the majority of foundations created around the same time have long since gone under.

Associations are not inherently more democratic either, but they do represent a consistent urge of man to participate in affairs he (or indeed she) feels are of interest, and therefore falsify any notion of a hierarchical concept of perennial order being superior to a continuing method of channeling an obvious disorder into structured collective action. In this context, voluntary action may be seen as decisive. When the French revolution, believing the nation was the sole admissible collectivity, abolished the legal framework for voluntary associations in 1791, it soon became clear that this concept did not correspond to reality, and a great number of more or less official associational organizations developed throughout the nine-

teenth century, until finally a law on foundations was enacted in 1901. “Nothing,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville (1840), “merits as much attention as the associations created for intellectual and moral purposes.” On the other hand, the urge to create an organization that would remain subject to the creator’s will is and always has been equally strong. Thus, foundations and associations have always existed side by side and will to all probability continue to do so.

Role Models

Associations’ specific contribution to societal life therefore needs to look at a different paradigm. In 1999, the European Commission issued a “Communication from the Commission,” listing four roles that associations and foundations could fill:

- Service provision
- Advocacy
- Self-help
- Intermediary

This functional approach has proven to be extraordinarily helpful in that it avoids disregarding certain roles, depending upon a certain political viewpoint or the focus of attention. However, the commission typology has proven to be incomplete. Three more potential roles need to be added:

- Watchdog
- Community building
- Political deliberation

The service provision role, exemplified in the services provided by big welfare organizations, is very prominent in Germany, where the principle of subsidiarity accords them a special place in the structure of the welfare state, and in other European countries like France and the Netherlands through the high proportion of educational institutions operated by civil society organizations. The advocacy role, although in existence long before, has attained a high profile over the last 30 years through the voice raised by organizations like Greenpeace, Amnesty, and Transparency International. The self-help role is not only occupied by organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous, but also by sports clubs, hugely important not only because of the numbers of people who join for their own physical benefit, but also for the importance attached to sports by politicians and by the society in general. Intermediaries comprise umbrella organizations as well as grant-making institutions, foundations in particular. The watchdog role, although close to advocacy, needs to be mentioned separately. Consumer protection for one is certainly a goal that is different from fighting for a cause. Colin Crouch (2011), in describing this role as the most important task for civil society, has a broader task in mind than concentrating on one specific theme. He argues for civil society organizations to perform a task that was at one time accorded to parliaments—to watch over what governments do.

Community Building and Political Thrust

For a very long time, the community-building role has been treated with disdain, both academically and politically. Amateur choirs and theatre groups, carnival clubs, and other organized leisure activities, although recognized as a prime method of bringing people together, have been treated as private hobbies of no societal relevance. At a time when traditional geographic communities, even at the local level, fail to give members a sense of ownership and belonging, these purposes that may seem perfectly ridiculous in themselves, and induce citizens to communicate, participate, and engage, have attained an added value that should on no account be underrated. Robert Putnam (1994), in developing the theory of social capital, had these informal networks in mind in identifying the place where social capital is developed for the benefit of others. Max Weber (1924, p. 447) in his famous address to the First Congress of Sociologists, knew about this relationship. And even Tocqueville was well aware of it (Hoffmann 2003, p. 11).

Contrary to popular belief, this type of organizations pursues a goal that is inherently public and political. I would argue that it is where political deliberation in the general sense, as described by Jürgen Habermas, takes place. Contrary to advocacy organizations, this deliberation may focus on a huge variety of goals, may change its focus, and may indeed connect different goals to gain political thrust. A good historical example is an organization called “Die Meersburger 101.” Founded in 1480, it consists to this day of 101 citizens of Meersburg, a small town on Lake Constance in southwest Germany. Members are from all walks of life. They congregate in their own house, and, as a tourist guide puts it, it is there that town politics are discussed and decisions are in fact made.

Obviously, there is no clear divide between the various types and role models. Many associations are active in more than one role. A welfare organization will regularly come forward as an advocate of the needy and destitute and thus in a sense participate in political debate when it comes to welfare policy. But it is not surprising that service providers, while possibly quite powerful, are not as much a center of political activity as leisure organizations, social networks, and community-building membership organizations potentially are (Groschke et al. 2009). There can be no doubt that the relationship between these and a political, outward-looking role model is particularly strong. In the past, preconditions such as coming from a certain social background, and sharing basic political convictions or a common religious affiliation, have proven to be a strong motivation to join a voluntary organization. And it is here that we see a marked difference between a membership organization and a foundation. Joining and participating can only happen in an associative organization. Max Weber appealed to sociologists to undertake to answer some basic questions: “What is it that connects any kind of an association, [...] from a political party to—and this sounds like a paradox—a bowling club, that is to say between whatever kind of organization and what one might in its broadest sense call the basic outlook on life [*Weltanschauung*]?” (Weber 1924, p. 446). To sum up, the awareness of this close connection between community building and

civic spirit—to use a more conventional phrase for political deliberation—analyzed by Tocqueville (Hoffmann 2003, p. 11) seems to have been lost in the twentieth century. In an age where civic spirit is in high demand (Crouch 2011), it is certainly worthwhile reflecting on the history of this connection.

Community and Participation in Historical Context

Greek and Roman law in classical times had not known any legal persons other than natural ones. It was only later that “moral persons” became legal entities. The analogy between public governance and voluntary organizations is that both developed a sense of cohesion gradually, over many centuries, accompanied by many disputes over supremacy, legitimacy, etc. Under these circumstances, voluntary bodies were no less in a development phase than others. In this context, it is important to note that the original form of *confoederatio* or *coniuratio* could only bind its members, whereas the *universitas* could act towards third parties (Isenmann 2012, p. 214a–b). For the history of voluntary bodies, this is of particular interest, as not only did they develop in close interaction with political entities, but they were part of the power struggles and political debates. Even more than today, they could and would, however, only participate in politics in as far as their members developed a strong sense of cohesion and acted individually in the interest of the community.

In many towns, the Italian example was followed, and a plethora of voluntary bodies sprang up to cope with urgent common problems. The “Misericordia” in Florence (Grote 1972, p. 175) and elsewhere have survived to this day. Their names as *confraternità* resonates with their original legal status. But they were always more than service providers. “The purpose of these brotherhoods was also to celebrate Mass and pray together, to venerate the Saints together, to organize processions together, to make donations and grants, and to congregate for meals and drinking feasts” (Isenmann 2012, p. 657a). Over time, this system of associative bodies developed into the guilds and became ever more powerful, but also ever more protective of the status quo. Associative life, at least in its established variety, was so closely intertwined with politics that it was prone to stifle new thoughts.

In northern Europe, towns, some of which went back to Roman origins, underwent a long development between the ninth and fifteenth centuries. The differences in origin, government, and a number of other factors were considerable. Yet, everywhere we find that voluntarily associating with others was a fixed asset of urban life. For a long period of time, the town itself was a voluntary body, only gradually becoming a legal entity (*universitas*) (Isenmann 2012, p. 214 a), and indeed retaining its nature as a corporation rather than part of the state for much longer than that. The City of London is an example of a local community that still sees itself as corporate rather than governmental. The famous Hanse federation, in a legal dispute of 1469, made a point of stating that they were neither *societas*, nor *collegium*, nor *universitas*, but merely a *confoederatio*, lacking all elements of a more cohesive body (Isenmann 2012, pp. 934a–935b).

The Divide Between State and Civil Society

In the wake of Bodin and Hobbes, the modern concept of sovereignty was established in the seventeenth century. It made a sharp divide between states as sole sovereign entities and other organizations, which increasingly were to become subject to the monopoly of force now exercised by governments. This was a starting point for nongovernmental organizations to be seen as opposed to governmental action. Alternative membership organizations had begun to be formed quite early on. Again, it was in Italy that the first learned societies were started in the fourteenth century (Garber 2012). The idea spread all over Europe and gained a new meaning as from the seventeenth century. Growing individualism let citizens join voluntary clubs and societies rather than being active members in corporations they were forced to join by law (Hoffmann 1981, p. 123). Reading societies, free masons' lodges, political clubs, and business societies were paramount. "The strong urge for intellectual exchange, clubbing, and promoting knowledge was to be seen here. [...] The wish to participate in public affairs became the driving force" (Garber 2012).

Surprisingly, this move towards a new form of collective action was by no means restricted to those who previously had not been able to participate. The 'Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft' (The Society that Will Bring Fruit) was founded by princes in 1617, and had up to 800 members. Ruling princes also became Freemasons, undergoing the same rituals as everyone else—quite the opposite of what was practiced at court. All in all, "the departing point of bourgeois intellectualism was the private inward-looking circle. Without losing its private character, the public was to become its forum in society" (Koselleck 1959, p. 41). Soon, societies with very different aims, but with overlapping goals existed everywhere. They may be described as the prototypes of political parties (Hoffmann 1981, p. 123).

A good example of the personal and political networking involved is Jacob (de) Mauvillon, friend of Mirabeau and coauthor of some of his works. Mauvillon first joined a Society for Agriculture and Free and Decorative Arts (*Gesellschaft des Ackerbaues und der freien oder nützlichen Künste*) in Kassel; some time later, he joined the Society of Antiquities (*Gesellschaft der Alterthümer*). In both of these, the ruling prince was a member, as were most government officials. After moving to Braunschweig, Mauvillon became a member of the Grand Club (*Grosser Klub*), again an institution of the establishment, although he was well known as a "radical element" (Hoffmann 1981, p. 128). He was also a Freemason, and later joined the Order of the *Illuminati*, a rather more progressive institution. All this gave him a chance to "push through and above all disseminate his ideas" (Hoffmann 1981, p. 151), while at the same time he was eager to join "all kinds of social events of the time that aimed at nothing but amusement and drawing room games" (Hoffmann 1981, p. 151). But while this atmosphere of congregating copied French examples, there was one big difference. In Paris, it was increasingly antigovernmental, and in the end helped overthrow the government. In Germany, it helped the reforms that, however modest, prevented the revolution from happening.

When the spirit of reform joined forces with a surge of national excitement following Napoleon's conquests, a popular sentiment towards a unified German nation-state gained ground for the first time in history (Reinhard 1999, p. 443). And civic organizations were the driving force. In 1813, over 600 Women's Unions for the Good of the Fatherland (*Frauenvereine zum Wohle des Vaterlandes*) collected 450,000 Thaler to further the national cause (against Napoleon), the members donating their golden wedding rings in exchange for iron ones inscribed "Gold gab ich für Eisen" ("I gave gold for iron"). All in all, Prussians made voluntary donations amounting to 6.5 million Thaler to help fund the "Wars of Liberation" (*Befreiungskriege*) (Clark 2006, pp. 374–375). "Perhaps the quirkiest expression of the insurrectory idea was the Turnbewegung, or gymnasts' movement, founded by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn in 1811 [...] to evolve specifically civilian forms of bodily prowess and patriotic commitment. [...] The gymnasts were [...] citizen fighters whose participation [...] was entirely voluntary. [...] Gymnasts did not march, [...] because marching killed the autonomous will.... Coupled with this hostility to the hierarchical order [...] was an implicit egalitarianism" (Clark 2006, pp. 351–352). For the first time, the voluntary initiatives of civil society—and particularly of its female members—were celebrated as integral to the state's military success (Clark 2006, p. 376).

This unity of voluntarism and the state could not last. By 1817, when some 500 students assembled at the Wartburg, ostensibly to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Reformation, frustration over the government's increasing reactionism had set in. A pamphlet published by Theodor Anton Heinrich Schmalz, Rector of the University of Berlin, in which the author attacked the patriotic secret societies and forcefully rejected the view that they had been instrumental in defeating the French, was publicly burnt (Clark 2006, p. 378). After that, reaction set in even more forcefully. Jahn's gymnastic clubs, which had a membership of around 12,000, were suppressed in 1819. Yet, commemorative associations continued, not least among students. The rise of fraternities (*Burschenschaften*) was but one expression of a sentiment that combined a cult of memory, a force of bonding, and the "quest of the inward-looking 'bourgeois self' [...] for a new kind of political community, welded together by a shared emotional commitment" (Clark 2006, p. 385).

Meeting in Karlsbad in 1819, the conservative rulers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia had decided to make it illegal to start or join a membership organization—one of many measures designed to enforce a strictly hierarchical social order. The ban was never enforced, if for the simple reason that many of the organizations that should have been banned were in fact the old order's staunchest supporters (Bösch 2002, pp. 24–25). By the end of the 1820s, discontent was paramount, but had no influence in politics, which had come under the spell of committed conservatives who believed in hierarchies as the sole proper way of organizing society. They too, however, had their voluntary bodies. The *Berliner Kritische Assoziation* (Critical Association of Berlin) was crucial in promoting Hegel's philosophy, which "before 1830 became a virtual state-philosophy in Prussia" (Watson 2010, p. 237). When Germany went to war against France in 1870, a Patriotic Women's Red Cross Society (*Vaterländischer Frauenverein vom Roten Kreuz*) took up the tradition started

in 1813 (Bösch 2002, p. 85). But until the first republican German constitution was adopted a century later, in 1919, battling for freedom of association was one of the most consistent themes of German politics (Agricola 1997). Indeed, there were associations for every taste, class, social standing, income group, and preference (Zimmer 1996, pp. 43–48). They could be decidedly conservative in outlook, supportive of the state, liberal, and radically opposed to government. The short-lived nationalist revolution of 1848 relied heavily on voluntary associations for gathering support among the citizens. After it had been crushed, it took 10 years for the first liberal society to become active again. The National Association (*Nationalverein*) became the forerunner of the liberal party.

Subcultures in Associational Life

A comprehensive history of German associative life can of course not be developed here, but two trends do need to be mentioned: the workers' associative subculture that emerged since the 1860s and the youth movement in the early 1900s. The workers in England, Switzerland, and Germany had begun to form their own clubs since the 1840s, and a national organization, called the General Fraternization of German Workers (*Allgemeine Deutsche Arbeiterverbrüderung*), was founded in 1848 (Kocka 1987, p. 13). The workers' clubs and political associations belied Hegel's assumption that this kind of organization was a specific asset of what he called civil society.

Strangely, however, it was liberal intellectuals who first organized educational societies for the workers. Karl Liebknecht, who had been forced to emigrate to Switzerland after participating in the revolution, joined a workers' union in Geneva, and after moving to England, the Communist Association. It was only in the 1860s, when Liebknecht returned to Germany, that the workers sought to disassociate themselves from the liberals. Ferdinand Lassalle, no more a worker than Liebknecht, masterminded the formation of a German General Association of Workers (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein*) in 1863, which after merging with August Bebel's Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei*) was to become Germany's Social Democratic Party (*SPD*). Incidentally, Lassalle's initiative was decidedly hierarchical. One of the reasons why it never attracted a large membership was that members had practically no say in the governance of the organization and that Lassalle himself, particularly after his early death, was revered in a pseudo-religious way. "The background of the people who acclaimed him was the Protestant Church rather than a democratic society. Discussions over statutes were not to their liking" (Herzig 2013).

What is remarkable about the whole workers' movement is that, although very much a political organization, it also encompassed a strong component of social congregation and self-help. Dancing and celebrating, and education and solidarity were as much part of associational life as was political work. In fact, political outward-going action was hotly debated before it became part of the program at all.

Women were not permitted to join. It was only in 1904 that this legal restriction was removed. To get around this obstacle, in 1873, Pauline Staegemann founded the Berlin Workers' Wives' and Girls' Association (*Berliner Arbeiterfrauen- und Mädchenverein*). After its demise, she joined the Association for the Protection of Female Workers' Interests (*Verein zur Wahrung der Interessen von Arbeiterinnen*), founded, surprisingly, by Countess Gertrud Guillaume-Schack.

As a final example for the voluntaristic associational urge, a few remarks on the youth movement (*Jugendbewegung*) that began at the very end of the nineteenth century and became moderately influential in the 1920s: The movement came from a widespread feeling that it was time for substantial changes in the structure of society as much as in lifestyle and beliefs. Society being rigidly class orientated and seemingly immobile, many young people wished to be "naked rather than in uniform, out of doors rather than within grey city walls, simple rather than ostentatious, free rather than conformist, close to nature rather than to status" (Staas and Kemper 2013, p. 6). In October 1913, the First Free German Youth Meeting (*Erster Freideutscher Jugendtag*) was held on the Hohe Meissner, a mountain in central Germany. The German Association of Abstaining Students (*Deutscher Bund abstinenter Studenten*) and the Free German Academic Union (*Deutsche Akademische Freischar*) had sent letters to several like-minded organizations: *Wandervogel*, *Dürerbund*, *Deutscher Vortruppbund*, *Deutsche Landerziehungsheime*, *Freie Schulgemeinden*—a very mixed company (Osteroth 2013, pp. 78–79). What united them was their wish to congregate socially, to walk, dance, and sing together, very much more than to act together politically. Yet, social change was the political undercurrent. However, the ideas, some of which had been expounded theoretically, were so divergent that no political movement evolved. The political establishment succeeded in bending many of the young idealists to their will, as did a number of extremist movements, most prominently both the communist and the national socialist movements. As a political force, the Wandervogel movement suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of powerful dictators, and it was not until several decades later, with the possible exception of the Catholic leagues, that associations reappeared on the political stage that grew out of the strong sense of belonging and bonding that had been so formative in Germany for centuries.

Conclusion

Still, the examples show that associative life is a common and ongoing phenomenon in Germany—as in every other nation's history. It may not always result in stable institutions with legal personality, government approval, or fiscal benefits; on the contrary, some of the most shining examples of civil society power are those, where relatively unstable and unorganized forms of collective action succeeded in attracting so many followers and exerting such influence that the course of history was changed. The civil rights groups in East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) and in other central and eastern European countries in the 1980s provide good

proof for this argument. Their story also shows us again that associative life does not depend on lenient, let alone approving constitutional and legal frameworks. The fact that despite some setbacks these groups managed to stay together and develop an increasing political thrust under the watchful eyes of a deeply suspicious and indeed hostile state also supports the argument that there is a strong relationship between bonding within such an organization and its political impact. This relationship may be identified in very diverse historical circumstances and with surprising consistency.

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Freise, M.; Hallmann, T. (Eds.)

2014, XIX, 357 p. 13 illus., 4 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4939-0484-6