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CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

By SHERI BERMAN*

PRACTICALLY everywhere one looks, from social science monographs to political speeches to *People* magazine, the concept of "civil society" is in vogue. A flourishing civil society is considered to have helped bring down the Evil Empire and is held to be a prerequisite for the success of post-Soviet democratic experiments; a civil society in decline is said to threaten democracy in America. Tocqueville is the theorist of the decade, having noted a century and a half ago that "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations." Further, he linked such behavior to the robustness of the nation's representative institutions. "Nothing," he claimed, "more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.... In democratic countries the knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others."¹

Today neo-Tocquevilleans such as Robert Putnam argue that civil society is crucial to "making democracy work,"² while authors like Francis Fukuyama and Benjamin Barber (who differ on everything else) agree that it plays a key role in driving political, social, and even economic outcomes.³ This new conventional wisdom, however, is flawed. It is simply not always true that, as Putnam (for example) puts it, "Tocqueville was right: Democratic government is strengthened, not

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¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 513, 517.

² Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); see also idem, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995); idem, "The Prosperous Community," *American Prospect*, no. 13 (Spring 1993); and idem, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," *American Prospect*, no. 24 (Winter 1996).

³ Fukuyama, *Trust: Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995); and Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How the Planet Is Both Falling Apart and Coming Together—and What This Means for Democracy* (New York: NY Times Books, 1995).

weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society.”⁴ This essay will show how a robust civil society actually helped scuttle the twentieth century’s most critical democratic experiment, Weimar Germany.

Associational life flourished in Germany throughout the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century. Yet in contrast to what neo-Tocquevillean theories would predict, high levels of associationism, absent strong and responsive national government and political parties, served to fragment rather than unite German society. It was weak political institutionalization rather than a weak civil society that was Germany’s main problem during the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras. As Samuel Huntington noted almost three decades ago, societies with highly active and mobilized publics and low levels of political institutionalization often degenerate into instability, disorder, and even violence;⁵ German political development provides a classic example of this dynamic in action. During the interwar period in particular, Germans threw themselves into their clubs, voluntary associations, and professional organizations out of frustration with the failures of the national government and political parties, thereby helping to undermine the Weimar Republic and facilitate Hitler’s rise to power. In addition, Weimar’s rich associational life provided a critical training ground for eventual Nazi cadres and a base from which the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) could launch its *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power). Had German civil society been weaker, the Nazis would never have been able to capture so many citizens for their cause or eviscerate their opponents so swiftly.

A striking implication of this analysis is that a flourishing civil society does not necessarily bode well for the prospects of liberal democracy. For civil society to have the beneficial effects neo-Tocquevilleans posit, the political context has to be right: absent strong and responsive political institutions, an increasingly active civil society may serve to undermine, rather than strengthen, a political regime. Political institutionalization, in other words, may be less chic a topic these days than civil society, but it is logically prior and historically more important. As Huntington put it, a well-ordered civic polity requires “a recognizable and stable pattern of institutional authority . . . political institutions [must be] sufficiently strong to provide the basis of a legitimate political order and working political community.” Without such political institutions, societies will lack trust and the ability to define and realize

⁴ Putnam (fn. 2, *Making Democracy Work*), 182.

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

their common interests.⁶ Political scientists need to remember that Tocqueville himself considered Americans' political associations to be as important as their nonpolitical ones, and they need to examine more closely how the two interact in different situations.⁷

NEO-TOCQUEVILLEAN THEORIES

The logic of neo-Tocquevillean theories bears closer examination. Contemporary scholars, it turns out, are not the first to "rediscover" the great Frenchman, nor even the first to link group bowling and political development.⁸ After World War II several social scientists also claimed to have found in associational life a key to understanding democracy's success or failure.

During the 1950s and 1960s social scientists such as William Kornhauser and Hannah Arendt helped turn the concept of "mass society" into a powerful theory for explaining the disintegration of democracy and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe.⁹ This school believed that Europe's slide into barbarism was greased by, among other factors, the collapse of intermediate associations across much of the Continent during the interwar years; the epigraph to Kornhauser's *Politics of Mass Society* was Tocqueville's warning that "if men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased."¹⁰

⁶ Ibid., 82–83, 5–25.

⁷ Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (July 1996); Larry Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (July 1994); Theda Skocpol, "The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy" (Presidential address for the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, New Orleans, October 12, 1996); and idem, "Unravelling from Above," *American Prospect*, no. 25 (March–April 1996).

⁸ A distinction apparently belonging to Max Weber; see fn. 23 below.

⁹ William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959); and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973). See also Sigmund Neumann, *Permanent Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1942); Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart, 1941); Edward Shils, "The Theory of Mass Society," in Philip Olson, ed., *America as a Mass Society* (New York: Free Press, 1963); and E. V. Walter, "'Mass Society': The Late Stages of an Idea," *Social Research* 31 (Winter 1964). It should be pointed out that the concept of mass society has a variety of different interpretations. Apart from the one discussed here, the most well known usage of the term is associated with José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), and other theories of cultural decay. For a recent discussion of this latter usage, see Neil McLInnes, "Ortega and the Myth of the Mass," *National Interest* (Summer 1996). For general overviews of the mass society literature, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Salvador Giner, *Mass Society* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).

¹⁰ On the intellectual history of mass society theories, see Walters (fn. 9), 405; and Sandor Halebsky, *Mass Society and Political Conflict: Toward a Reconstruction of Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Drawing on Durkheim, and to a lesser degree on Marx, the mass society theorists argued that industrialization and modernity estranged citizens from one another, leaving them rootless and searching for ways of belonging. Ripped from their traditional moorings, masses were available for mobilization by extremist movements—unless, that is, individuals could develop communal bonds through organizational affiliations and involvement. Without “a multiplicity of independent and often conflicting forms of association,” Kornhauser wrote, “people lack the resources to restrain their own behavior as well as that of others. Social atomization engenders strong feelings of alienation and anxiety, and therefore the disposition to engage in extreme behavior to escape from these tensions.”¹¹

Civil society, according to these theorists, was an antidote to the political viruses that afflicted mass society. Participation in organizations not only helped bring citizens together, bridging cleavages and fostering skills necessary for democratic governance, but it also satisfied their need to belong to some larger grouping. According to this view, a key reason for the collapse of the Weimar Republic was its status as a classic mass society, which made it susceptible to the blandishments of totalitarian demagoguery. Hitler’s supporters were drawn primarily from alienated individuals who lacked a wide range of associational memberships and saw in the NSDAP a way of integrating themselves into a larger community; had German civil society been stronger, the republic might not have fallen.¹²

The empirical evidence did not support such a causal sequence. For this and other reasons (such as the advent of newer and trendier theories), by the late 1960s social scientists had moved on and the concept of mass society had fallen out of vogue. Beginning in the 1970s, however, a third wave of democratization swept across the globe,¹³ and scholars sought to identify its causes, as well as those factors that determined democratic success more generally. Several were drawn to the same Tocquevillian insights that had attracted Kornhauser, Arendt and others a few decades earlier. Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work* was par-

¹¹ Kornhauser (fn. 9), 32; see also Arendt (fn. 9), 315–23. For a general review of the literature on this point, see Joseph R. Gusfield, “Mass Society and Extremist Politics,” *American Sociological Review* 17 (1982).

¹² On mass society theories and the Weimar Republic, see the excellent essay by Bernt Hagtvet, “The Theory of Mass Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic: A Re-examination,” in Stein Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet, and Jan Petter Myklebust, eds., *Who Were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism* (Bergen, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1980).

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

ticularly important for the revival of interest in the role played by private, voluntary associations in sustaining vibrant democracy.¹⁴

Like the mass society theorists, recent neo-Tocquevillian analyses stress the way individuals relate to each other and their society when explaining why democratic regimes function well. To measure and explain the success of democracy, Putnam, for example, uses the concepts of civic community and social capital; for both of these the key indicator is what might be termed associationism, the propensity of individuals to form and join a wide range of organizations spontaneously. According to Putnam:

Civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government . . . both because of their "internal" effects on individual members and because of their "external" effects on the wider polity. Internally, associations instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public spiritedness.

. . . Externally . . . a dense network of secondary associations . . . [enhances the articulation and aggregation of interests and] contributes to effective social collaboration.¹⁵

Associations "broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the 'I' into the 'We.'" "Networks of civic engagement," meanwhile, "foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust," which help resolve dilemmas of collective action and smooth economic and political negotiations.¹⁶ For Putnam almost any type of secondary association will serve these functions, as long as it is not organized around vertical bonds of authority and dependency. As he puts it: "The manifest purpose of the association [need not] be political."¹⁷ "Taking part in a choral society or a bird-watching club can teach self-discipline and an appreciation for the joys of successful collaboration," he writes, thus contributing to the efficiency of regional government in Italy; the decline of league bowling, similarly, signals the decay of democracy in the United States.¹⁸ In sum, for Putnam and oth-

¹⁴ Recent neo-Tocquevillian analyses are somewhat different in emphasis, however, from their earlier mass society counterparts. In particular, they focus—as Putnam's title states—on what "makes democracy work," that is, what makes some democracies healthier than others; there is no explicit discussion of the possibility of a new descent into totalitarianism. For Putnam and his counterparts, in other words, the dependent variable is the strength or effectiveness (it is unclear which) of democratic institutions, while for mass society theorists the dependent variable was the slide into totalitarianism.

¹⁵ Putnam (fn. 2, *Making Democracy Work*), 89–90. On social capital, see also James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1990).

¹⁶ Putnam (fn. 2, 1995), 67. See also idem, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS* (December 1995); and idem (fn. 2, "The Prosperous Community").

¹⁷ Putnam (fn. 2, *Making Democracy Work*), 90. For a separate argument on the consequences of organizations' internal structures, see Harry Eckstein, "A Theory of Stable Democracy," in Eckstein, *Division and Cohesion in Democracy: A Study of Norway* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

¹⁸ Putnam (fn. 2, *Making Democracy Work*), 90; idem (fn. 2, 1995), 70.

ers in the new generation of neo-Tocquevillian analysts, associationism is both an indicator of healthy democracy and a prerequisite for it.

TESTING THE THEORY

This neo-Tocquevillian thesis has attracted much attention, especially in its application to the contemporary American scene. Nevertheless, there has actually been little in-depth analysis by political scientists of the “internal” and “external” effects associations actually have on individual members and the wider polity.¹⁹ This essay therefore sets out to test the claims of the theory—specifically, by probing the effects of associationism on the political life of one country (Germany) over the course of almost a century (from the mid-1800s to the Nazi takeover in 1933). The investigation is facilitated by the work of historians of Germany, who, largely unnoticed by political scientists, have fought their own battles over some related issues: those debates provide extensive evidence of the vigor of German civil society, along with documentation of its causes and effects.

One might counter, of course, that a theory based on only a single case is inherently problematic and that, moreover,²⁰ German political development during this period was certainly influenced by a range of factors extending beyond civil society, many of them highly particular. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why an inability of neo-Tocquevillian analysis to account for the central features of this case should be significant and troubling. First, scholars have long viewed the Weimar Republic and its collapse as a crucial theoretical testing ground. The disintegration of democracy in interwar Germany is so central to our understanding of comparative politics and so critical for the history of modern Europe that we should at the least be wary of any theory of political development that cannot explain it. Second, the

¹⁹ Putnam, for example, cites some development and economic studies to buttress his points, but much less empirical research has been carried out on associationism's *political* effects, whether on citizens or societies. The old mass society literature did, however, spur sociologists to investigate some of these questions. See, for example, Nicholas Babchuk and John N. Edwards, “Voluntary Associations and the Integration Hypothesis,” *Sociological Inquiry* 35 (Spring 1965); David E. W. Holden, “Associations as Reference Groups: An Approach to the Problem,” *Rural Sociology* 30 (1965); Maurice Pinard, “Mass Society and Political Movements: A New Formulation,” *American Journal of Sociology* (July 1968); and also Sidney Verba, “Organizational Membership and Democratic Consensus,” *Journal of Politics* 27 (August 1965). Some political scientists are beginning to investigate these questions. See Dietland Stolle and Thomas Rochon, “Associations and the Creation of Social Capital,” in Kenneth Newton et al., eds., “Social Capital in Western Europe” (Manuscript, 1996); and idem, “Social Capital, Associations and American Exceptionalism,” in *American Behavioral Scientist* (forthcoming).

²⁰ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 209–12.

postwar neo-Tocquevilleans highlighted precisely this case as an example of the impact of associationism (or lack thereof) on political outcomes. And third, while the United States has been considered the homeland of associationism ever since Tocqueville, comparable honors could also be bestowed on Germany, making it resemble a most likely case for determining the reliability of the neo-Tocquevillean theory.

The extraordinarily vigorous associational life of Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany was frequently commented on, so much so in fact that contemporaries spoke of the *Vereinsmeierei* (roughly, associational fetishism or mania) that beset German society and joked that whenever three or more Germans gathered, they were likely to draw up by-laws and found an association.²¹ The German passion for forming organizations was so characteristic that it became the butt of several well-known satires, including Kurt Tucholsky's classic poem "Das Mitglied" (The Member).²² Max Weber, Germany's most perceptive analyst during this period, took note of his countrymen's predilection for voluntarily joining together in groups; recognizing the significance of this phenomenon for political development, he urged his colleagues to study German organizational life in all of its manifestations, "starting with the bowling club [!] . . . and continuing to the political party or the religious, artistic or literary sect." Yet Weber also observed that German associationism, unlike its American or British counterparts, did not lead directly to responsible citizenship, much less to liberal or democratic values. "The quantitative spread of organizational life," he argued, "does not always go hand in hand with its qualitative significance." He explicitly noted that participation in, say, a choral society did not necessarily promote true civic virtue: "A man who is accustomed to use his larynx in voicing powerful sentiments on a daily basis without, however, finding any connection to his actions," he said of singing group members, "that is a man who . . . easily becomes a 'good citizen' in the *passive* sense of the word."²³

²¹ James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995), and Thomas Nipperdey, "Verein als soziale Struktur in Deutschland im späten 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert: Eine Fallstudie zur Modernisierung," in Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur neueren Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1976).

²² Kurt Tucholsky, "Das Mitglied," in Mary Gerold-Tucholsky, ed., *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Eine Auswahl aus seinen Schriften und Gedichten* (Hamburg: Taschenbuch, 1952), 76.

²³ Max Weber, "Geschäftsbericht und Diskussionsreden auf den deutschen soziologischen Tagungen," in Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1924), 442, quoted in Rudy Koschar, *Social Life, Local Politics, and Nazism: Marburg, 1880–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 4, emphasis added. See also Margaret Levi, "Social and Unsocial Capital: A Review Essay of Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*," *Politics and Society* 24 (March 1996).

This essay now proceeds to explore the internal and external effects of German associationism, focusing on the Protestant middle classes in particular because of the critical role they played in the disintegration of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazis.²⁴ The results show that the postwar neo-Tocquevilleans were wrong in their assertion that an absence of civil society paved the way for the collapse of democracy and the rise of totalitarianism in Germany. I find, to the contrary, that participation in organizations of civil society *did* link individuals together and help mobilize them for political participation (just as current neo-Tocquevillean scholars claim), but in the German case this served not to strengthen democracy but to weaken it. And finally, I show that the NSDAP rose to power, not by attracting alienated, apolitical Germans, but rather by recruiting highly activist individuals and then exploiting their skills and associational affiliations to expand the party's appeal and consolidate its position as the largest political force in Germany. The essay concludes by probing the broader implications of the German case for theories of political development.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN BISMARCKIAN AND WILHELMINE GERMANY

German associational life grew rapidly during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Spurred by changes in the legal code, the breakdown of preindustrial corporate traditions, and growing social wealth and diversification, an increasingly dense network of private voluntary associations spread throughout the country. This trend was pronounced enough for many to comment that Germany was in the grips of an “associational passion” on the eve of the 1848 revolutions. Voluntary associations were active in public life, in areas ranging from education to land preservation policy; in particular, they helped a growing and self-assertive bourgeoisie pursue its social and economic interests. Many historians, therefore, have interpreted German associational life from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century as a “symptom of

²⁴ For a review of the literature on the middle classes and fascism, see Bernt Hagtvet and Reinhard Kuhl, “Contemporary Approaches to Fascism: A Survey of Paradigms,” and Reinhard Kuhl, “Preconditions for the Rise and Victory of Fascism in Germany,” both in Larsen, Hagtvet, and Myklebust (fn. 12). See also Hans Lebovics, *Social Conservatism and the Middle Classes in Germany, 1914–1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Hans Speier, *German White Collar Workers and the Rise of Hitler* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Jürgen Kocka, *Die Angestellten in der deutschen Geschichte, 1850–1980* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1981). For reasons detailed in the text and notes below, observations about bourgeois Protestant associationism do not necessarily apply to its labor or Catholic counterparts, among others.

the rise of bourgeois society and . . . a factor serving to accelerate" its development.²⁵

The next spurt of German associational growth began in the 1870s. One contributing factor was the constitution adopted by the new German Reich in 1871: the granting of universal suffrage encouraged a wide variety of groups to form organizations in order to give themselves a voice in the political sphere. More importantly, just as the institutional structure of the Reich was prompting certain kinds of organizational activity, the prolonged economic downturn that began in the late 1870s highlighted the vulnerability of different groups and increased demands for state aid. During the following two decades almost all sectors of German society engaged in a frenzy of associational activity, with heavy industry, small business, the *Mittelstand*, and white-collar groups all forming their own organizations.²⁶ The fight over protectionism was certainly a key reason for the emergence of new associations, but the Great Depression, as contemporaries referred to it, did more than merely highlight the divergent interests of different socio-economic groups. It led many to recognize that Germany was at a historical turning point, poised between a traditional agricultural existence and industrialized modernity. The tension between these two visions stimulated the formation of a wide variety of organizations, many of which (such as patriotic societies, sports and reading clubs, and neighborhood associations) were designed to foster certain values and lifestyles, rather than directly engage the political process.

In practice, the political system set up in 1871 only widened the existing cleavages within German society, since political parties were

²⁵ Nipperdey (fn. 21), 182; see also David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Politics and Society in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 194ff.; David Blackbourn, "The German Bourgeoisie: An Introduction," in David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans, eds., *The German Bourgeoisie* (London: Routledge, 1993); Jürgen Kocka, "The European Pattern and the German Case," in Jürgen Kocka and Allan Mitchell, eds., *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1993); Karl-Erich Born, "Der soziale und wirtschaftliche Strukturwandel Deutschlands am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts," in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Moderne deutsche Sozialgeschichte* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1966); and *Vereinswesen und bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, special issue of *Historische Zeitschrift*, ed. Otto Dann (Munich: R. Oldenburg Verlag, 1984).

²⁶ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Der Aufstieg des Organisierten Kapitalismus und Interventionstaates in Deutschland," in Heinrich August Winkler, ed., *Organisierter Kapitalismus: Voraussetzungen und Anfänge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1974); Heinrich August Winkler, *Mittelstand, Demokratie und Nationalsozialismus: Die politische Entwicklung von Handwerk und Kleinhandel in der Weimarer Republik* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1972), 47ff.; Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks: Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des Wilhelminischen Deutschlands* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1970); David Blackbourn, "Between Resignation and Volatility: The German Petite Bourgeoisie in the Nineteenth Century," in Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, eds., *Shopkeepers and Artisans in Nineteenth Century Europe* (London: Methuen, 1984); and Jürgen Kocka, *Facing Total War: German Society, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

organized around discrete, particularistic social groups and since national political structures were not strong or responsive enough to overcome social divisions. Under these conditions, associational activity occurred largely within each sector of society and helped lock in the fragmentation of the Reich.

These developments continued apace as the power bloc that had dominated the Reich since 1871 fell apart and German politics entered a new phase. Bismarck had been able to hold together a majority coalition based on antisocialism and a protectionist logroll serving the interests of "iron and rye." By the early 1890s, however, the Iron Chancellor had been dismissed and mounting contradictions within the dominant classes (industry versus agriculture, protectionists versus free traders, exporters versus producers for the domestic market) threatened to rip apart the ruling coalition. The lower and middle classes, moreover, were becoming increasingly mobilized: electoral participation increased from 50.7 percent of those eligible in 1871 to 77.2 percent in 1887, and participation in Reichstag elections averaged more than 75 percent from then until the outbreak of war in 1914.²⁷ This posed a challenge to traditional political structures in general and to existing political parties such as the National Liberals in particular.²⁸

Liberals had been the dominant force in Germany in the years after unification, but their political organizations, like those of other established groups, found it difficult to adapt to the changing environment in which they had to operate. Until the 1890s most parties (with the exception of the Social Democratic Party of Germany [the SPD] and to a lesser extent the Catholic Zentrum) were informal collections of notables (*Honoratioren*). These parties had little in the way of formal organization, especially at the grassroots level, and were really active only at election time; their institutional structures were simply not up to the task of performing well in the hurly-burly that was now German politics.²⁹ The failure of the National Liberals in particular to adjust to the new conditions left many of their potential constituents, particularly in rural areas and among sections of the middle class, searching for other ways of expressing their social and political aspirations. This

²⁷ Stanley Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), esp. chap. 2.

²⁸ The following section draws heavily on Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). See also Blackbourn and Eley (fn. 25), 144–55; and Koschar (fn. 23), esp. 46ff.

²⁹ Liberals did make some attempts to respond to the challenges of popular mobilization and the political organization of workers by the SPD, but these proved unsuccessful. See Eley (fn. 28), 2; and Sheehan (fn. 21), pt. 6.

helped spur yet another burst of associational growth in Germany, as organizations designed to appeal to a wide variety of disaffected groups sprang up across the country.

By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, a distinct and troubling pattern had already begun to appear in Germany—the growth of civic associations during periods of strain. When national political institutions and structures proved either unwilling or unable to address their citizens' needs, many Germans turned away from them and found succor and support in the institutions of civil society instead. Because weak national political institutions reinforced social cleavages instead of helping to narrow them, moreover, associational activity generally occurred within rather than across group lines. Under these circumstances, associational life served not to integrate citizens into the political system, as neo-Tocquevilleans would predict, but rather to divide them further or mobilize them outside—and often against—the existing political regime.

As the liberal parties stumbled, their natural constituencies were left unorganized, and many of their natural activists found themselves adrift and in search of alternative ways of becoming involved in public affairs. As one observer has noted, "Members of the middle strata may have looked with disdain on parties and elections, but they participated with extraordinary vigor in a dense network of other institutions through which they sought political influence, social identity and economic advantage."³⁰ Many of these activists played critical roles in forming and staffing the nationalist associations that became so popular in Germany in the decades before World War I.

The nationalist associations, as Geoff Eley argues, are best viewed as "symptoms and agencies of change. They were formed as distinctive organizations within a space which the difficulties and obsolescence of an older mode of dominant-class politics had opened up."³¹ They targeted a broad swath of German society and attempted to provide new channels for participation in public life. Many of these groups were not directly "political" organizations, however. Their primary goal was not to participate in the Wilhelmine political system, and indeed, they often defined themselves in direct repudiation of existing political institutions and structures, arguing that they were *Volksvereine* (people's associations) devoted to cross-class solidarity and national unity. Another distinctive characteristic of these groups was that, in contrast to old-style

³⁰ Sheehan (fn. 21), 236.

³¹ Eley (fn. 28), xix.

Honoratioren organizations and parties, they placed the idea of popular legitimacy front and center. The Navy League and Pan-German League, for example, broke new ground in terms of mass participation and activism. Both emphasized membership involvement in discussion and decision making, and both were more willing than the *Honoratioren* organizations to offer “particularly deserving” individuals the opportunity to rise to leadership positions. In many ways, the nationalist organizations conform to the type of civil society institutions neo-Tocquevillian scholars hold up as exemplary: “horizontally” organized, stressing equality and community, devoted to overcoming narrow particularistic interests.

Even though increasing numbers of Germans turned away from national politics during the Wilhelmine era, this hardly meant that they were becoming apolitical. Quite the contrary, in fact: the population was increasingly mobilized and politically active. Some observers failed to note the change, however, because the popular energies of the Protestant middle classes in particular were channeled into arenas outside of national political structures and organizations.³² Some took refuge in local government, for example, an arena in which liberals and the middle classes more generally felt they could play an important role. A National Liberal parliamentarian and former mayor of Berlin named Arthur Hobrecht captured this feeling in his observation that “the citizenship which is derived from common endeavors in the organs of local government becomes increasingly valuable for us the more the conflict of material interests fragments contemporary society as a whole.”³³ In general, though, the discontented middle and rural strata of the German population turned to the organizations of civil society. Some of these were drawn into political life and developed ties with existing political parties; most however viewed themselves as a sanctuary from traditional politics. The “various organizations to which members of the Protestant middle strata belonged, therefore, helped to deepen

³² Workers and Catholics, by contrast, were efficiently organized through and by the SPD and the Zentrum, respectively. In contrast to the liberal parties, both the SPD and the Zentrum were able to create their own affiliated associations in most areas of social life. One consequence of this, however, was the further fragmentation of German society, as the associations affiliated with these parties were so encompassing as to create “subcultures” that hived off their members from other groups. Referring to the SPD in particular, Dieter Groh has termed such behavior “negative integration”; see Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus* (Frankfurt: Verlag Ullstein GmbH, 1973). The literature on the socialist and Catholic subcultures in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany is immense; good places to begin are the bibliographies in Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988); and Hans Mommsen, *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

³³ Sheehan (fn. 21), 237.

the divisions within their ranks and furthered the debilitating fragmentation of liberalism's social base."³⁴

On the eve of World War I, practically all Germans were discontented with national political life. The then chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg would later write of this period:

While the storm-clouds gathered ever more heavily on the world horizon, an almost inexplicable pressure weighed on the political life of Germany. . . . [M]alaise and dejection imparted a depressing tone to political party activity, which lacked any progressive impulse. The word *Reichsverdrossenheit* [dissatisfaction with the imperial state] rose up out of the darkness.³⁵

With the national government unresponsive to calls for economic and political change and traditional political parties unable to adjust to the era of mass politics, civil society offered an outlet for the demands and aspirations of an increasingly restive German populace. This growth of associations during these years did not signal a growth in liberal values or democratic political structures; instead, it reflected and furthered the fragmentation of German political life and the delegitimization of national political institutions. State-society relations thus took an ominous turn during the Wilhelmine era, with consequences that would plague the Weimar Republic in later decades.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The democratization of Germany at the end of World War I opened up a new phase in the country's associational life. Hitherto unrepresented and unorganized groups began to form their own organizations, and the Weimar years witnessed feverish associational activity at practically every level. The number of local voluntary associations grew throughout the 1920s, reaching extremely high levels as measured by both historical and comparative standards.³⁶ National associations also

³⁴ Ibid., 237–38. See also Thomas Nipperdey, "Interessenverbände und Parteien in Deutschland vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," in Wehler (fn. 25).

³⁵ Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, *Betrachtungen zum Weltkrieg*, vol. 1 (Berlin: R. Hubbing, 1919–21).

³⁶ William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922–1945* (New York: 1984); Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Koschar (fn. 23). For cross-national comparisons of the impact of civil society activity on democracy, see Nancy Bermeo, "Getting Mad or Going Mad? Citizens, Scarcity, and the Breakdown of Democracy in Interwar Europe" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the APSA, San Francisco, 1996); Nancy Bermeo and Phil Nord, eds., "Civil Society before Democracy" (Manuscript, Princeton University, 1996); and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. 113–14.

grew rapidly, and participation in professional organizations reached very high levels among the middle classes in particular.³⁷ Yet, as in Wilhelmine Germany, the rise in associationism signaled, not the spread of liberal values or the development of healthy democratic political institutions, but rather the reverse. The parties of the bourgeois middle had reconstituted themselves after the war and proclaimed their commitment to becoming true “people’s parties” and reintegrating German society. But these parties found it increasingly difficult to hold on to their constituencies in the face of growing economic, political, and social conflicts during the 1920s. Once again this created a vicious circle. The weakness of the bourgeois parties and national political structures drove many citizens looking for succor and support into civil society organizations, which were organized primarily along group lines rather than across them. The vigor of associational life, in turn, served to further undermine and delegitimize the republic’s political structures. The result was a highly organized but vertically fragmented and discontented society that proved to be fertile ground for the Nazi’s rise and eventual *Machtergreifung*.

The German revolution raised hope among the middle classes that the “divisive” and “unrepresentative” parties of the Wilhelmine era would be replaced by a single *Volkspartei* capable of unifying the nation’s patriotic bourgeoisie and confronting the menace of social democracy. Popular support for such a course was strong, but institutional jealousies and elite divisions prevented its adoption. Instead, Weimar’s early years saw, along with a strengthened conservative movement, the formation of two main liberal parties (the German Democratic Party [DDP] and the German People’s Party [DVP]) and of several smaller regional parties, as well as reconsolidation of the Catholic Zentrum. The nonsocialist portion of Germany’s political spectrum was thus permanently divided among a large (and eventually increasing) number of parties, which soon began to squabble among themselves.³⁸

The failure of the bourgeois parties to form a single movement or even to agree on important issues of the day did not dull the desire of the German middle classes for some form of antisocialist unity and a

³⁷ Kocka (fn. 26); idem, “The First World War and the ‘Mittelstand’: German Artisans and White Collar Workers,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 8 (January 1973); Gerald Feldman, “German Interest Group Alliances in War and Inflation, 1914–1923,” in Suzanne Berger, ed., *Organizing Interests in Western Europe: Pluralism, Corporatism, and the Transformation of Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Rudy Koshar, “Cult of Associations? The Lower Middle Classes in Weimar Germany,” in Rudy Koshar, ed., *Splintered Classes* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990); and Hagtvæt (fn. 12).

³⁸ Larry Eugene Jones, *German Liberalism and the Dissolution of the Weimar Party System, 1918–1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

greater role in the political, social, and economic life of the republic. Throughout the 1920s “burghers from all social stations [continued] to demand more effective representation and a more direct political voice” and refused to abandon the ideals of bourgeois unity and community.³⁹ In this context, bourgeois social life took on a renewed vigor and sense of urgency. “More voluntary associations attracted more members and did so in a more active fashion than ever before. Just as retailers, bakers, and commercial employees had organized into economic interest groups, so also did gymnasts, folklorists, singers and churchgoers gather into clubs, rally new members, schedule meetings, and plan a full assortment of conferences and tournaments.”⁴⁰

At first, this activity occurred in conjunction with, or at least parallel to, traditional party politics, since the newly reconstituted liberal parties tried to improve their grassroots organization, cultivate broader ties, and even achieve the status of a “people’s party.” By the middle of the decade, however, the attempt to reshape the relationship between national political life and civil society had failed, with the Great Inflation of 1922–23 being the turning point. Economic historians may disagree over which socioeconomic groups suffered the most, but there is little doubt that the middle classes suffered greatly, even if the pain was more psychological than material.⁴¹ This was followed by the crushing stabilization of 1923–24, which hit white-collar workers and the middle classes particularly hard. “By the end of the 1920s the economic position of the independent middle class had deteriorated to such an extent that it was no longer possible to distinguish it from the proletariat on the basis of income as a criterion.”⁴²

The economic dislocations made all groups more jealous of their socioeconomic interests and more strident and narrow in their political demands, while making the middle classes increasingly resentful of both workers and big business, who were seen as having a disproportionate influence over the national government and political parties. By fighting for measures such as the eight-hour day and better wages, the

³⁹ Fritzsche (fn. 36), chap. 2, quote at 21. On the middle classes and the revolution, see also Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of the German Republic* (London: Methuen, 1936); Winkler and Kocka (fn. 26).

⁴⁰ Fritzsche (fn. 36), 76.

⁴¹ The most comprehensive treatment of almost all aspects of the Great Inflation and its aftermath is Gerald Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics and Society in the German Inflation, 1919–1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). On the psychological aspects in particular, see Jürgen von Krüden, “Die Entstehung des Inflationstraumas: Zur Sozialpsychologie der deutschen Hyperinflation 1922–23,” in Gerald Feldman et al., eds. *Consequences of Inflation* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1989).

⁴² Larry Eugene Jones, “‘The Dying Middle’: Weimar Germany and the Fragmentation of Bourgeois Politics,” *Central European History* 5 (1972), 25; see also Kocka (fn. 37).

SPD was considered to be serving the class interests of its core constituency above all else; the contrast between real (if limited) SPD success and the political impotence of the middle classes generated further paroxysms of antisocialist fervor.⁴³

Middle-class groups also became increasingly frustrated with the unwillingness or inability of liberal and conservative parties such as the DDP, DVP and DNVP (German National People's Party) to recognize their needs and act as their representatives on the national political stage. These parties came to be seen as the tools of big capitalists and financial interests, and the ideal of the people's party faded as the traditional parties of the middle and right seemed to be run by and for an unrepresentative elite.⁴⁴ Local-level organizations and associational affiliations, furthermore, were allowed to languish or break away. Not surprisingly, the vote share of the traditional bourgeois parties dropped precipitously throughout the 1920s. In 1924 the DVP and DDP together managed to attract only about 15 percent, and splinter parties were forming to capture their increasingly alienated and fragmented constituency. By 1928—the high point of economic stabilization and supposedly the “golden age” of the Weimar Republic—the splinter parties were outpolling the traditional parties of the middle.⁴⁵

As before, middle-class tension and frustration sparked a growth in associational activity. During the 1920s middle-class Germans threw themselves into their clubs, community groups, and patriotic organizations while increasingly abandoning the seemingly ineffectual liberal parties. By the middle of the decade both the style and the substance of bourgeois social life in Germany had begun to change:

⁴³ The SPD itself did much to preserve its image as a worker's rather than a people's party. See Richard Hunt, *German Social Democracy, 1918–1933* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964); Donna Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Heinrich August Winkler, “Klassenbewegung oder Volkspartei?” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 8, 1972; Hans Krempahl, “Könnte die SPD der Weimarer Republik eine Volkspartei werden?” in Horst Heimann and Thomas Meyer, eds., *Reformsozialismus und Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 1982); and Sheri Berman, *Ideas and Politics: Social Democracy in Interwar Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁴ The 1920s even saw something of a resuscitation of the old Bismarckian coalition of iron and rye, which like its predecessor was able to secure a wide range of subsidies and tariffs, the most infamous of which was the *Osthilfe*. See Dietmar Petzina, “Elemente der Wirtschaftspolitik in der Spätphase der Weimarer Republik,” *Vierteljahrsschriften für Zeitgeschichte* 21 (1973); and Gerald Feldman, *Vom Weltkrieg zur Weltwirtschaftskrise* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1984).

⁴⁵ Jones (fn. 38, 42); idem, “In the Shadow of Stabilization: German Liberalism and the Legitimacy of the Weimar Party System,” and Thomas Childers, “Interest and Ideology: Anti-System Parties in the Era of Stabilization,” both in Gerald Feldman, ed., *Die Nachwirkungen der Inflation auf die deutsche Geschichte* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1985). See also Hans Mommsen, “The Decline of the Bürgertum in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Germany,” in Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Spurred by growing political tensions, social organizations helped to lead an unprecedented surge of apoliticism that escaped the control of bourgeois elites. . . . [M]any spokesman for Weimar apoliticism argued that social organizations would do more than cushion political strife—they would bind together a moralistic, antisocialist, “folk community” of disparate classes and strata. . . . [T]he middle and late 1920s . . . thus saw not only an acceleration of tensions that had originated in the Empire but also an unprecedented rupture between the social and the political authority of the local bourgeoisie.⁴⁶

What occurred in Germany was no less than an inversion of neo-Tocquevillian theory; not only did participation in civil society organizations fail to contribute to republican virtue, but it in fact subverted it. “[A]s the middle class became more and more disenchanted with and hostile towards the republic, their energies ceased to be channeled into proto political organizations and party political organizations of the center and right which the old elites had traditionally headed. Instead the radicalized troops of the middle class deserted these organizations and their leaders.”⁴⁷

Private associations were correctly seen to offer benefits that the traditional bourgeois parties were failing to provide, such as a sense of community and unity. While the DDP, DVP and DNVP had trouble shaking their image as *Honoratioren* parties dominated by business and agricultural elites, many private bourgeois associations brought together a relatively wide range of individuals and created a sense of purpose that transcended socioeconomic divisions.

For many provincial burghers, associational life facilitated social contacts and friendships and muffled party differences. Repeatedly, the club was lauded for reconciling burghers. As an officer of a bourgeois choir in Hesse’s Marburg commented, in “a time of both internal and external antagonisms, it is the German song that binds together members of the folk . . .” In a similar fashion, the summer festival of Celle’s rifley club offered the mayor a happy example of unity between “burgher and civil servant.”⁴⁸

A fine example of these trends can be found in the World War I veterans organization known as the Stahlhelm. One of the largest and most politically powerful organizations during the 1920s, the Stahlhelm reached a peak membership of between five and six hundred thousand and played an important role in Hindenburg’s election to the presidency. It had a relatively diverse membership, attracting support

⁴⁶ Koschar (fn. 23), 166. See also Gerald Feldman, “German Interest Group Alliances in War and Inflation, 1914–1923,” in Berger (fn. 37); and Charles Maier, “Strukturen kapitalistischer Stabilität in den zwanziger Jahren,” in Winkler (fn. 26).

⁴⁷ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 230.

⁴⁸ Fritzsche (fn. 36), 76.

from different socioeconomic groups, regions, and both the liberal and conservative camps. In addition, the organization encouraged a high level of membership participation, had a relatively democratic internal structure, and maintained contacts with other clubs and associations. In the early years of the republic the Stahlhelm developed ties with parties of the center-right and right, viewing such links as the best way to ensure the success of its nationalist, antisocialist agenda. By the mid-1920s, however, the organization was becoming disillusioned with traditional party politics and began to emphasize a nationalist and populist communitarianism. Many burghers began to transfer their primary political loyalties to it from center-right and right political parties, helping to eradicate these parties' authority at the grassroots level. The nature of the organization is captured well by a 1927 manifesto, which declared:

Stahlhelm does not want to form or become a new party. But it does want . . . for its members to acquire the possibility and the right of decisive participation in all positions of public service and popular representation, from the local community to the national government. . . . Stahlhelm opposes all efforts and conceptions that seek to divide the German people. It esteems highly the experience of old comradeship at the front and unity and wants to develop out of it a national sense of unity. . . . [I]n full recognition of the value and the vital unity among enterprise, entrepreneur, and fellow workers, Stahlhelm will not hinder an honest and decisive settlement of conflicts of interest. It demands, however, the maintenance and preservation of the transcending interest of the German community.⁴⁹

After 1928 the Stahlhelm began to lose membership and influence, in part because it allied itself more closely with the DNVP, but mostly because it was unable to adjust to the increasing mobilization and radicalism that was sweeping Germany during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The organization remained tied to the memory of the wartime generation and was not very successful in attracting those who came of age later. It had trouble operating amid the accelerating disintegration of traditional political structures and did not manage to cultivate ties to

⁴⁹ Among the other goals of this neo-Tocquevillian paragon, it is interesting to note, were rearmament, the extirpation of degeneration and foreign influence, and the acquisition of Lebensraum. "Berlin Stahlhelm Manifesto," first published in *Stahlhelm und Staat* (May 8, 1927), reprinted in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 339–40. On the development of the Stahlhelm, see Fritzsch (fn. 36), chap. 9; Volker Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm: Bund der Frontsoldaten, 1918–1935* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966); and J. M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977).

either the new bourgeois splinter parties or their constituencies. Ironically, therefore, while the Stahlhelm had played a crucial role in infusing nationalist populism into the German political system and further weakening the traditional bourgeois parties, it was the Nazis and not the Stahlhelm who would be the ultimate beneficiaries of these trends. As the Great Depression spread throughout Europe, Germany found itself with weak political institutions and a fragmented but highly organized civil society; this, not the atomized anomie of a pure "mass society," would prove to be the ideal setting for the rapid rise to power of a skilled totalitarian movement.

THE RISE OF THE NSDAP

During the 1920s the Nazi Party (the NSDAP) was stagnant—low on funds and unable to fill meeting halls or amass a significant share of the vote. By 1926 the situation had become so dire that the party began to move toward a major shift in strategy. Where previously the NSDAP had focused primarily on urban areas and working-class voters, it now re-oriented its appeal toward the middle classes, nonvoters, and farmers, while proclaiming itself above the group divisions that plagued the country. Thus, as late as the 1928 elections the Nazis polled only 2.6 percent, whereas four years later they were the largest party in the Weimar Republic.⁵⁰ What enabled the Nazis to make such spectacular inroads into the German electorate? The depression, the weak response to it from mainstream parties, Hitler's charisma and political savvy—all these clearly played a role. A significant part of the answer, however, lies with contemporary German civil society.

As voters abandoned traditional bourgeois parties during the 1920s and then grappled with the ravages of the depression, a political vacuum opened up in German politics, a vacuum that offered the Nazis a golden opportunity to assemble an unprecedented coalition. To this end, the NSDAP exploited its increasingly strong position in Weimar's

⁵⁰ A good summary of the history of the Nazi party during this time is provided by Dietrich Orlow, *The History of the Nazi Party, 1919–1933* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1969). Good English-language treatments of the formation of the Nazi constituency include Thomas Childers, ed., *The Formation of the Nazi Constituency* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); idem, "The Middle Classes and National Socialism," in Blackbourn and Evans (fn. 25); Peter Stachura, ed., *The Nazi Machtergreifung* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983); and Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter: The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). Perhaps the most up-to-date analysis in German is Jürgen W. Falter, *Hitlers Wähler* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1991).

rich associational life. The dense networks of civic engagement provided the Nazis with cadres of activists who had the skills necessary to spread the party's message and increase recruitment. Those networks also served as a fifth column, allowing the NSDAP to infiltrate and master a significant sector of bourgeois society before emerging to seize control of Germany's national political structures. As one scholar notes:

Path-breaking work in recent years on the rise of National Socialism has stressed the importance of local newspapers, municipal notables, and voluntary associations, and points to the buoyancy and vigor of civic traditions. Had bourgeois community life been overly disoriented and fragmented, the body of new evidence indicates, the Nazis would never have been able to marshal the resources or plug into the social networks necessary to their political success.⁵¹

During the second half of the 1920s the Nazis concentrated on attracting bourgeois "joiners" who had become disillusioned with traditional party politics. Like the neo-Tocquevilleans, Hitler recognized that participation in associational life provided individuals with the kinds of leadership skills and social ties that could be very useful in the political arena.⁵² Civil society activists formed the backbone of the Nazis' grassroots propaganda machine. The party also skillfully exploited their organizational contacts and social expertise to gain insight into the fears and needs of particular groups and to tailor new appeals to them—using them, in other words, as "focus groups." The activists, finally, provided the movement with unparalleled local organizations. In contrast to the other bourgeois parties, the Nazis were able to develop flexible and committed local party chapters that enabled full and accurate two-way communication between the national party and its frontline troops.

Recent research into local life in interwar Germany details the crucial role played by bourgeois "joiners" in paving the way for the Nazi rise to power. Rudy Koshar's excellent study of Marburg, for example, shows that party members were an unusually activist bunch. "Before September 1930 there existed at least 46 Nazi party members with 73 cross-affiliations. For the period before 30 January 1933 overall, there were at least 84 Nazi students and 116 nonstudent party adherents with 375 cross-affiliations to occupational associations, sports clubs, non-party municipal electoral slates, civic associations, student fraternities

⁵¹ Fritzsche (fn. 36), 13.

⁵² Rudy Koshar, "From Stammtisch to Party: Nazi Joiners and the Contradictions of Grass Roots Fascism in Weimar Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 59 (March 1987), 2; idem (fn. 23), 185ff.; Hans Mommsen, "National Socialism: Continuity and Change," in Walter Lacquer, ed., *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); and Hagtvet (fn. 12).

and other local voluntary groups." By January 1933 there was at least one Nazi Party member in one out of every four voluntary groups in the city.⁵³ The Nazi elite was even more well connected.⁵⁴

Koshar describes the key role of civil society activists in creating a powerful and dynamic Nazi organization in Marburg. By the time of the Nazi breakthrough in the 1930 elections, the NSDAP had representatives in a wide range of civic associations working to spread the movement's message, get out the vote, and discredit political opponents. "The 1930–31 electoral victories were more lasting than expected, because the NSDAP was gaining control over a field of social organizations wider than that supporting bourgeois parties."⁵⁵ The activists not only created a powerful electoral machine but also helped the NSDAP to anchor itself in local communities in a way no other bourgeois party could match. The Nazis used their local organization to design propaganda and political events that would mesh with and appeal to Marburg's particular social rhythms, making the NSDAP seem sympathetic and responsive by contrast with elitist and out-of-touch liberals and conservatives.

[T]he party was attractive in part because of its positive image in conversations in the marketplace, local stores, university classrooms, fraternity houses, meeting halls, soccer fields, and homes. Hitler's seemingly mysterious mass appeal could hardly have been so extensive without the unplanned propaganda of daily social life. . . . Through infiltration, the NSDAP gained moral authority over organizations in which it also established a material base. It was becoming the political hub, the focus of legitimacy and material power, that bourgeois constituencies had lacked.⁵⁶

The Nazis did not merely exploit their cadres' preexisting associational bonds; they even deliberately infiltrated activists into a wide range of bourgeois organizations in order to eliminate potential opponents from positions of power within them.⁵⁷ Without the opportunity to exploit

⁵³ Koshar, "Contentious Citadel: Bourgeois Crisis and Nazism in Marburg/Lahn, 1880–1933," in Childers (fn. 50), 24, 28–29. See also Koshar (fn. 23); Hagtvet (fn. 12); Allen (fn. 36); and idem, "The Nazification of a Town," in John L. Snell, ed., *The Nazi Revolution: Hitler's Dictatorship and the German Nation* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1973).

⁵⁴ In a study of right-wing extremists in the U.S., Raymond Wolfinger and several colleagues came to a similar conclusion. See Wolfinger et al., "America's Radical Right: Politics and Ideology," in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964).

⁵⁵ Koshar (fn. 23), 202.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 204, 202.

⁵⁷ On the party's infiltration of a variety of bourgeois associations, see Mommsen (fn. 52); Winkler (fn. 26), 168ff.; Larry Eugene Jones, "Between the Fronts: The German National Union of Commercial Employees from 1928 to 1933," *Journal of Modern History* 48 (September 1976); Koshar (fn. 37); and Peter D. Stachura, "German Youth, the Youth Movement and National Socialism in the Weimar Republic," in Stachura, ed., *The Nazi Machtergreifung* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983).

Weimar's rich associational network, in short, the Nazis would not have been able to capture important sectors of the German electorate so quickly and efficiently.

A brief profile of the Nazi methods can be found in the case of the German peasantry. During the interwar years peasants joined and participated in a wide range of professional, special interest, and regional associations, a trend carried over from the Wilhelmine era. Early in the republic the peasantry tended to vote liberal or conservative, but they like other bourgeois groups soon began to desert traditional political parties. During the second half of the 1920s most peasants either withdrew from the national political arena or gave their support to one of the new splinter parties; they did not disproportionately support the extreme right.⁵⁸ As the depression bore down, however, the crisis in German agriculture became more acute and the political situation in rural areas more volatile. Large landowners used their influence on the DNVP and other political organizations to secure a large amount of help (including the notorious *Osthilfe*), but the peasantry found itself without a powerful political champion.

Until late in the day the Nazis essentially ignored rural Germany, and the vaguely socialist aspects of the Nazi program (such as land reform and expropriation) tended to drive farmers away. But by the end of the 1920s the NSDAP, clever and opportunistic in ways its competitors were not, noticed the political potential of the frustration and unrest spreading across the countryside. In 1928, therefore, the party refashioned its agricultural program, eliminating many offensive planks and focusing instead on the particular needs and demands of rural inhabitants.⁵⁹

R. Walther Darre was the key figure in Nazi agricultural policy, and by the end of 1930 he decided that the way to win the peasantry's support and box out potential opponents in rural areas was to capture existing agricultural organizations. In November 1930 an instruction

⁵⁸ In the 1928 elections, for example, the NSDAP share of the vote in the predominantly rural districts of East Prussia, Pomerania, East Hannover, and Hesse-Darmstadt was below its national average. Horst Gies, "The NSDAP and Agrarian Organizations in the Final Phase of the Weimar Republic," in Henry A. Turner, ed., *Nazism and the Third Reich* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1972), 75 fn. 2. See also Richard J. Evans and W. R. Lee, eds., *The German Peasantry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Robert G. Moeller, *German Peasants and Agrarian Politics, 1914-1924* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Shelley Baranowski, *The Sanctity of Rural Life: Nobility, Protestantism, and Nazism in West Prussia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Werner Angress, "The Political Role of the Peasantry," *Review of Politics* 21, no. 3 (1959).

⁵⁹ On Nazi agricultural policy during this period, see J. E. Farquharson, *The Plough and the Swastika: The NSDAP and Agriculture in Germany, 1928-1945* (London: Sage, 1976). For a discussion of why other parties such as the SPD passed up this opportunity, see Berman (fn. 43).

sheet ordered the NSDAP's agricultural apparatus (*agrarpolitische Apparat*, or aA) to

penetrate into all rural affairs like a finely intertwined root system. . . [The aA] should embed itself deeply in [all rural organizations] and seek to embrace every element of agrarian life so thoroughly that eventually nothing will be able to occur in the realm of agriculture everywhere in the Reich which we do not observe and whose basis we do not understand. Let there be no farm, no estate, no village, no cooperative, no agricultural industry, no local organization of the RLB [an agricultural organization], no rural equestrian association, etc., etc., where we have not—at the least—placed our [representatives].⁶⁰

Darre became particularly interested in capturing the Reichslandbund (RLB), a major player in German agrarian life that by the end of the 1920s had 5.6 million members. During the 1920s the RLB had cooperated with a number of bourgeois parties including the DVP and DNVP. But eventually many RLB members grew disgusted with the organization's political vacillation and inept leadership and began to consider the NSDAP as a potential champion for agricultural interests. During the latter part of 1930 Darre decided that the best way to gain control over the RLB was by "conquering one position after another from within."⁶¹ The aA focused first on placing supporters in lower ranks of the RLB, then on capturing leadership positions. Like his *führer*, Darre recognized the value of gradualism and legalism, reasoning that if the Nazis nibbled "away at [the RLB's] official apparatus, then, along with this mortar, the big stones will fall out on their own."⁶²

After the NSDAP's successes in local elections in 1931, Darre began to push harder for Nazi appointments to the RLB leadership. He recognized that an official RLB endorsement could play an important role in the 1932 elections. Soon he succeeded in getting a Nazi named one of the four presidents of the RLB, and in 1932 the RLB duly endorsed the Nazis. Darre continued his attack on the RLB from within, eliminating remaining non-Nazis from all influential positions. This pushed the RLB increasingly into the Nazi fold, brandishing the NSDAP's image as the champion of Germany's "neglected" groups while opening up new avenues for manipulation. "Instead of proving an obstacle to Nazism in the countryside, the RLB and other agricultural organizations became convenient conveyor belts for Nazi propaganda reaching deep into the

⁶⁰ Quoted in Gies (fn. 58), 51.

⁶¹ Ibid., 62. See also Zdenek Zofka, "Between Bauernbund and National Socialism: The Political Orientation of the Peasantry in the Final Phase of the Weimar Republic," in Childers (fn. 50).

⁶² Ibid., 65.

rural population. In this way the intermediate groups facilitated the rise of Nazism.”⁶³

The Nazis had infiltrated and captured a wide range of national and local associations by the early 1930s, finally bridging the gap between bourgeois civil society and party politics that had plagued Germany for half a century. From this base Hitler was able to achieve two goals that had long eluded German politicians—the creation of an effective political machine and a true cross-class coalition. With these in Nazi hands and bourgeois competitors eliminated, Hindenburg found it increasingly difficult to ignore Hitler’s demands for a change of course. By the end of 1932 Schleicher had lost Hindenburg’s confidence;⁶⁴ two days after Schleicher was forced to resign, Hitler was named chancellor.⁶⁵

CONCLUSIONS: GERMANY, ASSOCIATIONISM, AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The German case reveals a distinct pattern of associationism that does not conform to the predictions of neo-Tocquevillian theories. German civil society was rich and extensive during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this nation of joiners should accordingly have provided fertile soil for a successful democratic experiment. Instead, it succumbed to totalitarianism. This does not mean that civil society was disconnected from German political development; it was, rather, connected in ways that the reigning neo-Tocquevillian theories ignore.

The vigor of German civil society actually developed in inverse relation to the vigor and responsiveness of national political institutions and structures. Instead of helping to reduce social cleavages, Germany’s weak and poorly designed political institutions exacerbated them; instead of responding to the demands of an increasingly mobilized population, the country’s political structures obstructed meaningful participation in public life. As a result, citizens’ energies and interests were deflected into private associational activities, which were generally

⁶³ Hagvet (fn. 12), 91.

⁶⁴ At least partially because of the RLB’s efforts, which were directed by the Nazis; Hagvet (fn. 12), 75.

⁶⁵ In a tragic irony, Hindenburg’s decision may well have allowed the Nazis to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. After the July 1932 elections the NSDAP began to run into trouble, as Hitler’s inability to deliver on his promises caused dissent among different groups within the Nazi coalition and the party’s previously formidable organization had trouble maintaining necessary levels of enthusiasm and funding. A few months more out of power and the party might have begun to self-destruct. See the new study by Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., *Hitler’s Thirty Days to Power: January 1933* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1996); and also Orlow (fn. 50), 233ff.; and Childers, “The Limits of National Socialist Mobilization,” in Childers (fn. 50).

organized within rather than across group boundaries. The vigor of civil society activities then continued to draw public interest and involvement away from parties and politics, further sapping their strength and significance. Eventually the Nazis seized the opportunities afforded by such a situation, offering a unifying appeal and bold solutions to a nation in crisis. The NSDAP drew its critical cadres precisely from among bourgeois civil society activists with few ties to mainstream politics, and it was from the base of bourgeois civil society that the party launched its swift *Machtergreifung*. In short, one cannot understand the rise of the Nazis without an appreciation of the role played by German civil society, and one cannot understand the contours of that civil society without reference to the country's weak political institutionalization.

From Bismarck's tenure onward German political parties exhibited two major weaknesses.⁶⁶ First, they tended to focus on particular and relatively narrow socioeconomic groups. Workers, large landowners, large industrialists, Catholics—all had political parties catering specifically to them. Instead of reconciling the interests of different groups or creating a sense of national unity, therefore, parties reflected and deepened the divisions within German society. Only Hitler was able to overcome this pattern, finally creating a cross-class political coalition and uniting a majority (or at least a plurality) of Germans under a single political umbrella. Second, Germany's bourgeois parties in particular never adjusted fully to the era of mass politics. Instead, they retained an elite organizational style and failed to develop strong grassroots organizations and to cultivate strong ties to the associational lives of their constituencies.⁶⁷ The result was that large sectors of the German middle classes withdrew even further from national political activity. In general, therefore, the party system served to aggravate the lack of political and social cohesion that had plagued Germany since unification.

The weakness of such national political structures was a key reason that Germans threw themselves into clubs, organizations, and interest groups during periods of strain like the 1870s and 1920s. Because the

⁶⁶ Many, indeed, have blamed Bismarck for the nature of the German party system. By allowing universal suffrage but failing to provide responsible government, Bismarck ensured that political parties would be necessary but also somewhat impotent. Furthermore, by continually manufacturing crises and identifying certain parties (i.e., the SPD and Zentrum) as enemies of the Reich, Bismarck increased the difficulty that parties and their constituencies had in working with each other.

⁶⁷ Both the SPD and the Catholic Zentrum managed to avoid such problems with their core constituencies. Each maintained close ties with an extremely wide range of ancillary organizations, and the SPD in particular was a very effective mass party. Largely as a result of these parties' ability to integrate political and civil society life, their constituencies (i.e., workers and Catholics) proved less likely to vote for the Nazis later on than were other groups. Because they contributed to the segmentation of German society during the 1920s, however, these parties can still be held at least indirectly responsible for the collapse of the Weimar Republic.

political system deepened social cleavages, however, civil society institutions often catered to members of a particular group: socialists, Catholics, and bourgeois Protestants each joined their own choral societies and bird-watching clubs. However horizontally organized and civic minded these associations may have been, they tended to hive their memberships off from the rest of society and contribute to the formation of what one observer has called “ferociously jealous ‘small republics.’”⁶⁸ Germany was cleaved increasingly into distinct subcultures or communities, each of which had its own, separate associational life. Civil society activity alone, in short, could not overcome the country’s social divisions or provide the political cohesion that would have been necessary to weather the crises which beset Germany beginning in 1914. For this, strong and flexible political institutions, particularly political parties, would have been necessary.

On the eve of the Great Depression, Germany found itself in a precarious political situation—its civil society was highly developed but segmented, and its mainstream bourgeois parties were disintegrating. Many citizens active in secondary associations were politically frustrated and dissatisfied; when the depression added economic and political chaos to the mix, the result was a golden opportunity for a new political force. The Nazis stepped into the breach, reaching out to the disaffected bourgeois civil society activists and using the country’s organizational infrastructure to make inroads into various constituencies. The dense network of German associations enabled the NSDAP to create in a remarkably short time a dynamic political machine and cross-class coalition unlike anything Germany had ever before seen—one to which it soon succumbed.

The German case should make us skeptical of many aspects of neo-Tocquevillian theory. In particular, German political development raises questions about what has by now become practically conventional wisdom, namely, that there is a direct and positive relationship between a rich associational life and stable democracy. Under certain circumstances, clearly the very opposite is the case: associationism and the prospects for democratic stability can actually be inversely related. Furthermore, many of the consequences of associationism stressed by neo-Tocquevillian scholars—providing individuals with political and social skills, creating bonds between citizens, facilitating mobilization, decreasing barriers to collective action—can be turned to antidemocratic

⁶⁸ Fritzsche (fn. 36), 232. On this point, see also M. Rainer Lepsius, “Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur: zum Problem der Demokratisierung der deutschen Gesellschaft,” in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Deutsche Parteien vor 1918* (Cologne: Droste, 1983).

ends as well as to democratic ones. Perhaps, therefore, associationism should be considered a politically neutral multiplier—neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but rather dependent for its effects on the wider political context.⁶⁹

The neo-Tocquevilleans have in fact already been criticized for their inability to predict whether civil society activity will have negative or positive consequences for political development. Some, for example, have taken Putnam to task for praising the long-term salutary effect of civil society activity in Northern Italy while ignoring the fact that this selfsame activity proved to be consistent with Fascism.⁷⁰ What the analysis presented here seems to indicate is that if we want to know *when* civil society activity will take on oppositional or even antidemocratic tendencies, we need to ground our analyses in concrete examinations of political reality. If a country's political institutions and structures are capable of channeling and redressing grievances and the existing political regime enjoys public support and legitimacy, then associationism will probably buttress political stability by placing its resources and beneficial effects in the service of the status quo. This is the pattern Tocqueville described.

If, on the contrary, political institutions and structures are weak and/or the existing political regime is perceived to be ineffectual and illegitimate, then civil society activity may become an alternative to politics, increasingly absorbing citizens' energies and satisfying their basic needs. In such situations, associationism will probably undermine political stability, by deepening cleavages, furthering dissatisfaction, and providing rich soil for oppositional movements. Flourishing civil society activity in these circumstances signals governmental and party failure and may bode ill for the regime's future.

This latter pattern fits Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as we have seen, but it may be applicable to many other cases as well, with provocative implications. The weakening of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, for example, was hastened by a rise in civil society activity there in the 1980s; parts of the contemporary Arab world are witnessing a remarkable growth in Islamist civil

⁶⁹ Foley and Edwards (fn. 7); Skocpol (fn. 7, "The Tocqueville Problem"); Diamond (fn. 7); Pinard (fn. 19); Hagtvet (fn. 12), esp. 94; Koshar (fnn. 37, 23); Winkler (fn. 26), esp. 196; and Fritzsch (fn. 36).

⁷⁰ See Sidney Tarrow, "Making Social Science Work across Space and Time: A Critical Reflection on Robert Putnam's Making Democracy Work," *American Political Science Review* 90 (June 1996). Interestingly, Tarrow also criticizes Putnam for failing to recognize that much of the civil society activity he finds was directly or indirectly created by Italian political parties. According to Tarrow, in other words, civil society may not be an *independent variable* (as Putnam claims) but rather an *intermediary variable*, along the lines suggested by the analysis presented here.

society activity that feeds on the citizenry's frustration with the region's unrepresentative and unresponsive authoritarian governments. In such situations civil society may not necessarily promote liberal democracy, as the neo-Tocquevilleans would have it, but rather may simply corrode the foundations of the current political order while providing an organizational base from which it can be challenged. From this perspective, the fact that a militant Islamist movement, for example, provides its supporters with religious classes, professional associations, and medical services tells us little about what might happen should the movement ever gain power; it tells us much more about the political failure and gloomy prospects of the nation's existing regime.

Unfortunately, one need not look so far abroad to find examples of this pattern. The *New York Times* noted in a recent report on the District of Columbia, for example, that for many of Washington's residents home rule "has come to mean a patronage-bloated, ineffective city payroll offering phantom services." The weakness and failure of Washington's local government and political system, in turn, has spurred both a rise in associational activity and a fragmentation of social consciousness and communal identity. "Volunteerism [is] growing stronger in the face of the dwindling services, mismanagement and budget shortfalls that bedevil the city," according to one neighborhood activist. "Gradually," says another, "people come to feel they have to take care of themselves and not worry about the other guy."⁷¹ Another observer proclaims: "Amid widespread disillusionment with government and its ability to solve the nation's most pervasive problems, a loosely formed social movement promoting a return to 'civil society' has emerged . . . drawing a powerful and ideologically diverse group of political leaders."⁷² When associationism and communitarian activities flourish in such a context, it would seem that there is cause, not for celebration, but rather for deep concern about the failure of the community's political institutions.

Finally, if neo-Tocquevilleans have misunderstood the true connections between civic and political institutions, the policy advice they offer should be called into question. Responding to current public dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in America, many have argued that the remedy lies in fostering local associational life. This prescription may prove to be both misguided and counterproductive, however. If a population increasingly perceives its government, politicians, and

⁷¹ Ward 3 block-watch organizer Kathy Smith and Cleveland Park Citizens Association president Stephen A. Koczak, respectively, quoted in Francis X Clines, "Washington's Troubles Hit Island of Affluence," *New York Times*, July 26, 1996, p. A19.

⁷² "Promoting a Return to 'Civil Society,' Diverse Group of Crusaders Looks to New Solutions to Social Problems," *Washington Post*, December 15, 1996.

parties to be inefficient and unresponsive, diverting public energies and interest into secondary associations may only exacerbate the problem, fragment society, and weaken political cohesion further. American democracy would be better served if its problems were addressed directly rather than indirectly. Increased bird watching and league bowling, in other words, are unlikely to have positive effects unless the nation's political institutions are also revitalized.⁷³

⁷³ On this point, see also Skocpol (fn. 7, 1996, 1996).