

Trust and Transitions: Social Capital in a Changing World,
Edited by Joseph D. Lewandowski and Milan Znoj

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On the Cover: *Monument to the Victims of Communism*,
Olbram Zoubek (Prague) © Joseph D. Lewandowski

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

TWO FACES OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

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In the neo-Tocquevillean perspective, most powerfully defended by Robert Putnam, civic associations are the generators of positive social capital and the schools of democratic virtues necessary for the functioning of successful and stable democratic systems. The more associations there are, the better for democracy, the performance of institutions, economic prosperity, individual health, and so on (Putnam 1993a, 2000a). While Putnam's role in inspiring one of the most interesting debates in social science literature in recent decades is indisputable, the validity and scope of his thesis is not immune to contestation. It has been argued, for instance, that "all associations are not alike" (Stolle and Rochon 1998), that social capital is a context-dependent variable (Foley, Edwards, and Diani 2001) whose effects cannot be predicted without the knowledge of the particular context, and that the state and other political institutions are more important than associations in determining the quality of democracy (Tarrow 1996). In this chapter, I will attempt to show that an historical and institutional approach to civic associations in the Czech lands does indeed yield results that modify, if not contradict, the overly optimistic neo-Tocquevillean account of associations.²

As a reaction to the wave of sometimes uncritical enthusiasm for social capital theory provoked by Putnam's work, many authors point out that civil society, rather than being a universal panacea for all defects of democracy, can lead to severe disruptions and even collapses of democratic systems. Relevant for our case are the arguments that Sheri Berman (1997) extracts from the history of another Central European country, that of Germany. Berman examined the political effects of the extremely rich associational tradition in Germany of the Wilhelminian and Weimar era, only to conclude that the many associations, unions, clubs, etc. existing in Germany were to a large degree instrumental in

undermining the foundations of German democracy and paving the way for the Nazi party's victory. Indeed, these associations reinforced, rather than weakened, the existing social, political and cultural divisions in German society, since they were organized on the basis of dominant political and ideological orientations. Moreover, the autocratic character of the Wilhelminian political system gave citizens few or no chances to participate directly in the political process, and this circumstance was reflected in the political alienation of the associations. In the Weimar period, the latter remained integral components of antagonistic political-ideological camps alienated from the new democratic political system rather than vehicles for the creation of society-wide consensus—and, as such, they became a social resource that the Nazis could and did employ in their struggle for power. Targeting the leaders of influential nation-wide, regional and local associations, the Nazis attempted—quite successfully—to win their loyalty and bring under control the segments of society these associations represented. The general lesson that can be drawn from the German case is that the pro-democratic effect of civil society associations is conditioned by the broader institutional setting occupied by the state and political system: “[A]ssociationism should be considered a politically neutral multiplier—neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but rather dependent for its effects on the wider political context” (Berman 1997, 427).

Other studies have pointed in the same direction. A comparison of several 19th century European countries that either successfully evolved towards democracy or succumbed to authoritarian temptations in the 20th century casts doubt on many factors that are often considered crucial for a country's democratic prospects—not only density of associational life, but also universal enfranchisement, urbanization, education, and social homogeneity. Each of these factors ultimately proved poor predictors of future democratization. The case of highly urbanized and educated Germany, with one of the richest networks of civil associations in Europe and universal male suffrage since as early as 1871, offers again an almost perfect counterexample to the alleged correlation between such factors and prospects for successful democratization. What really matters is the *relationship* between civic associations and the state. For associations do not necessarily require generous support and formal legal acknowledgement on the part of the state—even if they certainly prosper under these—in order to develop properly, but they do need *de facto* toleration, without which the growth of civil society is seriously inhibited. Additionally, rather than the mere existence of a formal constitution and of a corresponding system of political institutions, it is the *connectedness*

between civil society and political institutions that creates the necessary setting in which citizens' associational activism can effectively contribute to the development and strengthening of democracy (Nord 2000; Bermeo 2000).

With these findings in mind, it seems indispensable to study the effects of civic associations on a particular society in conjunction with a careful analysis of the broader political and social setting in which such associations operate. In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to show that, like civil societies in Germany and a number of other European countries, Czech (and Czechoslovak) civil society associations are inherently Janus-faced, and thus no more or less well equipped to foster democracy than they are to undermine it.

Civic Associations in the Czech Lands: 1860–1948

The development of the associative sector in the Czech lands follows a pattern very similar to that of neighboring Central European countries. Typically for this pattern, the arrival of each of its different phases was somehow belated and the density of the associational life was lower in comparison to the “model” countries in the West, those of great Britain and France (Hoffmann 2003, 49). In spite of this fact, the growth of associations in the Czech lands was steady and impressive. The 18th century saw the arrival of associations of a specific kind—socially exclusive and elitist—mainly masonic lodges and academic societies typical of the Enlightenment era, and their presence on Czech territory was significant (Rataj and Ratajová 1998, IX). The development of associations in the first half of the 19th century was hindered by political circumstances, but even under the rule of Chancellor Metternich—who notoriously had little sympathy for associational life—the number of associations increased (Hoffmann 2003, 50f). The revolutions of 1848 demonstrated to the revolutionaries, but also to the conservative forces in various European governments, how powerful associations could be and how easily they could become instruments for the mobilization of the public for political purposes. Taking this lesson seriously, the Bach government of the 1850s introduced severe restrictions on associational life throughout the Austrian monarchy. It was the end of the absolutist period after 1860 that marked the starting point for an impressive growth of associations in all parts of the country. The strongest concentration of associations was in Bohemia, while Moravia did not lag too far behind (associations in Bohemia made up one third or more of the total number of associations in the Austrian part of the monarchy at any time until 1918

(see Hoffmann 2003, 76)). The numerical growth of associations was fast, with the total numbers doubling every decade. Between 1856 and 1876 their number in the Czech lands grew from 466 to 4,476 (Rataj and Ratajová 1998, XXXV–VI); the concentration of associations was particularly strong in Prague.

The beginnings of the rapid expansion of the associational field in the Austrian monarchy coincided with a surge of nationalism that did not fail to produce a deep impact on the nature of associations. The vast majority of associations clearly identified with one or another national group and their respective political programs. To be sure, well into the 19th century the boundaries between nationalities in the Austrian Empire were hardly solid or clearly defined (Hoffmann 2003, 67). Yet the nations in the making were in fact in search of institutions that could help them to create and maintain such clear-cut boundaries, and associations proved to be very powerful instruments of societal nationalization in this sense. Instructive is the case of the most important Czech sport organization *Sokol* (*Falcon*). It was founded in 1862 by two men, Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner, whose names themselves reveal much about how unsettled the question of national belonging of individual actors was (Hoffmann 2003, 65). The impetus to found such an organization had, of course, to do with the wish to emulate the German *Turnvereine* and the main goal was to give Czech-identified inhabitants of the Austrian Empire an institutionalized opportunity to manifest and develop their loyalty to the Czech nation. The network of *Sokol* chapters and branches expanded rapidly. There were 8 branches in the founding year of 1862, 49 branches with 10,516 members in 1871, and 460 branches with some 43,000 members in 1897 (Kořalka 1996, 100). Yet, even *Sokol* eventually failed to attract the sympathies and energies of all Czech-identified inhabitants. For some, it was too anti-Catholic, while others were discouraged by what they could perceive as its petit-bourgeois orientation and elements of social exclusivity. At the turn of the 19th century a period of dramatic crystallization occurred within Czech society that resulted in the formation of social and political segments that persisted over decades. These groups opted to secede from *Sokol* and join their own sport organizations, such as the Catholic *Orel* (*Eagle*; founded 1902) or social democratic sport associations (e.g. Klimek 2000, 264ff).

The historical case of sport associations brings to light two major divisions within the field of associations in the Czech lands: ethnicity/nation and class. An additional and no less significant principle of discrimination was that of gender. For the most part, women were either not allowed to join these organizations or assigned a second-class role

within them. An exception to this rule was philanthropic associations, which were quite numerous—but both their societal remit and political relevance were smaller than those of the most prominent male-dominated associations (Mannová 1990, 23; Trentmann 2005, 25). In a situation in which direct political participation by Czech inhabitants of the Austrian monarchy could be, at best, very limited, the latter associations in many cases aspired—albeit indirectly, because the law did not allow for this type of activity—to a political role.

By the 1880s, the national divisions between Czechs and Germans deeply pervaded the whole of social, political and economic life in the Czech lands, and civic associations were no exception to this rule. This was reflected in the emergence of a specialized type of associations, the so-called protective unions—big organizations with thousands of members—whose main function was to stabilize and strengthen the position of their own national groups in the ethnically mixed regions by means of supporting basic school education in the national language, promoting a wide range of cultural activities in nationalist spirit and boycotting similar endeavors by “national enemies.” Both the German *Deutscher Schulverein* and the Czech *Central School Union*, which focused on the development of the schooling system in the national language, were founded in 1880. Then there were various national protective unions for inhabitants of individual ethnically disputed regions, such as—to name only the biggest and not necessarily the oldest—the Czech *National union for North Bohemia* established in 1885 and the *Union of Germans in Bohemia* founded in 1894 (Klimek 2002, 436–7; Rataj and Ratajová 1998, XL–XLI). These unabashedly chauvinistic organizations remained highly influential to the very end of the democratic co-existence of Czechs and Germans in the Czech lands.

The rapid growth of associations continued, or even accelerated, during the interwar period. Available figures for Prague are illustrative: the total number of 3,873 associations for 1919 more than doubled by 1938, when the absolute historical maximum of 9,115 for the whole period before 1989 was reached (Rataj and Ratajová 1998, XLVII). The most salient feature of the association sector in the First Czechoslovak Republic was its segmentation according to nationality and party lines. Persistence of national divisions was fundamental to the character of the political system and also for the associations. The balance of power in the new state shifted towards the Czechs and the leading Czech associations, *Sokol* in the first place, which were required to take up their new role as representatives of the “state-bearing” Czechoslovak nation (Rataj and Ratajová 1998, LI). This led to their very close alignment with the state,

its political leadership, and official policies. At times, however, some of them went too far and endorsed openly chauvinist attitudes. The presence of the *Sokol* members among Czech fascists was quite significant (Klimek 2000, 266, 550). In keeping with their earlier orientation, the protective unions continued to maintain their openly confrontational approach to other nationalities. One of these, the *Silesian Union for Popular Enlightenment in the Těšín and Hlučín Regions*, an important regional organization with 148 local chapters and more than 20,000 members in 1926, exerted considerable Czechization efforts, supported by the government, against the ethnically mixed territory with strong groups of Polish and German inhabitants. The organization explained why it had not discontinued its operations after 1918 as follows: “in order to redress injustices committed in earlier times by our national enemies, we give back to the nation what it had lost in the years of subjugation. . . . We don’t take what is someone else’s, but what is our own, and in this the beautiful mission of the Union consists” (Onderka 1927, 5). Well aware of the prominent role of associations in the nationalist struggles, the report makes no bones about denouncing Polish and German voluntary fire squads for “subversive activities” and German sport clubs in the Hlučín region for relying on the support of “foreign German propaganda” (Ibid., 130).

Many associations became satellites of political parties represented in the Parliament, of which there were many under the adopted system of proportional representation. The biggest political parties especially excelled in organizing and maintaining many such satellite associations in their orbit. Sport clubs, mutual insurance companies, interest groups, educative circles, choirs, libraries—these and other types of associations were powerful instruments through which political parties controlled “their” sections of society. The anti-democratic parties, such as the Communists and German National Socialists, did no worse than the democratic ones in this respect.

Political fragmentation was highly consequent among the sport organizations. While *Sokol* and *Orel* chapters persisted and even further expanded, the secession of Communists from social democrats in 1921 provoked a split within the social democratic sport organization and brought to life new Communist sport and youth unions. Virtually every party and national group of any importance made an effort to create their own network of sport associations. Trade unions were an especially important type of association, from the point of view of political parties desiring to maximize their influence in all sections of society, and the ideological and national divisions among different parties left a deep

imprint on this sphere. Since the Czechoslovak government chose the so-called Ghent system of unemployment insurance, under which the trade unions enjoyed the privileged position of agencies exclusively entrusted with distribution of state funds to the unemployed, Czechoslovak trade unions were very powerful and membership in trade unions in relation to population size was the fourth highest in the world (Rupnik 2002, 91). All larger political parties, whether Czech or German, controlled their own trade union organizations and catered to the particular needs of those sections of the working population from which they could expect political support.

After Munich, and especially after the occupation of Czech lands in March 1939, associational life suffered the first drastic restriction and forcible subordination under a totalitarian political power. As a part of the corporatist reshuffling of the entire society, associations were placed under the authority of newly created umbrella organizations and their right to act freely was denied in both law and practice. Statistics for Prague report the highest number ever of dissolved associations for the year 1939, when as many as 4,236 associations ceased to exist (Rataj and Ratajová 1998, XLVII), mainly because they failed to apply for a new registration or their requests were declined. Some organizations, such as the scouts, survived in semi-legal or clandestine conditions, and the role their members played in the resistance against the Nazi occupation was quite important (see e.g. Hloušková 2001, 62ff).

At the beginning of the strange and brief period of the so-called popular democracy between 1945 and 1948, not all civic associations that had existed in Czechoslovakia before the war were restored. Obviously, the many German associations were not, as Germans had been expelled from the country. But the power shift in favor of the Communist party, which became a reality right after the end of the war, found its expression also in the unwillingness of the authorities to permit the renewal of those organizations whose political profile was clearly non- or anti-Communist. An excellent study of Slovak civic associations in the period 1945–1951 reports that even the powerful sport organization *Sokol* was restored in Slovakia only in 1947, after the political forces supporting it broke the resistance of Communist representatives in the relevant official bodies (Vranová 1980, 66).

In any case, the period of the renewed existence of pre-war associations was to be extremely short. After the coup of February 1948 the Communist party proceeded very resolutely and efficiently to quash the complex system of thousands of existing civic associations, cooperatives, mutual insurance companies, foundations and other civil

society organizations that had evolved over centuries. Many organizations were dissolved and their assets confiscated, others were forcibly incorporated into the newly established mass social organizations that were placed within the framework of the so-called National Front where they could be easily controlled by the Communist party. The traditional pluralism within Czech trade unions was crushed mercilessly and the new Revolutionary Trade Union Movement became one of the most obedient instruments of the totalitarian power of the Communist party. Sports organizations were also centralized, first under the umbrella of the *Sokol*, later under a new name no longer reminiscent of the “bourgeois” past of the Czech sports movement. Except for a short period in the late 1960s—when the attempted political liberalization triggered efforts to restore some of the traditional associations (*Sokol*, scouts)—and except for secluded and tiny dissident groups of the 1970s and 1980s—there are *no* instances of free associational life in Communist Czechoslovakia between 1948 and the late 1980s to be reported.

Associations: Neutral as a Resource, Ambivalent as a Concrete Historical Factor

The history of civic associations in the Czech lands briefly sketched above contains some interesting cases that are relevant to the problem outlined in the introduction to this chapter. One interesting conclusion that can be drawn from Berman’s analysis of the role of associations during the period when the Nazi party rose to power is that the social and political functions actually performed by associations are conditioned by the context, consisting of the state and other political institutions. Berman (1997, 408, 420, 426) argues that estrangement from genuine politics made German associations socially parochial and divisive, isolated in their respective societal milieus and easily manipulated by a movement which realized better than anyone else that, by gaining the support of the civic leaders, it would bring whole segments of the society into the sphere of its influence. The impact of associations on democracy is thus tied up with the character of the state and the political system. Under certain conditions, civic associations can be instrumental in bridging over ethnic, class and other social divisions, forging consensus and fostering social trust; while under different conditions they can preserve or even accentuate those divisions, produce and feed mistrust against outgroup members and help the forces opposed to democracy accomplish their goals.

It is difficult not to see the many benefits provided by associations and other organizational forms of civil society towards the emancipation of individual citizens and development of democracy in the Czech lands, as virtually anywhere else. The problem with neo-Tocquevillean approaches is that they postulate positive effects of associations on democracy with insufficient qualifications. The argument is no longer as simple as asserting that the larger the number of associations in a given country, the more robust its democracy. Some caveats and the undoubtedly useful distinction between bridging and bonding social capital were added (e.g. Putnam 2000a, 22). However, the historically and socially complex situations of Central European countries, in some ways markedly different from constellations existing in Western Europe and the United States, seem to call for further qualifications.

Parliamentary Elections in the Czech Lands and Associational Traditions: 1948

To give an example of the context-dependency of the effects of associations on democracy, one might briefly discuss the case of the 1946 parliamentary elections in the Czech lands—and, more specifically, the electoral results in Prague. According to available evidence, the Czech capital has consistently performed very well (relative to the other Czech regions) on the numbers of associations (Ratajová and Rataj 1998). At any time, there have been more associations in Prague (both in absolute terms and per inhabitant) than anywhere else in the Czech lands. This should, in keeping with neo-Tocquevillean theory, predispose Prague to have a stronger pro-democratic orientation than other regions in which the density of associational life was significantly lower. In 1946, the only unrigged elections in the Eastern bloc took place in Czechoslovakia, and the Communist party achieved a major victory (40.17% of the vote in the Czech lands—see Table 11.1). The fact that voters in Prague supported the Communist party less than Czech voters on the average—though the share of Communist vote in the Czech capital was not dramatically lower (36.02%)—while voters in those Czech regions that are seen as civically less developed (average for Moravia and Silesia was 34.46%) and in Slovakia (30.37%) voted more willingly for democratic political parties—runs counter to neo-Tocquevillean expectations. Even if the number of associations in Prague, and thus the level of “civicness” there, tends to be overestimated, as many organizations with nation-wide scope of activity are registered in the capital, the above-average vibrancy of civic associations in Prague relative to other Czech regions is beyond doubt.

Yet, while Prague enjoys unchallenged primacy in numbers of associations, in 1946 it did not display any particularly strong immunity to undemocratic voting. Conversely, some of the regions that consistently report very low numbers of associations, such as the two easternmost administrative units, Moravian-Silesian Region and Zlín Region, were among those where the support for the Communist party was at the same level as in Prague, or even weaker. In the former region, with strong concentration of heavy industry and coal-mining, the Communist Party received quite understandably more votes than in Prague, but the difference is very small (37.92%), while in the latter the share of Communist votes was only 30.89%.

This apparently “anomalous” behavior of Prague and some other Czech regions begs the question: Is there any ascertainable correlation between the percentage of votes for or against the Communist Party in 1946 and the density of associational life in various Czech regions? Since reliable data on numbers of associations in individual Czech regions for earlier periods than the 1990s does not exist, it is necessary to refer to more recent sources. Because both Putnam’s theory of self-enforcing social equilibria (see e.g. Putnam 1993a, 177) and the historical institutionalist school assume that institutional patterns remain by and large stable over time, the relative differences in the density of civic associations between different Czech regions in 2003 can be seen as an adequate approximation for the non-existent data of the same kind for 1946. Such an approximation must by necessity remain rough because of, among other limiting factors, the significant differences in the demarcation of regions in 1946 and at present (see the Note under Table 11.1).

Still, a comparison of the two data sets offers interesting insights. Table 11.2 shows the absolute numbers of civic associations³ in the present-day Czech self-governing regions (*kraje*) and the density of associations relative to the respective population sizes. The very weak and negative correlation ($r = -0.16$) between non-Communist votes in the 1946 Parliamentary elections and associational density in different Czech regions in 2003 gives little support to the argument that well-developed associational traditions consistently support pro-democratic behavior.⁴ In a neo-Tocquevillean interpretation, Prague’s social milieu, influenced by the relative abundance of civic organizations, should have prevented significant numbers of voters from supporting an undemocratic party, while totalitarian leanings should have been at their strongest in regions with very weak levels of associational density. Yet, on a more balanced and skeptical reading of the role of associations in political life—needed to grasp adequately the democratic or antidemocratic potential of civic

associations—one has to look also at the broader context, consisting of existing political institutions and historical patterns transferred across time. Thus, it is interesting to ask which traditions and current circumstances might, in the case of the Czech lands after World War II, have made civic associations into a factor, if not inimical then at least indifferent, for democratic political behavior.

Table 11.1 Vote for and against the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in parliamentary elections 1946, Czech lands

Region	Ústí nad Labem	Karlovy Vary	Liberec	Central Bohemia	Pilsen	South Bohemia	Highlands (Vysočina)	Hradec Králové
Votes KSC	137,936	44,063	100,110	<i>367,184</i>	160,124	<i>185,185</i>	<i>174,210</i>	124,236
%	56.49	52.25	48.32	<i>48.16</i>	44.9	<i>41.13</i>	<i>40.05</i>	39.45
% against	43.51	47.75	51.68	51.84	55.1	58.87	59.95	60.55

Moravian-Silesian Region	Prague	Pardubice	Brno	Olomouc	Zlín	Bohemia	Moravia and Silesia	Czech Lands Total
<i>189,910</i>	239,059	94,031	174,518	128,852	86,279	154,1852	66,3845	220,5697
<i>36.84</i>	36.02	35.75	33.82	32.43	30.89	43.26	34.46	40.17
63.16	63.98	64.25	66.18	67.57	69.11	56.74	65.54	59.83

Note: Marked in italics are regions not appearing as such in the statistical sources for 1946 elections. These are the result of the aggregation of data for smaller regions undertaken for the sake of comparability with the data in Table 11.2, notably: Central Bohemia = Outer Prague + Kladno + Mladá Boleslav, Highlands (Vysočina) = Havlíčkův Brod + Jihlava, Moravian-Silesian Region = Moravská Ostrava + Opava, South Bohemia = České Budějovice + Tábor.

Source: Czech Statistical Office, (*Porovnání* 1992, 30)

Table 11.2 Density of civil associations in Czech regions 2003

Region	Ústí nad Labem	Karlovy Vary	Liberec	Central Bohemia	Pilsen	South Bohemia	Highlands (Vysočina)	Hradec Králové
number of NNO	3,794	1,393	1,959	6,392	2,483	2,936	2,548	2,712
density	463	458	458	566	452	470	492	494

Moravian-Silesian Region	Prague	Pardubice	Brno	Olomouc	Zlín
4,384	8,237	2,335	4,775	2,620	2,236
347	709	461	426	411	377

Note: Density = number of associations per 100,000 inhabitants

Source: (Vajdová 2005, 32), based on data provided by Czech Statistical Office

The post-World War II situation was certainly not an ordinary one—the state had only been recently restored and political parties were weak, with the significant exception of the Communist party, which profited immensely in the eyes of the public from the Soviet victory over the Nazis and, even more so if less visibly, from its successful infiltration into positions of authority in the state. Historically, many influential Czech associations had been harnessed to national liberation (until 1918) or state-building projects (after 1918). In the interwar period, their subordination under political power was manifested in the system of party-controlled social clientism. The associations were thus anything but schools of independent political judgment for their members, and the idea of civic association as a bastion of individual citizens' freedom against government power and the machinery of political parties was entirely alien to most of them. Since so many associations belonged to clusters of kin organizations sponsored and controlled by a political party during the interwar period, the electoral behavior of many members of such associations amounted to following the recommendations of the party leadership. After the war, some parties were not restored, and those which were, except for the Communist party, had to deal with severe blows to their self-confidence. Those members of associations previously linked to a party that was not renewed after the war (the most notable case in question is that of the right-wing Agrarian Party) lost the source of political guidance and support on which they could rely during the interwar period. Their party no longer existed and their associations were suppressed or marginalized. At the same time, the type of membership in associations common during the interwar period represented too integral a part of one's identification with the respective political party as to provide independent basis for political decisions in a totally overhauled political framework in which that party no longer existed. These factors—the tradition of subordination of associations to politics and the learned dependence of individuals on the party leadership—played into the hands of the Communists after 1945. To political parties, the clusters of associations formed an important functional component of the system of government in the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic, but they turned out to be an ineffective antidote to totalitarian tendencies after 1945.

Indeed, rather the opposite was actually the case. First, the Communist party, in striving for absolute power after the war, could rely on its own network of associations, which were more popular than at any time before and helped the Communists to penetrate further into various segments of society. The Communist-dominated national committees and the infamous

action committees were so successful in part because of the training many of its leaders had previously received in various civil society associations. Second, the culture of strong loyalty to party headquarters cultivated in many associations with links to political parties of all kinds favored the Communists when most pre-war parties were not allowed to reemerge and the Communist party enjoyed wide popular support. A statistical study of the 1946 electoral results shows that the Communists were the most successful of all parties, both in keeping the loyalty of the original pool of their own pre-war supporters and in attracting the support of those who had voted, before the war, for one of the parties not restored after 1945 (Sláma and Kaplan 1991, 57).

Paradoxically, the Czech regions most *immune to totalitarian temptations* were those with the *lowest levels of associative activity*. This can be explained by an even bigger historical paradox, namely that Communism after the war represented modernity and was thus avidly accepted in the most advanced regions, while the less advanced ones opposed it out of their traditional instinct to resist all social innovations. But one can also argue that the less “civically developed” regions were penetrated to a lesser degree by a spirit of subordination to the political headquarters of the given social-political bloc—and were consequently less inclined to vote for the Communist party as it was gradually taking control of all the existing power centers. Higher levels of modernity simply mean bigger efficiency, but this is a neutral resource that can be both used and abused. In Prague, the high numbers of associations could not prevent a swing of voter sympathies towards the extreme left, since what also counts is the structure of the association sector and its links to the political system.

Further Historical Sources of Associational Ambivalence

Thus a more complicated relationship exists between associations and the support for democracy than neo-Tocquevillean theorists would care to admit—and that complex relationship is in no way historically limited to the post-World War II constellation. Indeed, it is rather a recurrent feature of the developments within Czech politics ever since the very beginning of substantive growth of the Czech associational sector in the 1860s. One important reason why these associations so rapidly expanded and were so popular was, without doubt, that they served as substitutes for genuine political activities from which the Czechs were otherwise excluded. If the Czech-identified inhabitants of the Czech lands could have participated in the government and self-government in ways proportional to their share of

the total population, they hardly would have felt such an urgent need to organize and find an outlet for their social energies in associations (cf. Rataj and Ratajová 1998, XXXVI; Müller 2002, 126). This logic worked with an exceptionless necessity for other nationalities, too. When in 1867 the Germans saw themselves ousted from the municipal government in what is now Prague's Smíchov district, they immediately proceeded to organize new associations, among them the influential German *Casino* (Kruppa 1992, 178).

The civic associations in the Czech lands during the final third of the 19th century bear certain marks of the then existing political situation that are not without consequences for their function as “schools” of democracy. First, they grew out of an alienation from the state and were geared to maintain, and even further reinforce, this alienation. Rather than schools of democracy in the neo-Tocquevillean sense, these were “schools” of nation-building that strengthened exclusivist, even chauvinistic, national identification. Second, these national associations fostered a climate of a narrow-minded intolerant patriotism that denounced any instance of internal pluralism as a betrayal of the national cause. This was so because they operated in a climate characterized by a pervasive feeling of permanent danger coming from the “national enemies.” Karel Müller (2002, 173) rightly observes that in the last part of the 19th century the Czechs were quite successful in building their national society based on the nationalist principle, but less successful in constructing a mature civil society. Finally and most obviously, the system of associations existing in the territory of the Czech lands was not functional in relation to the overall political system, i.e., that of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. Both Germans and Czechs were busy creating the social and institutional safeguards for maximum of political autonomy they could hope to obtain—and in fact they actually succeeded in creating two separate, if interconnected, national societies that coexisted on one territory. This is obvious enough, but one of the most serious implications of this state of affairs is that it trained both nations in working systematically not only *without* the state, but also *against* it. The existing system of associations was clearly not functional in supporting the political stability of the Austrian regime and contributed significantly to its final collapse. Such a lesson was well remembered by many in the new democratic framework of the First Czechoslovak Republic, and it was here that a significant part of associations adopted clearly antidemocratic and anti-regime agendas—Sudeten Germans, Czech fascists, and Communists all come to mind.

A more complex question is whether those associations that became satellites of democratic political parties in the First Czechoslovak Republic

contributed to democratic stability or not. In one sense the answer must be negative again, since the tensions among Czechs and Germans were certainly not weaker than before, and the associations consistently respected the pattern of national divisions first set by political parties. The only significant exception to this rule was the Communists, who maintained cross-national membership throughout the twenty years of the First Republic—but this was a party whose program, as once famously expressed by its leader Klement Gottwald, was to “wring the necks” of all democratic forces in the country. Thus, one has to conclude that the existing system of associations in the interwar period was not fully functional in supporting democracy and preserving the political regime. Generally speaking, long before the swing towards virulent German nationalism in the 1930s, many associations on both sides turned out once again to be training grounds of nationalist zealots rather than schools of tolerance and democratic virtues.

Leaving aside the nationalist divisions, it is also interesting to consider whether these associations were supportive of democracy—at least within their respective national blocs. They certainly were, in many ways. Yet, the alignment of important associations with big political parties also transformed them into representatives of particular social interests: workers, capitalists, latifundists, independent farmers, state employees, Catholics, etc. Such a segmentation into socially antagonistic clusters did little to overcome the existing social divisions; rather, it served to petrify them and thus had a permanently destabilizing effect on the society that became fatal in the late 1930s when the country, facing an extremely difficult historical constellation, was required to display unity. Social polarization was succeeded by the opposite extreme during the semi-authoritarian Second Republic (October 1938–March 1939), when many of the existing associations were suppressed and the rest centralized into unitary social blocs of a corporatist inspiration. Associational pluralism was partially discredited because it failed to be an efficient means of handling the political problems of the First Czechoslovak Republic. This discrediting, which survived into the postwar years, may be another part of the explanation for why the “joiners” in Prague and elsewhere turned away from democracy in the 1946 elections.

Conclusion

The traditions of Czech associational life, with both their positive and problematic aspects, were virtually eradicated in the first years following the Communist takeover. But institutions and their particular arrangements

tend to persist over time and thus one can ask the question whether some of the characteristics of the Czech associations identified above recur in the post-1989 situation.

If the answer is, in my opinion, largely negative, it is because the context has changed dramatically. The national problem is, after the post-World War II expulsion of German inhabitants from Czechoslovak territory, almost non-existent. One major feature of the Czech associative and social life until 1945—the permanent rivalry with the Czech Germans in all social spheres—has disappeared entirely. A less visible, but equally important change has occurred in the institutional setting. The state and the democratic political process, with all possible shortcomings and deficiencies they might display in comparison to more advanced societies of Western Europe, are far more stabilized than both before and after 1918. As a consequence, there is, on the one hand, significantly less need for civic associations to function as substitute outlets for political energies. On the other hand, because of the significant advances in the democratization process that occurred over the past century, there are numerous opportunities for new forms of political engagement for both individual citizens and members of non-governmental organizations. Excessive activism by the members of associations, a phenomenon to be observed in the late 19th century Czech lands, certainly does not occur today. As in other post-Communist countries (e.g. Howard 2003; Vajdová 2005), civic engagement in the Czech Republic is weaker than it is in Western democracies. No contemporary idea seems to be able to lure citizens into participation in a way similar to the sometimes fatal attraction exerted by nationalism in the past.

Less ambivalent is the comparison of the present day situation with the interwar period. While today political parties are avidly intent on monopolizing political power for themselves no less than in the past (Tabery 2006), due to existing legal and institutional arrangements, the rule of political parties means something very different from what it meant after 1918. Because of the complex institutional mechanisms operating both in the sphere of politics and social interests mediation, and also because of the substantial growth of the state, the associations of today are significantly less important as components of the system of rule by political parties. Consequently, they also have fewer opportunities to perpetuate social, ethnic and political divisions in society than they had during the interwar period. The proclamations of nonpolitical orientation by individual organizations cannot always be taken at face value; with the exception, perhaps, of trade unions and their alliance with left-wing parties, and the specific case of lobbying groups, no clientelistic clusters of

civic associations of significant size and social importance grouped around particular political parties have developed since 1989. To a neo-Tocquevillean's regret, today those Czechs who visit bowling halls bowl mostly alone. That they do so because they enjoy bowling, and not to satisfy an irresistible urge to demonstrate petrified social distinctions or the superiority of their own nation, paradoxically suggests that while the necessary institutional and political conditions for associational life have matured in the Czech Republic, the motivation to take part in associative activities has declined.

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² Following common Czech usage, "Czech lands" refers here to the three historical regions making up the territory of today's Czech Republic: Bohemia, Moravia and (Czech) Silesia.

³ Bartkowski's research (2002) on the territorial distribution of various associational types in post-communist Poland has shown marked variations in distributional patterns according to the type of association. The author distinguishes between associations of the old type (existing in pre-communist Poland) and the new type inspired by recent Western models. Whereas the distribution of the former corresponds to the historical division of Poland in various historical provinces, the latter are distributed according to the logic of center-periphery. Because the analysis presented here attempts to tap, in an indirect way, historical patterns of associational life, only numbers of civic associations, many of which are of the old type, are taken into consideration.

⁴ Since the electoral behavior of the new inhabitants of the territories previously populated by Germans in 1946 arguably could be anything but standard and one can hardly speak about uniform associative patterns of such a diverse population, different results can be expected if the analysis is narrowed down to those Czech regions with significantly lower shares of former German inhabitants. Yet, after the exclusion of the four regions with the highest shares of the German population before the war (Ústí nad Labem, Karlovy Vary, Liberec, Pilsen) the negative correlation is even stronger ($r = -0.42$), suggesting once again an inverse relationship between support for democracy and associational density than the neo-Tocquevillean theory would predict.