

## Small Groups and the Chimera of Consensus: Local Politics and National Politics in Modern Germany

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The German nation entered modern politics through a narrow door, and emerged with political tunnel vision. Viewing politics in a different way than their neighbors did, Germans also behaved differently in politics until well after the Second World War. This is the hypothesis which I will develop in this brief essay.

The first six or seven generations of Germans to participate in politics did so only in small, socially homogenous groups. Except for the brief experiment of 1848/49, there was no national parliament in the German lands until the founding of the Empire in 1871. None of the separate German regional states had an elected legislature before 1818, and most Germans could not vote for any kind of government until 1848. Consequently, most Germans before 1848 had no experience of political activity beyond what they could pursue within local voluntary associations and municipal councils.

Having grown up politically in such a sheltered environment, the first politically active Germans came to abhor conflict—which could make enemies of one's friends and neighbors within a narrow circle. They also thought that they could easily prevent conflict, or transcend it by embracing an ill-defined "general interest." After all, they assumed, why should reasonable people of comparable education not reach agreement on important issues?<sup>1</sup> Political education in small groups may also have produced a second marked tendency within German political culture: a preoccupation with individual morality and character. Good character made for good citizens, and only good citizens—as distinct from sophisticated organization, a well-crafted constitution, or other components of a political system—could make representative government work well and without conflict. These two tendencies—abhorrence of conflict and extreme emphasis on individual character—reinforced each other: only a

<sup>1</sup> The German aversion to conflict and idealization of consensus has long been recognized. A trenchant early statement is Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York: Norton, 1967), 129-41.

citizenry of good and homogenous character could reach the idealized consensus with a minimum of conflict.

I will briefly survey the role of voluntary associations in German politics before 1848. Then I will show how one type of voluntary association—the gymnastics clubs—typified the two central tendencies mentioned above. In conclusion, I will suggest the consequences of these two tendencies for German political development in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.<sup>2</sup>

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In the 18th Century, many Germans entered political life through voluntary associations. These associations included some 230 moral-literary societies established from the 1720s to the 1760s; perhaps 350 secret Masonic lodges that flourished between 1750 and 1780; fifty to sixty patriotic-beneficial societies founded during the last third of the century; and finally the reading associations, of which roughly 430 existed in the year 1800.<sup>3</sup> Especially as the century wore on, the membership of such associations was dominated by civil servants, including the highest ranks, and more broadly by society's most prestigious and best-educated members. United by the cultivation of Reason, they considered themselves a moral and intellectual elite, the "trustees" of the nation, who would educate the masses of their ignorant countrymen for future membership in civil society.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This essay is based in part on my manuscript, now under revision for publication: *Germany Incarnate: The Gymnastics Movement in 19th-Century Politics and Society*.

<sup>3</sup> Some relevant literature on these associations includes: Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700-1815* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), esp. ch. 5; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989 [orig. 1962]); Richard van Dülmen, *Die Gesellschaft der Aufklärer. Zur bürgerlichen Emanzipation und aufklärerischen Kultur in Deutschland* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1986); Ute Frevert, "Ausdrucksformen bürgerlicher Öffentlichkeit—zwei Beispiele aus dem späten 18. Jahrhundert," in *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, ed. Lutz Niethammer, 80-90 (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Thus Christoph M. Wieland: "In the course of the existence for which nature determined it, humanity in several thousands of years has made marked progress. Ten, twenty or thirty million people in a single state will not let themselves be treated any longer as so and so many *moral ciphers*. Nonetheless,

Toward that end, they read and discussed about philosophy, theoretical and applied science, new technologies, and social problems such as poverty or infanticide.

Yet in what sense was this activity "political"? Publishing their deliberations in journals and books, such associations hoped to influence the governments of the many German states. To a degree that is difficult to measure, both the associations of citizens and the rulers of states accepted the premise that government actions derived some measure of their legitimacy from approval by "public opinion," meaning, of course, not the opinion of the masses, but rather the consensus of enlightened elites, displayed in journals and in the deliberations of associations. When Frederick the Great decided in 1784 to reform Prussia's legal code, he sought commentary from "public opinion" outside the higher bureaucracy, and eventually commissioned a prize-contest for essays on the subject. By a gradual and largely imperceptible process, the self-appointed trustees of civil society appropriated for themselves the state's role as arbiter of the "common good," which legitimized all government action.<sup>5</sup>

The associations also subjected their members to elaborate rules, ensuring polite demeanor and orderly discussion, and imposing an elevated notion of moral conduct: morality was assumed to be a vital precondition for civil society's self-government, hence moral improvement of members was a significant goal. This self-policing had distinctly political implications, for politics and morality were inextricably linked in eighteenth-century German thought. The dictates of morality were to guide state action (as in Kant). Sound moral character was seen as the indispensable precondition of individual freedom

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the larger part of these millions may be seen in a certain sense as immature [*unmündig*]; but they have *general reason* as their trustee [*Vormund*], and one may rest assured that in matters directly affecting the welfare or woe of the unending large majority, the *expression of this trustee is public opinion* [*öffentliche Meinung*]." Quoted in Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society*, 214.

<sup>5</sup> Hull, *Sexuality, State and Civil Society*, 215; a similar argument for France in Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Duke University Press, 1991), ch. 2: "The Public Sphere and Public Opinion." As Chartier and Hull emphasize, "public opinion" did not mean the "opinions of the masses," but rather the carefully reasoned views of an elite.

and political participation; individual character, in turn, could only reach full development—including morally—in the context of a well-ordered social union. Moral self-policing by the associations' members, together with their egalitarian sociability, underpinned their claim to represent the future of civil society.<sup>6</sup>

Until the French Revolution of 1789, no voluntary association directly challenged the policies of any German monarch, and most clubs limited their declarations to general principles rather than specific policies. The Revolution changed that, by undermining the legitimacy of all European monarchs. Napoleon abolished the Holy Roman Empire, unseated dozens of minor German rulers, and controlled the better part of German-speaking Europe after he defeated Prussia in 1806. Just as the French example inspired some Germans to demand representative government, Napoleon's conquests posed for the first time the question of German national unity. Could the "German nation"—at this point nothing more than a linguistic and cultural community—long survive without becoming a nation-state like France or England?

After the trauma of revolution and war, new types of voluntary associations developed in the German lands, and these associations supported a broader movement for national unity and representative constitutional government. This movement eventually became known as "liberalism." The first and most militant associations to strive for liberal goals were the gymnastics clubs.

Founded in 1811 by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the gymnastics movement rapidly blossomed into a network of some 150 local groups, with roughly 12,000 members in 1818. Banned by the German states as a revolutionary threat in 1820, gymnastics survived through the 1820s in private schools and in a handful of clubs, gradually reviving as a movement of voluntary associations in the 1830s, then growing by leaps and bounds during the mounting political and social crisis of the mid-1840s. By 1847 there were an estimated 300 clubs in the German states (not including those in Switzerland), and perhaps as many as 500 during the revolutionary years 1848/49; during the revolutions, gymnastics clubs often functioned openly as political clubs, and

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<sup>6</sup> Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society*, esp. 218-23.

armed gymnasts' militias (*Turnerwehren, Turnercompagnien*) played a prominent role in the democratic insurrections of May-June 1849, especially in Baden, the Pfalz, and the Kingdom of Saxony.

Decimated by political repression during the early 1850s, the movement gradually revived toward the end of the decade, then mushroomed after 1858 into nearly 2,000 clubs with over 200,000 members in 1864. During this third phase of their activity the gymnastics clubs usually limited their agitation to the singing of patriotic songs, and the organizing of festivals, just as they had done during the first decade of their existence. In any case, their agitation had no direct impact on the course of events. Bismarck brought the other German states under Prussian influence through a series of three wars fought between 1864 and 1871, creating the first German nation-state, which survived in varied forms until Hitler led it to ruin in World War Two. The "German Empire" founded in 1871 met most gymnasts' demand for national unity, while the new Imperial Parliament (*Reichstag*) gave at least the appearance of representative government. With its political *raison d'être* removed, the gymnastics movement withered in the 1870s, then gradually revived as an organization devoted almost entirely to recreation and sociability, exhibiting only the faintest echoes of its earlier political engagement.

Returning now to the period before 1871, one must ask: why gymnastics? It bears repeating that the young men who filled these clubs spent most of their time exercising on the high bar, the vaulting horse, the parallel bars, and so forth. But how could exercise contribute to national unity and the establishment of constitutional, representative government? Exercise in community—or so they argued—turned immature young men into virtuous citizens.

Writing in September of 1848, the schoolteacher August Krause, who taught gymnastics in the town of Löbau (Saxony), explained how gymnastics clubs prepared their members for citizenship:

it is not hard to see that for the youth and the man—besides the natural urge for physical exercise—it is the Fatherland which will give them the impulse toward gymnastics. Does not the youth glow with love for his Fatherland, and is it not his desire to become useful to it?

And when he recognizes in gymnastics a means to become useful to the Fatherland, when he realizes that the gymnastic striving for freedom of the mind [*Geist*] brings him civic virtue [*Bürgertugend*] in general and fitness for military service in particular, then he feels the need to unite at the Turnplatz with those who are inspired by the same idea. The same wonderful striving, in which he sees all his comrades [*Genossen*] united, awakens in him a love and friendship toward them. Soon he realizes that in a voluntary association [*Verein*], individual self-effacement [*Selbstverleugnung*] is necessary for the good of all, and that the Fatherland also requires self-effacement from him.<sup>7</sup>

The exercise itself supposedly promoted the strong and independent character that underpinned "civic virtue;" in turn, the sociability within the clubs was thought to create a sense of community, thereby helping to create the unity of the citizenry, and inspiring the all-important *Gemeingeist* (civic spirit).

Time and again, gymnasts described their clubs as schools of citizenship, as incubators of good character and civic virtue, in precisely the same terms used by liberal theorists. Exercise promoted control of physical appetites, hence, so it was believed, a general control of selfish impulses and a willingness to make sacrifices for the common good. Strength developed in exercise supposedly gave the gymnast confidence and self-respect, hence the ability to assert his rights as a citizen.<sup>8</sup> In his *Staats-*

<sup>7</sup> Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, Ministerium für Volksbildung No. 13074, fol. 383a-391b: this was one of 89 reports to the Saxon Ministry of Education, sent in by gymnastics clubs and school officials, in response to the Ministry's 1848 inquiry into the practice of gymnastics in the Kingdom of Saxony.

<sup>8</sup> Moritz Kloss, later director of the Royal Saxon Institute for the Training of Gymnastics Teachers, described in 1846 the value of gymnastics in molding character: "From the regular exercise of the willpower in the performance of energetic deeds, and from the awareness of a certain physical strength that develops at the same time, there follows with psychological necessity that moral courage [which is] the noble basis of manliness." Kloss then went on to ask the question: "How does gymnastics promote patriotism?" Basing his answer on the need for "manly character" and "moral courage" in citizenship, especially in national defense, he declared that gymnastics leads a young man "to that level of moral development ...where he, free of egotistical striving, is always ready and eager to promote the happiness, the honor, the freedom of his people and

*Lexikon* article on gymnastics, Heinrich Karl Hofmann argued that compulsory school instruction in gymnastics could ensure "for all children of the Fatherland an equal and complete development of their physical and moral faculties [*Gemüthsanlagen*]." This experience of equality, he continued, would make them better citizens: gymnastics

will thereby give everyone in the nation, without consideration of Estate or wealth, the opportunity to feel equal to those beside him, not only before God but also before humanity, and precisely for this reason to love them more sincerely and to value himself more highly. [Gymnastics] thus leads the soul along a close and secure path to Christian love of humanity and to civic spirit [*Gemeingeist*], the breath of life of every society.<sup>9</sup>

As August Krause mentioned in the passage quoted above, gymnastics could also help prepare young men for military service; this argument fit neatly into the broader liberal demand for universal conscription to people's armies that would themselves serve as schools of citizenship. It bears emphasizing, however, that the main contribution of gymnastics to military service was not thought to be physical fitness, but rather moral development and education to "civic spirit:" willingness to die for the community was seen as the ultimate expression of *Gemeingeist*, as well as the most important attribute of the soldier; physical fitness was important in itself, but was more or less taken for granted.

Gymnasts and other German liberals assumed that virtuous citizens could transcend conflicts between their separate interests, and willingly embrace an idealized "general interest" (*Gemeinwohl*). Voluntary associations could educate citizens to the ways and means of harmonious consensus, or so they thought. Every generation of gymnasts before 1871 strove mightily to impose harmony within and between clubs. As the fourth of his "gymnastic laws" (1816), the movement's founder, Friedrich

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his country, and, if it must be, to make every sacrifice." Kloss, *Pädagogische Turnlehre oder Anweisung, den Turnunterricht als einen wesentlichen Theil des allgemeinen Erziehungs- und Unterrichtswesens zu behandeln* (Zeitz, 1846), 19-21.

<sup>9</sup> Hofmann, "Turnen, Turnerei, Turnkunst," in *Staats-Lexikon*, vol. 15, eds. Rotteck and Welcker (Altona, 1843), 476-80, quoted passages at 477-8.

Ludwig Jahn, prohibited his followers from "thinking of hatred or rancour" toward each other when exercising or when traveling to and from the place of exercise.<sup>10</sup> In later years, gymnasts classified all non-members as "friends/enemies of gymnastics" (*Turnfreunde, Turnfeinde*): they welcomed every German who would at least praise them, but ridiculed any who rejected gymnastics, accusing them of being ignorant, weak, cowardly, effeminate, slavish toward authority or opposed to progress.

This fundamental intolerance and naive expectation of political harmony caused few problems so long as press censorship and other legal restraints on political life muted the expression of diverging views. After the March 1848 revolutions, however, a wide spectrum of competing political parties emerged. The gymnastics movement flourished in this climate, growing from 300 clubs to perhaps 500. At the same time, however, antagonism between liberals and democrats broke the movement apart.

Delegates to a July 1848 "Gymnastics Congress" in Hanau tried to establish a national umbrella organization of all gymnastics clubs. The democratic gymnastics clubs insisted that any such organization proclaim that a democratic republic was the proper form of government for a united Germany. Losing the vote 91 to 81, the democratic clubs walked out and formed a rival umbrella group.

Like their liberal antagonists, the democratic gymnasts had not given up the basic expectation of harmony; they had instead insisted on it too strongly, seceding so that they could at least have consensus within their own ranks. In dozens of towns across the German lands, the local gymnastics club would split into two or three clubs: one explicitly democratic, the others liberal or politically agnostic. This schism mirrored the bitter antagonism between democratic and liberal parties during the revolutionary years. In the 1860s, most gymnasts escaped this conflict by suppressing discussion of divisive issues within their clubs. Gymnastics remained a political movement, in that clubs ritually affirmed their "progressive" sentiment and demand for

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<sup>10</sup> Jahn published his "gymnastic laws" (*Turngesetze*) in 1816; they were to regulate the conduct of all gymnasts, so as to make them models for others: Jahn and Ernst Eiselen, *Die Deutsche Turnkunst* (Berlin, 1816), reprint edition edited by Wilhelm Beier (East Berlin, 1960), 181.

national unity. Otherwise, however, they left "politics" (defined as partisanship) to clubs affiliated with the political parties. Self-censorship finally banished discord among the gymnasts. However, the problems of German party politics were just beginning.

Already by 1849, Germany's distinctive five-party system had taken shape: conservatives, Catholics, liberals, democrats, and socialists. Although each party grouping varied over time in strength, together they defined the political spectrum until Hitler seized power in 1933. The stability of the German party system reflected its rigidity: each party presented itself as the sole bearer of the nation's transcendent general interest, and rejected the other parties as illegitimate. Perhaps because the early liberal movement had originated the concept of party within the Germanies, all parties took on the liberals' expectation of harmony and intolerance of dissent. Each party sought to develop a harmonious community of supporters; the German parties became anchored in "social-moral milieu," each party having its characteristic social base, network of associations, and world view. To choose a party in Germany after 1848 was not merely to embrace a set of policies: it was to define oneself as a particular kind of person.<sup>11</sup>

During the years of the German Empire (1871-1918), antagonism between parties took precedence over the question of parliament's power *vis-a-vis* the Imperial crown. Liberals joined Bismarck in trying to crush political Catholicism in the 1870s. This campaign (the infamous *Kulturkampf*) only rallied Catholic voters to the embattled Center party, creating an enduring liberal-Catholic antagonism. The liberal right wing then supported repressive legislation against the socialists. After this law was allowed to lapse in 1890, the Social Democrats grew to become Germany's largest party, taking one third of the votes in the last national election before World War I. The socialists became almost a separate nation within the nation, with their hemetically

<sup>11</sup> On the concept of the party "milieu," and the rigidities of the German party system from 1848 to 1933, see M. Rainer Lepsius, "Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur: zum Problem der Demokratisierung der deutschen Gesellschaft," in *Deutsche Parteien vor 1918*, ed. Gerhard A. Ritter (Cologne, 1973), 56-80; and Thomas Nipperdey, "Grundprobleme der deutschen Parteiengeschichte im 19. Jahrhundert," in Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie* (Göttingen, 1976), 89-112.

sealed network of unions, associations, newspapers, political symbols and language.<sup>12</sup> Rejecting Imperial politics and society, longing for a revolutionary utopia, the Social Democrats were in turn ostracized from the already fragmented national political community.

Divided against itself by antagonisms between parties, the Imperial Parliament lacked the strength and will to wrest power from the Crown. The parties' internecine conflict reinforced their inherited reluctance to challenge the state and subordinate it to the will of the people. For these and other reasons, Germany alone among central and western European states did not make the transition to genuine parliamentary government before World War I. Only defeat and revolution (1918-1919) brought democracy to Germany, and a fragile democracy at that. The gymnastics movement can hardly be blamed for this greater national misfortune. However, the gymnastics clubs reflected and reinforced important liberal assumptions about the nature of political action. These assumptions became pervasive in German politics, and did much to delay the advent of a successful German democracy.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture. Socialist Labour in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1985).