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HANS JOAS

Communitarianism: A German Perspective

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## **Communitarianism: A German Perspective**

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## Communitarianism: A German Perspective\*

"Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself."<sup>1</sup> This sentence of John Dewey taken from his 1927 book, "The Public and its Problems," sounds very strange to German ears. The semantics of the term "community" in America are very different from the cultural traditions in Germany, and this difference is certainly bigger than in the case of the term "democracy." In Germany, every positive use of the term "community" today will meet with the skepticism of those who suspect therein antidemocratic effects. "Whoever calls for more community in this country will immediately come under the suspicion to be an old-fashioned fool or a sinister ideologist."<sup>2</sup> The use of the term "Volksgemeinschaft" in the Nazi propaganda undeniably served the purpose of disparaging the democratic order of the Weimar republic. I will personally never forget that in the time of Walter Ulbricht the East German state behind its wall called itself "a socialist community of men and women" ("sozialistische Menschengemeinschaft").

Prior to 1933, the term "community" was indeed a proprietary codeword used by anti-democratic social movements in Germany. But it would be misleading to extend this observation back to the earlier phases of German intellectual history. Many of the elements of meaning that constitute the opposition between "community" and "society" have existed in Germany at the latest since the romantic critiques of the Enlightenment. These elements, however, were in the beginning not stably and consistently split up in these two terms as we can find out when we read authors using these terms, for example, Friedrich Schleiermacher or Heinrich von Kleist.<sup>3</sup> It was one of the early sociologists, Ferdinand Tönnies, who developed a clear conceptual dichotomy in this semantic field.<sup>4</sup> But Tönnies did not do so because of cultural pessimism or

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<sup>1</sup>John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*. New York 1927, p.148.

<sup>2</sup>Wolfgang Fach, *Der Zeuge Tocqueville*, in: Christel Zahlmann (ed.), *Kommunitarismus in der Diskussion*. Frankfurt/Main 1992, p.42.

<sup>3</sup>For the German history of the concepts "Gemeinschaft" ("community") and "Gesellschaft" ("society") cf. the excellent article by Manfred Riedel, in: Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Stuttgart 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 801-862.

<sup>4</sup>Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. (1887). Darmstadt 1972.

reactionary thinking. He placed his hopes in the strengthening of co-operative social forms within the framework of modern societies and found potentials for such a development, above all, in the trade union movement. At the end of his political biography he joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Outside of the scholarly discourse, it was the middle-class youth movement around the turn of the century that filled the term "community" with intense sentiments, but this culturally productive movement was much more ambiguous in its political repercussions than those searching for precursors of the Nazi movement are often willing to admit. And the Nazi use of the term "community" for the whole of the totalitarian state should not make us forget that the same term, in the thinking of leading members of the German Resistance,<sup>5</sup> served as an orientation for the reconstruction of society after the fall of the Nazi regime. Yet, though it would clearly be exaggerated and historically unfair to reduce the term "community" in Germany to the anti-democratic use of it, nobody in Germany would have said what Dewey did: that we should understand "democracy" as the fullest embodiment of the principles which underlie all social life.

Things are easier in America in this respect. The term "community" must be more innocent here for the simple reason that it covers a wider spectrum of meaning—from the merely territorial ("Gemeinde") to the utopian ("Kommune"). In the American moral and political discourse the term "community" still is—as Robert Bellah's group has observed in their interviews—"a kind of 'very special word' that always meant something good."<sup>6</sup> Terms like "clique", "aggregation" or "lifestyle enclave" are used in the sociological literature if the authors tend to deny the positive traits of "community"—and the question whether the name of community is appropriate in a case such as the "gay community" may be quite a substantive one. But even when the American debates about community have connotations similar to the German ones, one big difference remains: the discourse on "community" in the U.S. has always been part and parcel of communication within a liberal-democratic society, whereas in Germany—and this is true regardless of the personal convictions of the single contributors—the debate took place in a fundamentally illiberal society and always had the tendency to

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<sup>5</sup>Hans Mommsen, *Kreisauer Vorstellungen als Antwort auf die Herausforderung des Nationalsozialismus*, in: Dietmar Petzina/Jürgen Reulecke (eds.), *Bevölkerung, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft seit der Industrialisierung. Festschrift für Wolfgang Köllmann*. Dortmund 1900, pp. 389-397.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Madsen, *Contentless Consensus: The Political Discourse of a Segmented Society*, in: Alan Wolfe (ed.), *America at Century's End*. Berkeley 1991, pp. 440-460, here p. 451.—The remark on Robert Bellah's group refers, of course, to: Robert Bellah/Richard Madsen/William Sullivan/Ann Swidler/Stephen Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley 1985, and, by the same authors, *The Good Society*. New York 1991.

question the principles of modern individualism, market economy and democratic self-government. In contrast to that, the American debates articulated the sensibility toward cultural losses caused by unrestricted individualism without envisaging a completely different form of modernity. German cultural critics on the right and the left have always looked down upon these American traditions, but the time may have come to see things differently.

All I have said so far may sound as if I were overly interested in a quarrel about words. The reason why the semantics of "community" attracts my attention is, however, that this term is crucial for a major new development in American moral and political reasoning, namely so-called *communitarianism*. Communitarianism developed slowly during the 1980s out of a reaction against Harvard philosopher's John Rawls' magisterial book "A Theory of Justice" published in 1971 and since then widely respected as one of the crucial philosophical works of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Rawls breathed new life into contemporary liberalism by emphasizing the difference between the value of justice and the value of individual or collective happiness. Contrary to classical utilitarianism, Rawls established an absolute priority of justice over happiness since for him each individual may have a different notion of happiness and each orientation toward collective happiness must result in the imposition of values or life-styles on others. The only task for the collectivity has to be to make possible a fair coordination of the differing concepts of the good life. Thus each citizen would be able to pursue his or her own vision of happiness as long as this is compatible with the same freedom of all other citizens. Rawls replaced the Kantian idea of an autonomous subject obeying the categorical imperative by the ingenious construction of an "original position" in which we can test our orientations as to their justice. In this original position, we act behind a "veil of ignorance" about our own social status and membership, advantages and disadvantages in the social order we are going to problematize or to constitute. This is a way to establish fundamental principles for a just social order and to examine more specific questions from the viewpoint of justice.

Rawls's approach was severely criticized because of the view of the self, of the human person implicit in his construction of an "original position". The critics called the self in Rawls "unencumbered", i.e., a self that looks as if it were independent of its own values, intentions or goals.<sup>8</sup> Such a notion of the self could only be adequate with respect to voluntary associations, which we may enter or leave according to our taste; but it is clearly inadequate with respect to those forms of social life like the family of our childhood which we did not

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<sup>7</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass. 1971.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Sandel, *The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self*, in: *Political Theory* 1 (1984), pp. 81-96; cf. also by the same author: *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge 1982.

choose and which played a constitutive role for our personalities. Even if we take into consideration that Rawls' construction was a mere proposal for a thought experiment and not an empirical assumption (since as such it would fall way behind the crucial insights into the human self developed by George Herbert Mead and his followers in modern social psychology), one might ask why anybody should enter into such an experimental situation and follow its results if there were no preceding feelings of obligation toward particular fellow human beings. The term "communitarianism" became generally accepted during the 1980s for the authors who criticized Rawls in such a vein. This debate among moral philosophers has practically come to an end now in a way which is highly desirable for such discussions in general, namely by a consensus reached via mutual criticism and self-revision. But on that basis a network of philosophers, social scientists, other scholars, and politicians was formed that intends to dispute the hegemony not so much of Rawls, but of utilitarian individualism in America. The agenda of this communitarian network includes paradigmatic changes in some scientific disciplines like economics and other social sciences and a remoralization of political and social life from the family and the school to the influence of special-interest groups on the national level, from restrictions on individual liberty in the interest of public safety and public health to nonlegal remedies against discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

This American intellectual movement has reached Germany with considerable delay. During the 1980s it was only academic specialists in philosophy who followed it, and though several books by authors like Robert Bellah, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer appeared in German translations, they were not perceived as being in any sense connected to one another. The collapse of the communist regimes in Europe in 1989 changed this situation completely. Why did these events produce such a widespread interest in communitarianism and make this American intellectual current almost fashionable in Germany? I see three main reasons for this interesting turn in the intellectual climate.

The first reason lies in the problems related to German reunification itself. The larger part of the West German population had lost its emotional bonds to the Germans in the East. They had come to take pride in their being part of the Western world and its political and cultural traditions. When the East Germans in the fall of 1989 turned the slogan "We are the people"—which had been the popular catchword against the authoritarian rule of communism—into "We are

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community. Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*. New York 1993. The volume reprints the "Communitarian Platform" which is crucial for the communitarian movement.



one people"—referring to German unity—most West Germans responded with very mixed feelings. The victory of democracy in the East was clearly welcomed, but unification gave rise to fears either about new tendencies toward German hegemony in Europe or about the costs and incalculable economic consequences of such a step. After reunification (in October 1990) this debate gained additional momentum because now the tension between an ethnically based "national identity" and a normatively based "constitutional patriotism" intensified as did the need for a justification of long-term economic sacrifices for the West German population. Understandably enough, after the horrible crimes of the Third Reich, terms like "national solidarity," "the priority of the community" and "sacrifice" have incredibly negative connotations in Germany. But, on the other hand, the feeling that the tasks of reunification cannot be solved on the basis of individualist liberalism became stronger. This prepared the soil for an interest in American communitarianism as a "purification" of the German tradition, as Albert Hirschman said.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, many intellectuals in West Germany interested in alternatives to the existing political order, without admiring the communist regimes nevertheless entertained a subliminal affinity to a tradition which seemed to have deviated from an originally attractive path. Even the most outspoken anti-communist Social Democrats shared with Marxism an emphasis on a strong centralized state as the most important actor for social reforms. The collapse of communism finally opened the way for a new thinking. As soon as the utopian hopes for a social order different from Western democratic capitalism are abandoned, debates within that type of society must gain enormous interest. The question is no longer posed as in Werner Sombart's time: "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" It is now more appropriate to ask: "Why has liberalism in its individualist and its communitarian version been so weak in Germany?" And this question immediately leads to an interest in less state-centered and more community-oriented types of social action and social reform.

Thirdly, as in the U.S., the slogan of "communitarianism" in Germany integrates diverse social problems which had emerged before 1989 and which are analytically independent of the repercussions of reunification. The future of the welfare state under new demographic conditions and in view of international economic competition, the restructuring of the labor market given high structural unemployment rates, the loss of loyalty toward political parties, all these hitherto unrelated debates find a common denominator under the label "communitarianism".

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<sup>10</sup>Albert Hirschman, in: Körber-Stiftung (ed.), *Wieviel Gemeinsinn braucht die liberale Gesellschaft?* Hamburg 1993, p. 20.

Sociology has always been interested in the processes that lead to the decline of communities. This interest may even be called constitutive for this discipline in Europe and America. But early American sociology differed in an interesting way from its European counterpart. In Europe the dichotomy of community and society was interpreted as a sequence with two phases: for example, an age of "community" was thought to be followed by an age of "society." For the Americans, however, the pragmatist idea of a creative reconstruction of habits made a scheme with three phases more plausible. In their perspective there has to be a third phase: namely the genesis of new communities. The classic case here are studies about immigration in which the decline of European village-communities was not considered to give rise to a faceless mass society of isolated individuals but to new forms of community in the ethnic neighborhoods of the American metropolitan areas. So the loss of community is not necessarily without a substitute; even "better" communities can take the place of the lost community. These new communities are no longer natural ones, but have to be created. However, this creation cannot be arbitrarily managed. In this process, political actors and social scientists can at least be helpful.<sup>11</sup>

Sociology can contribute to the contemporary debate about communitarianism by opening this debate toward empirical clarification. It can ask in an empirically-controlled way how justified the diagnosis of an on-going weakening of social relations is; and it can, in addition to that, try to find out which community resources may help revitalize social life, and thus contribute to the solution of our most pressing social problems. In the following I will sketch some answers to these questions in a way which constantly pays attention to the comparison between Germany and the United States.

The empirical examination of community decline can begin with an almost trivial question: when did the processes which allegedly led to this decline set in? How necessary it is to ask this question immediately becomes clear when we observe that we often talk about the decline of a type of community which only came into being when many historians or sociologists already spoke of community decline. When everybody in Europe described the loss of the village-community those homogeneous working-class districts developed. Today we may regret or at least describe their decline. The historian Thomas Bender has demonstrated in a funny way how differently the decline of community is dated in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> One analysis of John Winthrop's Boston, for example, regards the decline of community and the triumph of individualism and materialism over

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<sup>11</sup>Hans Joas, *Pragmatism in American Sociology*, in: H. J., *Pragmatism and Social Theory*. Chicago 1993, pp. 14-51.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America*. New Brunswick, N.J. 1978, pp. 45 ff.

the Puritan ideals of fraternity as completed by the year 1650. Others prefer to date the same process in the late 17th century or early 18th century. The increase of republican thinking in the run-up to the American revolution is sometimes considered as an attempt at reviving the declining traditional "community". A vast literature situates the origins of the American police in the social problems caused by rapid urbanization and thus connects the development of separate institutions of social control with the erosion of traditional communities. In particular, the period after the American Civil War (1861-65) and even more the so-called Progressive Era (1896-1914) are depicted in many historical works as phases in which a society mainly consisting of diverse autonomous municipalities with highly informal and predominantly face-to-face relations was transformed into a more and more centralized society with impersonal and purposively-oriented social relations. The same scheme of interpretation can be found, however, in the literature about the 1920s, and up into our present age. This mere listing challenges, of course, our belief in the correctness of the given assumptions. More than this, the whole framework loses its plausibility, when we can ask (with Thomas Bender): "How many times can community collapse in America?"

But such an ironic relativization of the permanent outcry of decline does not mean that there is no such thing as a decline of communities. It makes clear, however, that we should not blow up particular tendencies to one master trend of unilinear and comprehensive decline without weighing against each other tendencies and counter-tendencies. Among communitarian philosophers, Michael Walzer has attempted to concretize sociologically the contemporary social origins of a loss of community when he talks about the "four mobilities": geographic, social, family and political mobility.<sup>13</sup> These are, of course, very different phenomena. Frequent moves from one place to another, climbing up or down the social ladder, attitudes toward marital fidelity and divorce or the strength of one's affiliation with a political party obviously have to be distinguished. If you talk about the loss of community today you have to make clear whether you mean a decrease in the commitment to the nuclear family, the extended family, friendship, parish, local municipality, urban neighborhood, political party, trade union, voluntary association or whatever. Those differences might only be neglected if one assumes that the developments in all these areas take the same direction. Let me give you a few examples how careful we have to be in this respect.

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<sup>13</sup>Michael Walzer, *The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism*, in: *Political Theory* 18 (1990), pp. 6-23.

One of the most frequently mentioned causes of community decline is the degree of regional mobility. Walzer, among others, assumes that Americans move more frequently than any other nation in history, at least since the age of the "Völkerwanderung," the migration of the peoples, and with the exception of the nomads or the refugees of wars and civil wars. But sociological research has found out that other comparable states, ex-colonial settler-states like Australia and Canada are not considerably different from the U.S. in that respect and that geographical mobility has been slightly but constantly decreasing in the U.S. for a relatively long time.<sup>14</sup> That is to say that a contemporary decline of community can hardly be traced back to geographical mobility.—Another phenomenon which is often used as an illustration for the alleged decline of community is the dissolution of ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods in American metropolitan areas. But we should not forget that ethnic homogeneity is not replaced by complete heterogeneity, whatever that would be, but by another type of homogeneity, namely economic homogeneity.<sup>15</sup> In the suburbs this economic homogeneity makes social intercourse within the neighborhood quite easy. Modern technical facilities allow close social relations with people who live farther away so that even those who are not deeply embedded in their neighborhoods should not be considered to live outside of any type of close communities. For the inner-city poor, however, the increased possibilities for black middle-class people to move out of the black ghettos has paradoxically resulted in a deterioration of their social life because of the loss of visible role-models representing achievement-orientation and social mobility.<sup>16</sup>

Walzer's emphasis on the "four mobilities" is not only misleading because they are not empirically verifiable, but also because he leaves the impression that the different mobilities are parallel phenomena; he ignores the possibility that they are interrelated in ways that are different from positive mutual reinforcement. Again, a few hints must be sufficient. Increasing employment of women, for example, may reduce and not increase geographical mobility because finding of jobs for both partners in another place is more difficult than for one. Commuting instead of migration is then a typical solution. If the attachment to political parties on the national level is going down, this may increase and not reduce the interest in and commitment to local politics. If ties with a particular religious denomination are getting looser, this does not

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<sup>14</sup>Theodore Caplow et al., *Recent Social Trends in the United States 1960-90*. Montreal 1991, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup>Claude Fischer, *Ambivalent Communities: How Americans Understand Their Localities*, in: Alan Wolfe (ed.), *America at Century's End*. Berkeley 1991, pp. 79-90.

<sup>16</sup>William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged. The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy*. Chicago 1987.

necessarily suggest that the importance of the churches is going down in general, since one may more freely choose between denominations but remain firmly within the religious sector ("church-shopping"). All these briefly mentioned facts produce at least some doubts about a continual decline of community in the U.S.

A particularly striking case can be found in Robert Wuthnow's recently published study on self-help and support groups in America. He asserts that about 40% of all Americans are members of a self-organized community which meets regularly and in brief intervals and which pursues a common intention not reducible to common utilitarian interests: "Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step groups, youth groups and singles groups, book discussion clubs, sports and hobby groups, and political or civic groups."<sup>17</sup> Two thirds of these groups have close relations to religion. Common origins of the group members or the feeling of unavoidable membership are the exception here, not the rule. But this does not restrict these groups, as some cultural critics assume, to a form of collective narcissism. Mutual help in emergencies is clearly expected from the members; talking about one's biography and pressing personal problems is among the informal obligations. These groups, or networks of such groups, are often the point of departure for more comprehensive civic activities. The identities of the groups' members are deeply impregnated by the life of these communities; the values which are the orientation of one's actions are elaborated and concretized in such groups. Communities like those can be called the communicative infrastructure of a democratic society.

Let me now switch to Germany and follow the same guiding thread, namely the question whether we observe there a continual decline of community. One can immediately mark one major difference between the two countries when one considers the main cultural traditions which provide what sociologists like Robert Bellah call "community resources." I have already mentioned the weakness of a purely individualistic tradition of "negative freedom" (Isaiah Berlin) in Germany. But even the community resources are very different. The republican tradition of thinking—in the sense of self-government of free and virtuous citizens -, so strong in America since the 18th century is hardly existent in Germany. Liberalism has always had a difficult position in the German-speaking countries, and classical republicanism had only little influence outside of the Hanseatic towns or Switzerland. The biblical traditions of community orientation played an important role in Germany, too, but—in contrast to the

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<sup>17</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey. Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*. New York 1994, p. 4.

U.S.—not in the form of a rich pluralism of denominations, but in the clear separation of Catholics versus Lutherans, and not in an intermingling of these denominations in different regional areas, but in a clear pattern of purely Catholic or purely Lutheran small states, because it was the religion of the ruler which decided the religion of his subjects. Two other cultural traditions containing strong community-orientations have played a much more influential role in Germany than in the U.S.: a nationalist-conservative tradition on the one hand, and a social democratic-trade unionist tradition on the other. Both formed milieus of a very distinct character and infused large parts of the population with value-orientations of the non-individualist kind.

Despite the fact that the twelve years of Nazi totalitarianism in Germany weakened all these milieus by intentionally destroying the workers' organizations, impeding the churches and devaluating even the conservative-nationalist subcultures, not to mention the horrors done to Jewish citizens, all three milieus survived these years in weakened forms and, after 1945, began to reconstruct themselves. In Harold Hurwitz's fascinating five-volume sociological study of Berlin in the post-war era,<sup>18</sup> this reconstitution of social milieus under the Allied government takes on a graphic quality. The major difference was that before 1933, the German East experienced the loss of the social basis of the aristocracy and, as a consequence of the expulsion of millions of refugees from the territories now under Polish control, a mix of Catholics and Lutherans which then developed was much more thorough than what had already started to happen during the urbanization processes of the late 19th century. Thus the Federal Republic in its early years was an absolutely new democratic state on the basis of a slightly changed social structure with relatively traditional cultural milieus.

This situation changed completely and dramatically as a consequence of what was called the "Wirtschaftswunder," the "economic miracle" of the 1950s and 1960s. The enormous increase of productivity and of the standard of living within the experience of one generation destroyed traditional communities more than the historical events before 1945 had done. German sociological research on social mobility has aptly spoken of an "elevator effect,"<sup>19</sup> that is to say, a process in which the whole stratification system of German society moved upwards. A large part of the traditional lower class occupations either disappeared completely in the transition process to a service-sector economy and post-industrial society, or was transferred to a new immigrant population from Southern European countries, which were not considered permanent or truly

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<sup>18</sup>Harold Hurwitz, *Demokratie und Antikommunismus in Berlin nach 1945*. 5 vols. Köln 1983 ff.

<sup>19</sup>Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main 1986.

part of the German population in general. This process was subjectively experienced as personal success and individual climbing up to higher levels of stratification. A rapid expansion of the whole system of higher education, which began in the early sixties and lasted well through the seventies, enhanced even more the conviction of millions of young people that they had superseded the milieu into which they had been born. The so-called proletarian milieu and the religiously influenced subcultures disappeared almost completely in the course of these developments. "Individualisation" and "pluralisation" are the fashionable sociological catch-words in Germany, which describe this cultural restructuring and signal in their terminology that they emphasize the dissolution of traditional community orientations. Ulrich Beck, for example, describes the German society as a society of singles who construct their own biography in an autonomous way and who no longer experience themselves as part of any stable social class. Postmodernist writers exaggerate this already exaggerated description even more and talk about the end of the social and the reign of the fragmented patch-work identities.

Again, these assertions are not fully convincing since they clearly ignore all counter-tendencies. If we consider, for example, data on membership in associations ("Vereine"), political parties etc. we receive a very different image. Then Germany appears as a tightly integrated, strongly communitarian, society. Twenty-one million Germans (out of 80 million inhabitants) are members of sports clubs, 1.8 millions are members of the "Deutsche Sängerbund" (German Choral Society), 2.2 millions are members of a political party—not to mention trade unions and the churches. The followers of the "individualization" and community decline thesis may object that it is often only a small part of the membership of these associations that is truly active in them and not only passively registered. But then one could argue that formally registered associations cover only a very small part of the communitarian activities in Germany. There are so many music groups and choirs not formally organized, so many sports groups, self-help groups and neighborhood initiatives which are not counted in these sociological statistics. In spite of a number of studies on individual types of associations, there is no study in Germany yet comparable to Bellah's or Wuthnow's studies about the U.S., a fact that may be taken not only as an indicator of a part of my current research interests but, more importantly, as evidence again that German self-perception suffers even more strongly from the perspective of continual community decline than its American counterpart.

These remarks on Germany were exclusively concentrated on West German conditions. East Germany had a different fate after 1945, and in our days we are witnessing the rapid adaptation from the results of this Soviet-dominated development to the general conditions of the unified German society. From the viewpoint of communitarian value-orientations it has to be mentioned that in

East Germany socialist values were crucial, but enforced by means of the state, whereas the conservative and the Christian milieus were almost completely destroyed. The important role of protestant pastors during the anti-communist rebellion in 1989 often makes us overlook the fact that the anti-Christian communist crusade in East Germany has been terribly successful. Two thirds of the East German population are not members of any church, and only 5% of that population define themselves as truly religious. The value of working-class solidarity was one of the crucial reference points of education and indoctrination under the communist regime. But it goes without saying that the concrete nature of solidarity was defined not from the bottom up, but from the top down. There was absolutely no possibility to organize autonomous groups or activities. In some cases even groups which supported official goals were prohibited on account of the paranoid world-view of the regime's leaders. Complete lack of autonomous groups was one side of the coin; the comprehensive grasp of highly centralized mass organizations for everybody was the other side. Within these huge organizations one had unavoidably, of course, tendencies toward autonomization again and again. Alongside these mass organizations, the state-run enterprises or agricultural cooperatives played a role for social life unimaginable for many people in the West. The VEB (=enterprise owned by the people) and LPG (=agricultural production cooperation) offered much more than merely a job. They also provided for child care, vacations, shopping and even arbitral jurisdiction. A last type of community specific to communist countries has been called the "niche," and one of the most astute observers of East German culture has called the whole society a "niche society."<sup>20</sup> Mainly because of constant shortages in the provision of goods, large informal networks of mutual help developed which were also filled with community-like feelings of solidarity, though their real core was clearly instrumental.

The collapse of the East German regime led to a rapid disintegration of all these types of community. The mass organizations dissolved themselves, the industrial and agricultural enterprises were either closed down or lost at least most of their additional functions, the "niches" became simply superfluous. This is indeed much more than anything in the West, a dramatic process of decline. It is all the more dramatic since it takes place after the consecutive intentional destructions of community structures first by the Nazis and then by the communists. Many East Germans experience this current process as similarly violent. For them Western societies do not present themselves as richly textured democratic cultures, but as purely utilitarian-individualist societies, "the

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<sup>20</sup>Günter Gaus. *Wo Deutschland liegt*. Hamburg 1983.



domination of the elbows" as a current saying goes. The introduction of democratic institutions in East Germany clearly is not sufficient in itself, since it is an open question whether the reconstitution of a communicative infrastructure will be able to keep abreast of these developments.

Eastern Europe has its own parallel to the American debate on communitarianism, the "civil society" debate; the developments in East Germany after the collapse of communism demonstrate very impressively how appropriate this debate was. It is mainly to the Polish trade union movement under the name "Solidarity" that the credit goes for having reached the conclusion that fighting communism meant more than replacing one ruling elite by another, namely a comprehensive reconstruction of a society that was to become "differentiated, pluralistic, politically democratic and economically market driven."<sup>21</sup> After the fall of communism, however, this debate does not shed much light on the details of the reconstitution of communities and a differentiated society and, as a result, the experiences of societies with long democratic traditions become more and more important in this context. One can safely say that Germans and East Europeans interested in democratic theory look with utmost attention to the revitalization of democratic theory in the U.S.—a development which in itself is clearly restricted up to now to the internal problems of the American society. That makes the internationalization of this debate in its empirical and its normative aspects so important for all sides.

Communitarianism should not be misunderstood as a nostalgic attempt to reconstruct an overarching and primordial notion of moral consensus nor as a return to traditional communities. It is, on the contrary, an attempt to reformulate the ideal of democracy in a modern, highly differentiated but not necessarily fragmented society. Such an attempt is not necessarily connected to a myth of moral decline. In two points it is completely different from the democratic slogans of the social movements in the sixties. It accepts the value of efficiency and does not define democratization as the abolition of markets and bureaucracies where these are superior to democratic means in an instrumental sense. And secondly, communitarianism is completely different from the progressivism of the sixties and seventies because it separates the combination of political democratization with cultural permissiveness which was so characteristic of the earlier movements and which alienated many intellectuals originally supporting their goals. Communitarianism has learnt the lesson that, to put it in old-fashioned terms, self-government presupposes the virtue of the citizens. Without self-control and social control or without intense feelings of

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<sup>21</sup>Jeffrey Alexander, Review of Jean Cohen/Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, in: *Contemporary Sociology* 22 (1993), p. 798.

obligation toward concrete particular communities self-government is impossible. Liberation from all such obligations and loosening of all controls most often leads to the diffusion of responsibilities and not to efficient and responsible self-government. This critical relationship to the cultural consequences of the sixties makes it so difficult for contemporary observers to classify communitarianism as liberal or conservative, left or right. It evades such dichotomous schemes of perception in its insistence on a remoralization of politics. The institutional consequences of this reorientation and the more technical part of such an endeavor like the theory of action, the self, the genesis of values and norms, play a significant role in my work, but here I would rather like to end on the optimistic note that a revitalization of the international debate on democracy will also enhance the public importance of the sociological discipline.





