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A Nation of Joiners: Sports Clubs in Germany

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How does German and American voluntarism differ?

Why do sports clubs continue to be attractive in Germany?

For centuries, whoever came to America was impressed by the country's landscape of voluntary organizations. Young nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville, when traveling the U.S. in the early nineteenth century, highlighted that Americans are inclined to found voluntary organizations for any purpose you might think of, ranging from sending missionaries to the antipodes to establishing a public library downtown.¹ The same holds true for Max Weber. When he was in the U.S., he also perceived the density of voluntary organizations as an important element of the political culture of the country. In his speech delivered at the inaugural meeting of the German Sociological Society, he even advised his German colleagues to make the study of voluntary organizations a top priority on the sociological research agenda.²

There is no doubt that America looks back upon a long tradition of voluntarism and civic activity, organized by and large in voluntary organizations. But it is not well known on the other side of the Atlantic that the U.S., indeed, is a nation of joiners. On the contrary, many Germans believe that they live in the country that stands out for its club culture. There is even a specific word in German highlighting the strong preference for club life in this country. It was the famous writer and poet Kurt Tucholsky who in the 1930s pointed to Germans' "*Vereinsmeierei*" (spending your leisure time in voluntary organizations) that constitutes a major characteristic of German social life.

The differences between voluntarism in Germany and the U.S. are still remarkable. Voluntarism in the U.S. is first and foremost "community-based." People tend to volunteer and give support in order to help those in their community who are not so well off. Civic life in Germany is strongly membership-based. The reasons why citizens join a specific club (in German, *Verein*) are at least threefold: They want to support the organization through their membership dues; they want to get something out of their membership, since the majority of clubs offer services that are exclusively geared toward members; and finally, they want to indicate that they are in accordance with the idea and mission the particular club stands for. In the course of time, the individualistic incentive of getting something out of your membership has gained momentum in Germany, whereas in former times the motivation to join was strongly affiliated with political considerations. At the outset of the voluntary movement, the country's cleavage structure was mirrored by the composition of the country's voluntary organizations.

At the beginning of the club movement, the very reasons why Americans and Germans were fond of founding and joining voluntary organizations were significantly different. In a nutshell: While citizens in America already enjoyed the benefits of a democratic society, at the beginning of modernity, Germans still had a long way to go until they finally managed to establish what political scientist Benjamin R. Barber titles a "strong democracy."³ Hence at its outset, German club culture used to be highly politicized. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Germany was a country divided into many small counties and states run by autocratic governments. Political parties and other prime political movements were not yet in place; against this background, voluntary organizations provided the prime avenue for spreading political messages to the public. If one considers the very difficult political situation at that time, it makes sense that leisure activities in particular became the most important arena for expressing political issues.

Thus, in sharp contrast to the U.S., from the very beginning German voluntary organizations were not functionally oriented in the practical sense of getting things done, such as building a community center or founding a school. Instead, political advocacy was at the very heart of the voluntary organizations. Organizations and initiatives provided vehicles for changing the political system. Members who joined indicated through membership their support for pushing a political issue ahead. Interestingly enough, the area of sports, today perceived as a prime field of leisure activities, used to be highly politicized, not only in Germany but almost everywhere in Europe, except for the UK. This article will focus on sports organizations as one of the prime areas of membership-bound activities in Germany. First, it will trace the history of German sports clubs by indicating the close nexus between political issues and sports. Second, it will discuss the topic of how the future will look for German sports clubs. Will they continue to be the most attractive voluntary organization concerning membership support? Or will they also be confronted with a significant decline in membership similar to that facing trade unions, political parties, and even churches?

According to the most recent survey,⁴ there are more than 90,000⁵ sports clubs registered in Germany with more than 27 million⁶ members enrolled. Sports club membership in Germany outnumbers the membership of the German Catholic Church (26 million).⁷ There are six times more members enrolled in sports clubs than in trade unions;⁸ however, the comparison between political parties is even more telling. German political party membership is down to less than 2 million.⁹ Compared to other voluntary and nonprofit organizations in Germany, sports clubs are an interesting species that stands out for their civic responsibility. Membership dues constitute the most important source of sports clubs' income. Furthermore, although sports clubs are increasingly offering job opportunities, work in sports clubs is, compared to other segments of the German nonprofit sector, still primarily based on volunteer input.¹⁰ In other words, club life is very much based on the principle of reciprocity: Sports club members are engaged in volunteer work for the benefit of their fellow sports club members. Against this background, club members are the most important organizational stakeholders. Thus, stakeholder management in this segment of the German nonprofit sector specifically has to take care of the members' interests. But, as already indicated, the incentives to join and to uphold the membership have significantly changed over time.

Decades ago, club theory, as well as the work of famous economist Mancur Olson (*The Logic of Collective Action*), already pointed out the difficulties of keeping members affiliated. Whereas club theory convincingly argues that these organizations should be small, thus guaranteeing face-to-face encounters and close contacts, Olson¹¹ showed a way to keep members interested even if they are affiliated with a very large organization. His advice for the management was to provide so-called selective incentives, ones available exclusively to members. In other words, membership status makes a member eligible for receiving a good which is unavailable to non-members. However, social movement theory indicated another technique in addition to these tactics: Mission- and solidarity-based stakeholder management is a specific tool that can be applied particularly in voluntary or nonprofit organizations.¹² The organization's management caters to the members' hopes, wishes, and normative beliefs. Thus, the nonprofit entrepreneur provides an organizational frame for those social and political ideas flowing around attracting specific constituencies.

This is specifically what the famous German political activist Friedrich Ludwig Jahn did at the beginning of the nineteenth century when he started the first voluntary sports organizations, the so-called *Hasenheide*, a public space for doing gymnastics. He was a political entrepreneur who ardently supported the German movement toward nationhood. All over the country, Germans joined the gymnastic movement in great numbers. What they did together was very different from our current notion of sports, which is based on the idea of competition. They engaged jointly in physical exercises in order to get fit for a national political movement, but they were not competing with each other. As widely documented by historians, this first and very successful membership drive was blocked by a political ban issued by the government. The outcome of the ban was of course to make the movement even more attractive. Indeed, in the years to come after the lifting of the ban, gymnastic clubs mushroomed in the country. However, when nationhood was achieved, gymnastics were much less attractive, and were soon followed by another idea—sports—based on the concept of competition and fair play, which was imported to Germany from the UK. Soon, soccer and other

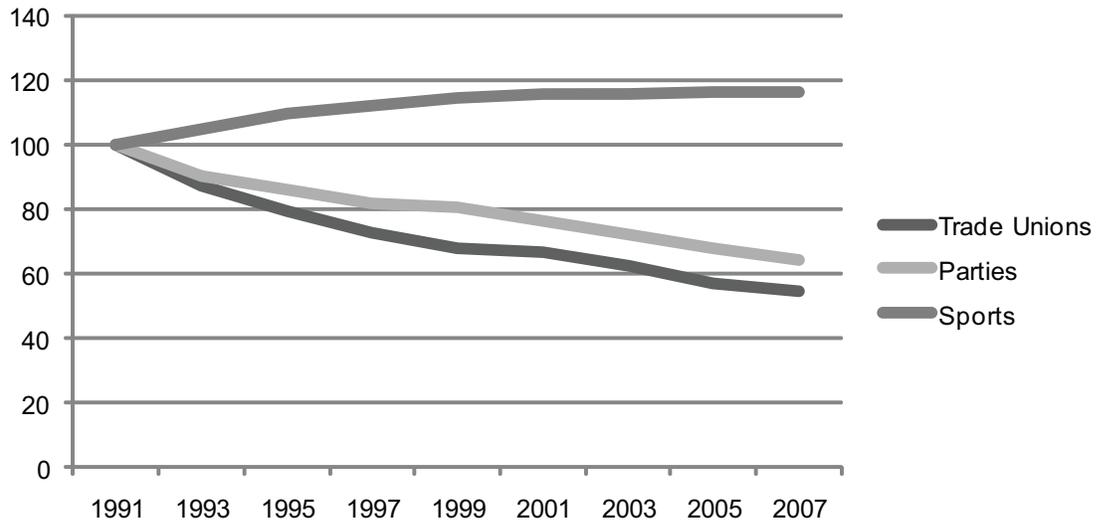
team-based disciplines of sports were increasingly welcomed by the new classes of civil servants, clerical workers, and members of the industrial elite of skilled workers, a class formed due to the fast industrialization of the country.

Membership in these sports clubs was legally based on the principle of equal access; however, the sports clubs mirrored the country's cleavage structure. There were soccer clubs across the political spectrum—closely affiliated with the social democratic movement, closely affiliated with the conservative movement, and closely affiliated with the clerical wing.¹³ In other words: At that time, membership in a certain club served as a strong indicator for the support of a specific political orientation. This close nexus between politics and sports made the sports movement in continental Europe distinct from sports in America. In many eastern European countries, sports clubs similar to other leisure-oriented activities were used as an “undercover” vehicle for promoting the idea of nationhood. The attuned cleavage structure of Italy, dominated by the Communist-Catholic divide, was lively portrayed in the novels and movies of *Don Camillo* and *Peppone*. Again, the soccer field provided the playground for opposing teams to which each of them was bound together by a distinctive ideology.¹⁴ In 1920s Germany, membership in the two competing camps—the conservative and the social democratic/communist milieu—was impressive. More than 5 million members were affiliated with the conservative sports movement. Less than 1 million Germans were members of the socialist/communist camp. However, the conservative camp was fractionized and divided into different sub-milieus, such as the Catholic sports movement and the liberal movement.¹⁵

In Germany, the camp mentality of the sports movement and hence the cohesion of the sports clubs was soon to be challenged by two developments. First, political rigidity was put into question by the downturn of amateurism and the upswing of professionalism among the top athletes. Already in the 1920s, soccer in Europe was widely covered by the media, and this created a star cult among the top players. Clubs began to compete for the best players by offering them paid positions. The German sports associations tried to hold against the trend toward professionalism; however, they ultimately had to give in. Second, the principle of competition in sports overcame the principle of partisanship in politics. In Germany, sports clubs on different sides of the political spectrum merged because their leaders and managers wanted to have access to a greater pool of good players who might lead the club to the next level of competition. Solidarity among the players who wanted to give their best to achieve team success provided the new “mission” that replaced the sports clubs' former ideological underpinning. But since then, “solidarity” among the amateur players is constantly endangered by the move toward professionalism. Today, there is a rigid divide between the professionalized branch of a sport, particularly soccer clubs, and its amateur teams. Similarly to the U.S., the world of professionalized sports has developed into big business. This is particularly the case for soccer, which has also developed into an entertainment industry—a development very similar to the U.S. with the exception that in the U.S. sports aficionados prefer other disciplines such as football or baseball.

But if engaging in competition serves as the prime incentive for membership in sports clubs, why have German sports clubs been able to attract a booming membership base for many years? The window of opportunity to become active in sports by taking part in contests is very narrow. It is done as a child or young adult; if the player is extremely talented, he or she might become a professional. How do we explain the attractiveness of sports clubs in Germany if solidarity among athletes constitutes only a second best replacement for the former mission-based and highly politicized club affiliation?

Graph: Membership Development (%) Sports Clubs, Parties, Trade Unions (1991-2007)



Source: *Engagementbericht 2009, with the courtesy of Dr. Priller*

The reason is closely connected to the development of German society after the Second World War. Sociologist Helmut Schelsky, working on changes of societal stratification, indicated the end of class society in Europe and particularly in Germany in the postwar period. In 1953, he put forward the characterization of a “leveled middle-class society.”¹⁶ The wording pointed to the societal phenomenon that it is no longer the bourgeoisie, in the sense of the entrepreneurial class, who served as the role model; instead civil servants, clergy, and the educated workforce constituted the core of German society. The nucleus of the new middle class was the family with the housewife at home while the husband was exclusively responsible for making a living. Schelsky’s characterization was in line with a conservative and also old-fashioned model of family life. However, this model became a stronghold of German society, and provided the point of reference for the country’s high court legislation. With the support of their umbrella associations—the German Association for Sports—German sports clubs started several campaigns, which targeted the members of the “leveled middle-class society.” The sports club was to become the meeting ground of all members of the family. The campaign was titled “Sports for All,” encouraging every family member to engage and become active in sports activities. This encompassing approach was highly successful, and the German sports club developed into a “family affair.” Grandparents, mothers, fathers, and children are happy members of their community-based sports club. In order to make sports events happen for their children, parents are willing to volunteer. Grandfathers and very rarely grandmothers also serve on the boards of sports clubs to contribute to family leisure activities. The federal government as well as local governments significantly supported the sports movement, particularly for two reasons: First, being engaged in sports activities helps avoid health problems. Second, in politics sports clubs provide a forum for electoral campaigns, particularly for local politicians.

Interestingly enough, most recent studies show that the German sports club movement is still very much embedded in the family. Being a member of a sports club has become a family affair in Germany.¹⁷ However, what served to be the bedrock of success for many years might develop into a significant drawback today, putting an end to the German sports clubs’ success story. Today, German society is far less in accordance with the traditional and in a way old-fashioned approach that was primarily organized around the family. Similar to other industrialized countries, divorce rates are high in Germany. The number of single mothers and one-member households is on a steady increase. Society has become much more heterogeneous during the last few decades. Gays and lesbians are no longer perceived as outsiders but as members of modern Germany. Furthermore, working conditions have changed dramatically in recent years. The new German economy is characterized by part-time work and flexible working hours, as well as by temporary jobs and a high risk of unemployment. Simultaneously, at the high end of the labor force, similar to the U.S., there is a

significant increase in dual career families, increased job mobility, and many professionals who have to commute. Therefore, the straightforward “family approach” of stakeholder management in sports clubs does not meet the needs of these groups. Without any other “mission” in place, sports clubs increasingly fail to address the needs of these new constituencies. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that fitness clubs with flexible working hours and a client orientation have started to boom in recent years in Germany.¹⁸ Similar to the U.S., they are also membership-based but membership serves as a synonym for a service-oriented affiliation that entitles the client to make use of all the provided facilities. There is no “mission,” no ideological underpinning attached to membership.

In 2009, a survey of German sports clubs pointed out that the sports clubs see themselves confronted with problems concerning the acquisition of volunteers as well as members. As the results show, while the overall membership numbers have not gone down, numbers concerning volunteers have decreased significantly.¹⁹ This might indicate the first hint of an accelerating trend that in the long run will put the encompassing family-based concept of German sports clubs into question. German sports clubs have come a long way from their early beginnings when they were a societal avant-garde promoting nationhood. They still were highly politicized in the 1920s and 1930s, when they mirrored the cleavage structure of German society. It was Nazi rule that basically did away with the former milieus and political camps of German society. After the Second World War, Germany—more specifically the Federal Republic of Germany—became united behind a vision of a leveled middle class society whose nucleus was the traditional “breadwinner model” of family life. However, this particular societal setting is becoming increasingly outdated. Leaders of sports clubs have to address the question of what comes next in order to support the former “family approach” of stakeholder management. It might be the case that those large sports clubs who have around 2,000 members will not have a future. It seems probable that small clubs serving the needs of small groups and facilitating face-to-face encounters will never die out. However, this might not be the case for those clubs that are strongly built on the “sports for all” ideology that basically translated from its very start into a management approach that was primarily family oriented.

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The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies.

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