

Voluntary Associational Life (*Vereinswesen*)*

Max Weber

Translator's Note

Vereinswesen constitutes the second half of Weber's 1910 speech to the new German Sociological Society.¹ The first half, following a brief comment on value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) as a constitutional principle of the new Society, opened with a proposal that the press (*Zeitungswesen*) be made the subject of a collective research project. Weber regarded *Zeitungswesen* to be a preliminary investigation into the German public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), and called attention to new developments in modern journalism and the *Weltanschauungen* that underpinned them. The new tendencies he found noteworthy were quite diverse—in the financial basis (from direct sales and subscription to advertisement); in reporting style, such as the new principle of anonymity that conveys

* Glossary: German is notoriously rich when it comes to associations or groups, and English pales in comparison. Following the German convention of his time, Weber used various words to note the fine conceptual differences. For example, Verein, Anstalt, Verband, Genossenschaft, Gemeinschaft, Gesellschaft, Gemeinde, Einigung, Vereinigung, Vergesellschaftung, Gruppe, and Klub are all in heavy use in this text, and their meanings in the German original are not always interchangeable. Unless noted otherwise, I have used distinct English words—such as voluntary association or association for Verein, institution for Anstalt, and organization for Verband—to respect Weber's distinctions. In general, I followed Weber's own typology in Weber (1972: 21–30). I also consulted Anthony Black's Glossary attached to his edition of Otto von Gierke's monumental *Genossenschaftsrecht*. See Gierke (1991): xxxi–xxxiii. Note that Gierke was one of the most influential legal historians in turn-of-the-century Europe and America whose works contributed to the renewed understanding of groups and associations as legal categories. His influence on British pluralism, via Maitland, was far-reaching, as was his influence on Weber during his student days at the University of Berlin, according to Martin Riesebrodt (1989). Given Gierke's influence in general and Weber's intellectual debt to him, it does not seem unreasonable to consult the idiomatic practice established by Gierke and his English translators. In the main text, my own insertions are bracketed, while parentheses are used for noting German originals. In the footnotes, Weber's own is preceded by (MW); all others are my annotations. Weber's own underlinings and emphases are preserved.

1. Weber (1969; 1979; 1998).

impersonal authority and (false) objectivity; in the personal and social background of the modern journalists; and in the effects upon the habitus and routine of the working class. This last point about habitus prompted Weber to crystallize his interest in the press as founded upon the 'making of modern man', a process in which public opinion was formed and transmitted. He concludes: What does it contribute to the making of modern man? Secondly, how are the objective, public cultural values (*überindividuellen Kulturgüter*) influenced, what shifts occur, what is destroyed and newly created of the beliefs and hopes of the masses, of the *Lebensgefühle* – as they say today – what is destroyed forever and newly created of the potential point of view? These are the last questions which we must raise and you see immediately, honoured members of the audience, the road to the answer to such questions is extremely long'.

Gentlemen, I will have to be even briefer in outlining the other two issues that the [German Sociological] Society has in view.

For the present, and out of necessity, I need to formulate the second topic very broadly. It is a fundamental task of any sociological association to take as the object of its work those entities conventionally described as 'social' (*gesellschaftliche*), i.e., that which is located between politically organized, or acknowledged powers, such as the state, the town council (*Gemeinde*), and official churches, on the one hand, and the organically grown community (*Gemeinschaft*) of the family, on the other. And so the first task is: *a sociology of voluntary associational life (Vereinswesen)* in the broadest sense of the word, from the bowling club – to be really drastic! – to the political party and on to religious, artistic or literary sects.

Gentlemen, such an ambitious topic has to be approached from many different angles that can yield more discreet sets of questions. I will very briefly mention at least a few of them.

Undoubtedly, contemporary man is, among other things, an associational man (*Vereinsmensch*) to a dreadful and entirely unsuspected degree. This is no exaggeration: now even associations for 'the abolition of associations' have been created. In this respect, Germany sets a very high standard. A glance at any address book shows – assuming that it really lists most associations, which turns out to be most unlikely, for even in Berlin, for instance, the list is totally incomplete, while small towns sometimes fare better – that, say, in cities with 30,000 inhabitants, 300 different associations exist. Thus, one association for every 100 inhabitants, or for every 20 households.

Gentlemen, the quantitative distribution of associations does not always go hand in hand with qualitative significance. From a qualitative

perspective, which country is the land of associations (*Vereinsland*) par excellence? Without a doubt, America. And the reason is that, for the American middle class, membership of a particular association implies legitimization as a 'gentleman' [English original] – or to be more precise, it used to imply this, since now everything is becoming Europeanized.² Some drastic examples! A German nose and throat specialist told me that his first patient in Cincinnati said to him before being treated: 'I am a member of the First Baptist Church on so and so street.' He could not divine what this had to do with the patient's nasal problem. It meant nothing more than: 'I am a certified gentleman and I will pay well and promptly.' His second patient showed him straight away a sort of legionnaire's badge in his buttonhole. The physician asked about this and was told that this badge signified membership in a club (*Klub*) to which you are elected only after careful examination of your personality; once you belonged to that club, then you were certified as a gentleman.³ This kind of club or association of every kind is to be found everywhere in bourgeois society (*Bürgertum*). These days they are increasingly secular in nature. But the archetype of every association – which is salient especially in America – is the *sect*, in the quite specific sense of the word. Whether it is purely historical in character does not matter here – it is rather a matter of principle. For the nature of the sect lies in its being a combination (*Einigung*) of specifically qualified people and not an 'institution' (*Anstalt*), and its socio-structural principle involves a rejection of those sanctions typical of an authoritarian organization (*Zwangverbände*) such as the state or the church. It *has* to be a 'voluntary association'. Hence in America the sect still attests to the ethical qualification of the businessman. For instance, before the Baptists admit a new member he is subject to an examination, not dissimilar to the examination our reserve officers undergo, covering his entire past – visits to the tavern, relationships with ladies, card playing, cheques, and all outstanding personal debts are unearthed, all this before he can be baptized. Whoever is baptized after such a scrutiny earns the reputation for creditworthiness and honest business deals. Other traditional American associations go about it with similar consequences, although they may not be so rigorous as the Baptists. Although Freemasonry played a rather similar function here (in Germany), as can easily be seen in the Freemason's records, this phenomenon was first and foremost an American one. An American gentleman complained to me that he could not for some superficial reason achieve the position of a Master of the Lodge

2. For Weber, Europeanization is largely synonymous with secularization in America. See, for example, Weber (1906: 559) and Weber (1920: 208-15).

3. For Weber's use of same ethnographic anecdotes, see Weber (1920: 209).

(*Meister am Stuhl*). When I asked him why that position was so important to him, he responded – If I am a Master of the Lodge and can on my business trips present myself with the Lodge’s secret sign, I will get all the customers and sell anything, because it will be assumed by everyone that I provide honest goods at honest prices and that if I did not conduct my business properly, the Freemasons would not tolerate me in their midst. And so it goes in American life in general. Whoever fails to gain admittance – and the German Americans, for instance, rarely have this luck – cannot scale the social heights. Democracy in America is not a heap of sand, but a jumble of exclusive sects, voluntary associations, and clubs.⁴ These bodies support the selection of those most fitted to American life, and they do this by supporting advancement to business, social, political and all other forms of domination (*Herrschaft*) in social life. How does this compare with the way things are here? Can we find analogous examples here, and, if so, what is their nature and extent? Where? With what consequences? Where not? Why not?⁵ This is the first, purely external, part of the problem.

The second question is as follows: How does a certain associational membership influence the inner workings (*innen*) of the individual members or the personality (*Persönlichkeit*) as such?⁶ Generally one can say: Whoever belongs to an organization (*Verband*), be it for instance a German student fraternity, a Greek Letter Society or other student association in America, has to ‘assert’ himself among his fellow members (*Verbandsgenossen*) both externally and internally. And the question is: In what way does he assert himself? In the above example, for instance, it depends upon which specific ideal of ‘masculinity’ is consciously and purposefully, or unconsciously and traditionally, cultivated in a German

4. Cf. ‘Whoever presents democracy as a mass fragmented into atoms, as our romantics prefer to do, is fundamentally mistaken as far as the American democracy is concerned... The genuine American society – and here we include especially the middle and lower strata of society – was never such a heap of sand. Nor was it a building where everyone who entered without exception found open doors. It was and is permeated with “exclusivities” of every kind’ Weber (1906: 580). Also see Weber (1920: 215-16).

5. Cf. Drawing from the Prussian officer corps and German Lutheran churches, as well as his own experience with Heidelberg fraternities, Weber noted their affinity with American counterparts, and yet in the end criticized the German examples for failing to inculcate moral qualities in the individual members. German associations ask ‘only what is customary and expedient for the proper citizen [*korrekten Staatsbürger*]’, Weber laments, having little to do with ‘religious motives’. Weber (1906: 582). Also see Weber (1924: 469; 1978: 342-43). More on this national contrast in n. 7.

6. K. Tribe translated this sentence as ‘What is the inner effect of belonging to a particular form of association? On personality as such?’, in Hennis (1988: 57).

fraternity on the one hand, and an English sports club or an American fraternity on the other.⁷ The conditions under which one gains the 'respect' of comrades are of course quite different. They differ very generally not only by nation, but also by class and type of voluntary association. The individual in pursuing this ideal [of different associations] is consciously or unconsciously selected and then moulded. And, furthermore, it is not just a question of whether he wins the external respect of his colleagues, but in the final analysis we always have to ask: How does the individual exposed to these influences maintain *his own self-respect* and his own need to be a 'personality'? What is important in the shifts in inner positions that might be critical to the equilibrium of what we call 'personality' and that lead to the possible necessity of redefining it? For it is through such inner problematization that the individuals adopt the influences of the social ensembles in which the individual is placed and incorporate such influences into the nexus (*Zusammenhang*) of one's own 'Self' (*Ich*). And one's own sense of 'dignity' can shift to entirely different foundations, depending on the kind of ensemble concerned.

Now to continue: Every voluntary association one belongs to represents a relation of domination (*Herrschaftsverhältnis*) between people. First, as a rule it is formally and officially a relation of domination based on majority rule. We are therefore ultimately concerned with the psychology of this majority rule (*Majoritätsherrschaft*) over the individual, a psychology that is expressed and has effects in very specific ways within these private organizations. Here I can only speak to the most decisive point at issue. That is, within each and every organizational body of this kind, whether it be called a party, a voluntary association, a club or whatever else, rule is in reality always domination by the minority (*Minoritätsherrschaft*) — occasionally a dictatorship of a single individual, the domination of one person or a few who are somehow qualified in the process of selection and their adaptation to the tasks of leadership and in whose hand the actual domination of such an association lies.⁸

7. Behind this value-free pretence lies his disparagement of German associational life. In contrast to 'English club...[where] all members are equal', German associations, such as student fraternities, emphasize 'schoolboy subordination' that masquerades as a 'training for the discipline of office' and 'ritualized convention'. At its worst, voluntary associations are mere instruments for ingratiation in 'higher places' or a forum for vain 'boasting about the wealth of one's parents' (Weber 1988: 116-17).

8. *Vereinswesen* provides an interesting context to revisit Weber's alleged elitism. This insistence on minority rule and the leadership ideal constitutes one of the backbones of Weber's political thinking, and has been criticized, understandably, for its elitism. Presenting this notorious theme in the context of voluntary associational life, however, raises some interesting questions. For one, leadership position is seen to be open to all who are willing to compete for it. It indicates a meritocracy rather than

Under what circumstances and under what 'rules of the game' does this leadership selection within the various categories of voluntary associations or parties take place? This is decisive for the question: What kind of personality is brought to the position of domination? This again can be answered only with respect to every kind of voluntary association and the cultural circumstances of the related environment. This is a sociological question of central importance, and no less important is one which follows from it: In what ways do the leading groups seek to secure loyalty toward the association, which means in effect toward their own domination? We already have available some important preliminary studies of this issue.⁹

To continue: What kinds of connections exist between different kinds of voluntary association, again between – this sounds paradoxical – the bowling club and the political party, between an arbitrarily selected association and something that can be labelled in the broadest sense as an association based upon a 'worldview'? Everywhere such a relationship is somehow present, even where it would not be expected. But it assumes very different guises. First of all, it is an everyday phenomenon that social associations originating in grand ideas about the nature of the world (*Weltanschauungsideen*) become mechanisms that in fact increasingly dispense with these ideas. The cause of this lies in a universal 'Tragedy', so to speak, that dooms every attempt to realize ideas in reality. It happens to every voluntary association, to every apparatus no matter how modest, that as soon as the association identifies itself propagandistically, its apparatus becomes in some way objectified and occupied by *careerists*.¹⁰ For example, consider even such a difficult and

aristocratic elitism. For another, leaders are formed, to use Weber's phraseology, 'from below'. When leaders are identified and trained at the level of, say, neighbourhood choral societies, the alleged elitism comes across as more pluralistic in its conceptualization, far from its usual identification with demagogic dictatorship and unthinking mass following. In the present context, Weber's leadership ideal makes better sense as a civic educational project than as a caesarism.

9. [MW] The work of Prof. G.A. Leist comes to mind.

10. This theme of organizational oligarchy is another enduring legacy of Weberian political theory. Weber thought that this irreversible trend was indicative of the degeneration of sectlike associations, for it is tantamount to bureaucratization of civil society. This provided Weber with another reason to call for a vigorous civil society, albeit bureaucratized, for without associational pluralism, the whole society will be subjected to a single monolithic bureaucracy of the state. Market agents, while being also rapidly reorganized in massive scale according to a bureaucratic model, were welcomed by Weber for the same reason. This theme of balance of power among bureaucratic and bureaucratizing organizations becomes more salient in his later postwar writings, especially on constitutional issues. For an analysis of Weber's

delicate problem area as that of the erotic life – the propaganda of ideas here already foresees the pecuniary basis of relationships. My observation is not based on any kind of moral accusation against such people, and I do not consider myself so entitled – considering the way in which so many professors still today see it as their duty to broadcast their subjective political views or other ideals from the lectern. But, it is a fact, and it has of course far-reaching consequences, that when the development of an idea has reached the stage of objectification (*Versachlichung*), where the propaganda for these ideas becomes the foundation for material existence (of the organization), once again a variety of consequences naturally follow depending on the kind and character of these ideals. On the other hand, gentlemen, nearly every voluntary association holds in some way a substantive ‘worldview’, even those associations seeking to avoid this as a matter of principle. In some sense, one could say, even a German bowling club, or, even more clearly, a choral society. Gentlemen – staying with this example – I believe that the thriving choral society scene (*Gesangvereinswesens*) in Germany has considerable influence even in areas not normally suspected – for instance, in politics. A person who is accustomed to releasing daily huge emotions from his chest through his larynx without making any connection to his action, that is, the adequate working out (*Abreaktion*) of these powerfully expressed emotions in correspondingly powerful action – and that is the essence of the choral art – will become a person who, to put it succinctly, will easily become a ‘good citizen’ in the passive sense of the word. No wonder that the monarchs have such a huge predilection for entertainments of that kind: ‘Where people sing, you may safely settle.’ Great, strong passions and strong action are lacking there.¹¹ It sounds paradoxical, and it may be, I have to admit, a bit one-sided. It is not meant as criticism; it may even be possible to take the viewpoint that it is precisely the wealth of the German people that they are able to accomplish this release and to create on this foundation an artistic culture unique to them; and it could be said that *every* kind of culture finds its foundation in the introduction of inhibitions between feelings and their discharge

positions in the draft committee of the Weimar Constitution, especially regarding federalism as an institution of balance of power, see Schulz (1987: 114-42).

11. K. Tribe rendered this passage as: ‘A person who is used daily to let powerful feelings flow out of his breast through his larynx without relation to his action – without therefore adequate abreaction of these powerful expressed feelings in powerful actions – that is a person who, in short, very easily become a “good citizen”, in the passive sense of the word. No wonder that monarchs have such a love of these sorts of performances. “Where they sing, you can peacefully settle down”. Mighty and strong passions, and great actions, are missing here.’ Hennis (1988: 57-58).

(*Abreaktion*). I leave all of these questions open today, for we are not concerned with value-judgment. Although I might have exaggerated, I would like to say that such a relation, as I indicated, *can* exist.

In these or similar cases, it is essentially a matter of the unconscious influence that the nature of associational activity has on the overall habitus. But one finds the most diverse nuances in the ways in which organizations, whether pursuing purely professional or purely matter-of-fact goals, influence the regimentation of practical life conduct (*Lebensführung*). It can happen even quite unconsciously in purely professional-technical areas where we would never imagine them. Just consider the fact that certain medical theories, very specifically psychiatric theories, today are clearly on the way to forming sects, that a particular theory, created by a famous Viennese psychiatrist, has led to the founding of a sect, which has gone so far as to close its meetings to non-members and hold its meetings in secret. The 'complex-free' person as the ideal, and a form of life conduct through which such a complex-free person can be created and preserved, is the object of this sectarian activity, and almost all aspects of life can be regulated according to those ideals. This might elude many who believe the purely psychiatric and scientific nature of these theories, and yet the connection becomes very clear later.¹²

A similar phenomenon can also occur, for example, in the area of the aesthetic, in the artistic creation of sects. Indeed, from a sociological viewpoint, sects sustained by artistic visions of the world belong to some of the more interesting ones to be found – they are also of considerable interest in their own right. Even today, just as in a religious sect, they have had their incarnations of the divine (I am thinking of the Stefan George circle), and their impact on practical life conduct, on the inner attitude toward life in general which they create in their followers, can have far-reaching consequences.¹³ And race theoreticians are no different. Marriage arranged according to aristocratic lineages can of course be replaced by marriage according to lineages established on the basis of racial hygiene, and we all know that a sect that exists mostly for that purpose attracts esoteric and exotic followers.¹⁴ At this juncture, I feel

12. For Weber's critical attitude to Freudianism and what he perceived to be its moral precepts, see Weber's letter on Otto Gross's Freudianism in Weber (1926: 378-84).

13. For Weber's fascination and eventual disenchantment with the George circle, see Weber (1926: 463-72). Suffice it to say that Weber in the end regarded the circle as encouraging a mystic flight from this world in the way in which the virtuosi of Indian religions did. The same is, according to Weber, true of the Russian literary gurus, such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, with whom he also felt a deep sympathy and disagreement in turn (Weber 1924: 467).

14. For Weber's ambivalent attitude to race theories, see his verbal exchange with

compelled to mention that, as always, the term 'sect' is employed here in a manner quite free of value-judgment. The term seems to have a peculiarly negative connotation for no reason other than that it is linked to the idea of 'narrowness'. Specific, firmly articulated ideals can be brought into life in no way other than in the founding of a sect whose enthusiastic followers strive to realize them fully, and who therefore unite with one another and set themselves *apart* from others.¹⁵

Gentlemen, to cut things short, we finally arrive at two similar principal questions, just as happened in the case of the press: How do the various categories of such organizations and associations contrive their effect? This line of inquiry can begin with political parties for reasons that have to do with their variety. Political parties can be either machines, or pure machines like the American parties; they can be self-proclaimed ideological parties (*Weltanschauungsparteien*) like the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) today, which honestly believes itself to be such a party, even though it ceased to be a long time ago; or they can be genuine ideological parties like the Centre Party, which is still mostly ideological, even though that element is disappearing even there. These varieties reflect the most diverse pairings between ideas and mechanisms. My question then becomes: How and by what means do these different types of voluntary associations effect the formation of particular individuals, on the one hand, and the formation of the objective, public values (*überindividuellen Kulturgüter*), on the other?

If you ask now about the empirical data for such an analysis, the material that you first have to start with is very dry and trivial, and without this dry and trivial material, the kind of work that wears out shoe leather and uses up quantities of money and effort will not get anywhere. First of all, it is worth seeking from the associations systematically information about their members' occupations, their geographical, ethnic and social provenance. I think it quite possible that, in time, we can create a kind of register of the most important associational cate-

Alfred Ploetz that also took place during the first convention of the German Sociological Society. See *Verhandlungen* (Weber 1969: 157-64) and Weber (1924: 456-62). Also see his reservation about it in Weber (1976: 235). For an analysis of Weber's attitude to race issue, see Liebersohn (1988: 118-19).

15. Cf. "Individual members" neither rest on "emotional needs" nor aspire toward "emotional values". The individual seeks to maintain his own position by becoming a member of social groups (*Gruppen*). Missing is that undifferentiated peasant, vegetable-like congeniality (*Gemütlichkeit*) without which Germans imagine no community (*Gemeinschaft*). The cool objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) of the associative activity (*Vergesellschaftung*) promotes the precise placement of the individual in the purposefulness (*Zwecktätigkeit*) of the group.' Weber (1906: 581).

gories along those lines, from which we can trace their principles of selection, of which naturally the associations are themselves mostly ignorant. This kind of investigation can only be developed out of extensive and comprehensive material. Alongside this, we then have the *means* to analyse the ways in which the influence of the associations is exerted on the cultivation of the members internally, and externally the propagandistic meaning and struggle, and then also the propagandistic content itself – all organized in clear sociological casuistry. Certainly a work of many years!

Since I just mentioned ‘selection’, I will now mention the final area of work that we are already contemplating. As Professor Eulenburg of Leipzig discussed and presented for systematic examination, the question concerns the selection of the leading professions in the modern society, especially of those professions that can be called in the conventional sense (the sociologist cannot assume anything else than a conventional sense) the ‘leading’ ones, such as the economic and political leaders, the scientific, literary and artistic leaders, the clergymen, civil servants, scholars, business owners, and so on. Thus, we ask: Where do those people come from?, what did their fathers and grandfathers do?, what are their ethnic backgrounds?, what kind of life stories did they tell (this means, how, and over what kind of obstacles, did they arrive at their current position)? and so on. In short, why has the selection, that is in effect everywhere, brought them into that position (this, of course, can be determined only based on sufficiently numerous responses), and which ethnic, professional, social, or material background is most conducive to increasing the chances to arrive exactly at this profession or position? This is the kind of research agenda that would require a long-term investigation and a very large survey. Gentlemen, I have merely attempted, in the given time, to demonstrate in a purely *illustrative* manner and with randomly chosen examples that in the problem area we are facing, there exist questions which are worth approaching from a scientific point of view.

[Followed by two concluding paragraphs in which Weber discusses the funding for the proposed research. He estimates that the initial stage of the research would cost 25,000 Marks of which 20,000 Marks is already in hand thanks to private donations mostly from Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften and Institut für Gemeinwohl in Frankfurt. This is followed by Weber’s emphasis on the necessity for building a financial basis of the Society independent of the membership dues and his observation on the general situation of research funding in Germany.]

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