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The expansion of voluntary clubs and societies based around common leisure, social, and commercial interests from their early modern origins into an explosion in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ‘age of associationalism’ has been the focus of a great deal of historical attention over the past few decades. Analysed for their role in processes as diverse as state formation, the development of new forms of national and regional consciousness, changing modes of consumer culture, shifts in class society, the formation of intellectual and scholarly disciplines, and the growth of mass politics, the rise of the association in modern Europe has been woven into a diverse range of fields. Klaus Nathaus’s Organisierte Geselligkeit, based on the author’s Ph.D. thesis, seeks to bridge many of these approaches by examining the growth of associational life in modern Britain and Germany as a general phenomenon from the perspective of socialization and sociability. As its theoretical starting point, the work ‘regards associations as a suitable “probe” through which the prevailing relations within a society can be analysed’ (p. 13), and seeks comparatively to examine the role of associations within the two countries as a means of comparing broader social trends and processes of integration.

Of course, a major issue in such a work is precisely what the units of study actually are. The diversity of forms of association in modern Europe is a problematic issue for all scholars working in this area, all the more so for a comparative study, where it is not always clear whether Vereine, Gesellschaften, and Verbände in the German context are necessarily the same sorts of institutions as clubs, societies and associations in Britain, or, indeed, if different organizations carrying these labels are the same within national boundaries. As such, a broad definition is presented, encompassing groups characterized by ‘voluntary entry, independent administration, a dedicated purpose, formal membership, in addition to the waiving of all financial profits’ (p. 11). This evidently covers a very large range, and examples are drawn from organizations as diverse as Masonic lodges, trade unions, and savings societies. However, the main focus falls upon
what could be termed ‘recreational’ associations, particularly gymnastics groups, choirs, drama societies, and sports clubs, organizations which can be seen to have a relatively continuous existence throughout much of the long period under consideration, and an unambiguous ‘social’ role.

The structure of the book is largely chronological and juxtapositional, splitting the period being surveyed into a number of chronological blocks, with long separate sections on each country followed by a short supplementary comparative stock-taking. These divisions correspond roughly to: a gestatory period from the early modern period to the early nineteenth century (ending in 1835 in Britain and 1850 in Germany, itself an interesting point); the mid nineteenth century to the First World War, seen as a period of rapid expansion and commercialization, with a major acceleration in the decades after 1890; the 1914 to 1945 period, taken to be one of continued growth and divergence; and an epilogue-like final examination of the post-war period. One major benefit of this book is precisely this extension into the twentieth century. Associations have overwhelmingly been studied as a nineteenth-century phenomenon, with their relative decline in recent decades overshadowing their continued importance in much of the first half of the twentieth century.1 Many societies and associations in both countries seem to have massively increased their membership over the 1920s, even in the face of increased competition from less structured forms of leisure and popular culture such as cinema and music halls—for example, the Deutsche Sängerbund grew from 185,000 members in 1912 to a high point of 516,000 members in 1929, and the Amateur Athletics Association in Britain grew from 500 clubs in 1914 to around 1,000 in 1930. This suggests important trends and a rich seam to research, which this work follows through productively.

The wide focus and broad chronology mean that the argument is a general one presented in broad strokes: of a tendency towards social strata-specific (schichtenspezifische) British and cross-strata (schichtenübergreifende) German associational structures. This is

1 This is a trend borne out by much of the later section of the work, although sporting associations are shown to be a major exception. The Deutscher Sportverband e.g. is shown to have grown from 3.2 million members in 1950 to over 18 million by the 1980s (p. 272).
judged as having grown from the place of associational life within wider social networks and processes: the market and class divisions are shown to have played a stronger role in the British case, leading to essentially separate working-class and middle-class spheres; while the dominance of social elites, the state, and cross-class integrative practices (at both local and national level) were more significant in Germany. This is certainly a plausible general argument given the known higher importance of the state and national movement in Germany and the long entrenchment of consumer culture in Britain. However, it is in many ways a familiar and expected one which mirrors much of the—albeit often diffuse—existing secondary literature. In Britain, the works of Ross McKibbin and Patrick Joyce have tended to approach associations from the perspective of the growth of consumer society and cultures of class, while in Germany, the general trend since the field was instigated by scholars such as Thomas Nipperdey in the 1970s has been to study the Vereine in their own right as agents of mobilization and integration. This essentially forms the core argument and focus of this work, which ensures that it primarily reflects and systemizes the two national historiographies of associational life rather than presents new interpretations.

Following this, British associations are primarily examined through the dual prism of the strength of market society and the dynamics of a sharply defined class system. The middle-class associations, aiming at respectability and the promotion of a particular vision of the social order, are seen as attempting to instil a sense of morality throughout society, and particularly towards the lower orders, through the promotion of ‘rational recreation’ and educational movements in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Yet despite these pretensions, they are shown as largely unsuccessful, with British workers’ associations maintaining an ‘organizational and cultural independence from the patronage of the middle class’ (p. 102), a trend which only increased as the period went on. A telling example is presented by the Working Men’s Clubs, initially established in the 1860s with the intention that ‘once the workers belonged to a club, they would fall under the restraining influence of the clergy and members of the “middle class”, becoming reoriented through a sort of social “osmosis” to religious views and a desire for education’ (p. 52). However, these were to be themselves reoriented by the need to cater to a consumerist working-class leisure culture with a
heavy emphasis on smoking, alcohol, and entertainment, transforming them away from ‘moral imperialist’ agendas into what George Orwell would describe as a ‘glorified co-operative pub’ by the 1930s. This is one example of a broad trend where a rising market-based popular culture is shown as giving the working-class organizations, through dynamics of self-help, consumerism, and close connections to sponsors such as travel agents, pubs, and local companies, the ability to maintain a high degree of economic and social autonomy away from the middle classes.

German associations meanwhile are studied for their relationship to vertical forms of social integration, dominated by elite politics and never having the broad sense of class separation found in British associations, despite some resistance from the 1890s and 1900s from organizations formed by other social or political groups, particularly the Social Democrats. Strong connections to regions and localities, and thereafter to nationalism and unity, are shown to have been of crucial importance in fostering large societies, as was a greater emphasis on ritual, corporate identity, and status. The association as a binding collective is seen to have tied itself behind the concept of a nation unified across regions and classes, a powerful idea as ‘to underprivileged Germans it signified the principle of equality, which appeared to be realized under the patriotic associations. Such a union under the banner of the nation was also acceptable to the middle class, as the national community could be reconciled with the existing social order’ (p. 113). A less well-developed commercial popular culture, ‘as the concept of advertising was still too new, the state railway systems opened no space for independent travel agents, and the press saw their task as the instruction, not the entertainment, of their audience’ (p. 142), is seen to have worked against the autonomy of working-class organizations. This meant that the hold of patronage and the predominance of general and local associations remained a key trend, and when consumer leisure culture expanded from the end of the nineteenth century, it was largely separate from the world of the Vereine.

Both of these trajectories are shown to have been exacerbated in the period immediately following the First World War, when the influence exercised by the Weimar state in Germany over the development of associational federations through its control over the granting of tax-exempt status is judged to have been crucial. A very
interesting section shows how this was bestowed for reasons of the ‘conceptual Hydra’ of ‘social utility’ (Gemeinnützigkeit), which meant that ‘the state controlled the process of the formation of federations, because it possessed the power to define the term Gemeinnützigkeit and decided on its recognition’ (p. 150), allowing it to condition the character and structure of associational life in the years following the First World War. The large comparative point in this period is that associational life in Britain remained more continuous with pre-war forms, connected with increasingly distinct levels of class society as a means of social differentiation. While the importance and scale of this shift in the German context does slightly overshadow the increasing role of the state in inter-war Britain, which, while certainly never approaching the German levels, still marked something of a change from earlier forms, it still presents a very thought-provoking section.

There are expectedly some gaps and unevenness in the coverage, as complex topics such as the effect of war-time conditions on voluntary associations and the complexity of the role of traditional Vereine under National Socialism are appropriate subjects for full monographs in themselves. More pressing, however, the divided structure works against deep comparisons, and often obscures some fascinating points, such as the parallel rise but differing characters of defence leagues and shooting associations in the two countries. In Germany these developed into durable mass national organizations linking members of many different classes (pp. 108–14). However, similar associations in Britain tended to be localized, fluctuated in membership, were predominantly ‘middle class’, and failed to bridge the gap between the two associational worlds, being roundly mocked and laughed at when they went on parade (pp. 61–3). Likewise, an archival research-based comparison between associations in Essen and Sheffield features sporadically in the nineteenth-century sections, but almost gets lost in the broad overall argument. A closer examination of these types of case-studies would perhaps have been more effective in drawing out the central argument than the comprehensive but often secondary source-dependent approach which is followed. Issues of transnational contact and interchange are also not examined, even if some of the briefly cited examples, such as the importation of football, tennis, and boxing from England, the ‘Mutterland des Sports’, to Germany in the 1890s (p. 123), would have offered a very interesting field of analysis. There is also some
degree of asymmetry, in that some types of organization are discussed in one national context, but not in others. A particularly notable example is the case of the Boy Scouts and similar youth groups in Britain, who are given a fairly significant section, while their German equivalents barely feature at all, despite also being highly active and prominent.

Nevertheless, these are minor points within a generally comprehensive work, which should be of use to historians in highlighting the potential of research in this area of modern history, as well as surveying processes of class-formation, mass consumer society, and the changing roles of the state and the market in the two countries.

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