

# Towards a History of Civil Society\*

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Although Dutch historians seem hesitant to use it, when analysing associational life and political development in the long 19th century the concept of civil society is preferable to that of public sphere, because civil society includes those citizens who, for a long time, did not participate in political life in the narrow sense, such as women and working-class men. Following a review of Stefan Hoffmann's *Civil Society: 1750-1914* (2006), some suggestions are made as to how Dutch history fits into this book, and how a history of civil society can be conceived, researched, and written.

Precisely 25 years ago, a special issue of *De Negentiende Eeuw* on associational history argued that, whereas important research had been done on late eighteenth-century associational life, the history of nineteenth-century voluntary associations was a neglected field of study. More research was needed. As Boudien de Vries, one of the pioneers of this field, has recently observed, much has changed since then.<sup>1</sup> Dozens of academic studies – urban or social histories of associational life in a particular city or town, or studies of a particular kind of association nation-wide – have been published.<sup>2</sup> While we now know much more about the history of organizing in the Netherlands, this knowledge needs interpretation, to help us better understand the course of Dutch history.

Interpretation implies using a larger framework to arrange the pieces of the puzzle. To make sense of the individual histories, some sort of ‘master narrative’ is needed. After examining the usefulness of the frameworks of ‘public sphere’ and of ‘burgerlijkheid’ as the context of associational history (see below), this contribution will suggest ‘civil society’ as an alternative framework, and will discuss Stefan Hoffmann's *Civil Society*, which could prove a starting point for further exploration of the concept by Dutch historians.

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1 Alexis Raat and Peter van Zonneveld, ‘Genootschapsleven in Nederland 1800-1850’, *De Negentiende Eeuw* 7 (1983), 73-75; Boudien de Vries, ‘Voluntary Societies in the Netherlands, 1750-1900’, in: Idem, Graeme Morton and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Civil Society, Associations and Urban Places: Class, Nation and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot 2006) 103-116, 103.

2 Specific titles are discussed in De Vries, ‘Voluntary Societies’ and Idem, ‘Een eeuw vol gezelligheid. Verenigingsleven in Nederland, 1800-1900’, *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis na 1800* XXVIII (December 2005) 63 16-29.

This article is meant as an invitation to future researchers to take associational history to the next level, now that there really is something to work with. It will take much time and research before we can begin to formulate definitive answers regarding the relevance of the concept of civil society for a better understanding of Dutch history, and before we can start embedding the history of Dutch civil society in current international historiography. This contribution hopefully offers some starting points and incentives to engage in that process.

## I Public Sphere and/or Civil Society?

As Americanist David Waldstreicher put it: ‘Historians treat theory the way rattlesnakes approach small mammals. They either strike to kill or swallow whole. The latter often amounts to death by citation’.<sup>3</sup> Here he refers to the popularity of the Habermasian concept of the ‘public sphere’ among American historians. Whereas many Dutch historians have similarly embraced the public sphere as a central concept in writing the history of the Netherlands from 1750 onwards, unlike their American and German colleagues, they seem to make less use of ‘civil society’, a concept that in many ways is closely related to that of the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> A precise definition of the term is not easy to formulate, but it can be generally said that civil society ‘refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family, and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated’.<sup>5</sup> Voluntary associations are considered an important element of civil society, as are the media.

To speak for myself: when I was writing my dissertation, an exploration of the role of pressure groups in the transformation of nineteenth-century Dutch politics, one of the many issues I struggled with was related to the concept of civil society. It was not a complicated theoretical issue, but a rather simple and somewhat embarrassing question: can I get away with avoiding the concept of civil society altogether, while writing about associational history?<sup>6</sup>

3 David Waldstreicher, ‘Two Cheers for the “Public Sphere”... and One for Historians’ Skepticism’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol 62, No. 1 (January 2005) 107–112, 107.

4 An important exception is the work of Niek van Sas, who uses the concept of civil society throughout his work, see for example N.C.F. van Sas, ‘The Netherlands, 1750–1813’, in: Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows (eds.), *Press, politics and the public sphere in Europe and North America, 1760–1820* (Cambridge 2000), and Idem, *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective*, vol. 5: *Accounting for the Past 1650–2000* (Assen, Basingstoke, New York 2004) 41–66. Ido de Haan also does not shy away from using the concept of civil society in his historical work.

5 As used by the Centre for Civil Society of the London School of Economics, see <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/introduction.htm> (23-3-2008).

6 In the end I decided not to ignore it, but at the same time employed the notion of the public or political sphere more prominently as an analytical concept. Maartje Janse, *De Afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland, 1840–1880* (Amsterdam 2007).

This question would be unfathomable for the vast majority of researchers outside of the Netherlands. Yet, it seems I am not the only Dutch historian who is reluctant to use the English phrase ‘civil society’ as an analytical concept. As opposed to American or German historiography, it is not regarded an important concept in our national historiography.<sup>7</sup> The German word ‘Zivilgesellschaft’ has in the last two decades gained popularity as the equivalent of civil society, to be distinguished from ‘bürgerliche Gesellschaft’. The Dutch ‘burgerlijke samenleving’ or ‘burgermaatschappij’ refers to the latter, rather than to Zivilgesellschaft/civil society.<sup>8</sup> Here, language complicates matters: the ‘burgermaatschappij’ that Kloek and Mijnhardt described in their 1800. *Blaww-drukken voor een samenleving* is translated as ‘civil society’ in 1800: *Blueprints for a National Community*. This, however, does not necessarily imply that the authors adopted the analytical viewpoint of civil society as it is understood abroad – although they have unmistakably been inspired by it.<sup>9</sup>

So, while Dutch historians have paid much attention to ‘de burgerij’ and ‘burgerlijke cultuur’ in the sense of the social, cultural and political behavior of the middle classes, it seems that they, even when writing about associational history, do not automatically place civil society at the core of their analysis. If we look only at the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this is obscured by the fact that Dutch research is very similar to civil society research abroad, simply because during that time period civil society actually *was* shaped and embodied by middle-class men. Conversely, for the later nineteenth century this focus on ‘burgerlijke cultuur’ narrows the perspective on civil society and has at times prevented a full appreciation of the social and political participation of women and members of the working class. But before further exploring this neglect, we need to ask why Dutch historians are not using the concept of civil society.

To return to my own experience, I can identify three main reasons I was reluctant to use the term. First of all, civil society is a complex concept that at the

7 Helpful introductions for historians to the history and use of the concept are Jürgen Kocka, ‘Civil Society in Historical Perspective’, in: John Keane (ed.) *Civil Society. Berlin Perspective* (New York, Oxford 2004) 37–50; Ralph Jessen, Sven Reichardt, Ansgar Klein (eds.) *Zivilgesellschaft als Geschichte: Studien zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden 2004); Jose Harris, ‘Introduction: Civil Society in British History: Paradigm or Peculiarity?’, in: Idem, (ed.) *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford 2003) 1–12 and John L. Brooke, ‘Consent, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution and the Early American Republic’, in: Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (eds.), *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill 2004) 207–250.

8 See for more on (the distinction between bürgerliche Gesellschaft and) Zivilgesellschaft, Jessen, *Zivilgesellschaft*, especially the contributions of Jessen/Reichardt, Kocka and Hettling. To name but the most relevant Dutch literature on ‘burgerij’ and ‘burgerlijke cultuur’: Remieg Aerts and Henk te Velde (eds.), *Stijl van de burger. Over Nederlandse burgerlijke cultuur vanaf de middeleeuwen* (Kampen 1998); Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans (eds.), *Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip ‘burger’ in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw* (Amsterdam 2002).

9 Whereas the book describes a process of the development of institutions and debate independent from, or even in opposition to the state, a process that is similar to the one Habermas described in his *Structural Transformation*, it focuses mainly on the cultural aspects of this development. Cf. Niek van Sas, ‘De burger als Eunuch’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 117 (2002) 495–506.

same time refers to norms and ideas and to social reality – something Frank Trentmann has aptly described as ‘the perplexing double life’ of civil society.<sup>10</sup> To make matters even more complicated, for the historian who wants to understand the historical development of civil society, another dimension is added: both the ideas and practices change over time, and this change has to be accounted for.

The second reason I hesitated to write about civil society was the fact that much of the literature on the subject appeared to speak another language: that of political science. Using the concept entailed participation in a vast debate in another discipline – a debate and a discipline with different questions, preoccupations, methods, and a whole new literature, which were in many ways intimidating.

Thirdly, I was wary of its normative and ideological connotations. After 1989 civil society had become a slogan for the democratization project of Eastern Europe and post-dictatorial states in Africa and South America, as well as the renewal of democracy in the Western world. While I believe in democracy (like everybody else), I did not necessarily want to place my book in these political and ideological currents of thought. Could it be that Dutch historians are more reluctant than historians elsewhere in the Western world to show their political affiliation through their work?

The concept of the public sphere seemed more attractive. Central to that concept is the notion of debate, deliberation, of expression of opinion in a public setting, whether about politics or literature. Associations and the press are important institutions of the public sphere because they facilitate the debate and shape the ‘evolving meeting place of consent’.<sup>11</sup> The public sphere is a historical phenomenon that came into being in the late eighteenth century and, according to Habermas’ original account, collapsed in the late nineteenth century. Although this is not the place for a full exploration of the theoretical similarities and differences between civil society and public sphere, let me add a few remarks to indicate the reasons why I think in general the perspective of civil society is broader and more helpful than that of the public sphere.

There is a lot of confusion surrounding the use of the two terms. They are often used interchangeably. To say the least, there is more overlap than difference between the two terms. As Hoffmann puts it, ‘Civil society and the public sphere emerged historically in tandem’. In his canonical book on the development of the public sphere, Habermas speaks several times of the ‘public sphere of civil society’. Conceptually, the public sphere is that part of civil society in which public opinion is formed through deliberation. Apart from the fact that civil society encompasses more than just the public sphere, a fundamental distinction between civil society and public sphere is artificial.<sup>12</sup>

10 Frank Trentmann, ‘Introduction’, *Paradoxes of Civil Society. New Perspectives on Modern German and British History* (Oxford, New York 2000) 3–46, 3.

11 Brooke, ‘Consent, Civil Society’, 212.

12 A helpful treatment of the different terms in Craig Calhoun, ‘Civil Society/Public Sphere: Histo-

However, it seems that the two terms refer to two distinct and separate bodies of scholarship with different sets of questions. After *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* had been translated into English (as late as 1989), the public sphere as a concept became popular among British and American cultural historians (especially those studying the history of press culture) and historians of political culture. It provided them with a new understanding of politics, and a new way of analysing the political aspects of seemingly apolitical phenomena such as art, novels, reading clubs, popular print culture, festivals, and other public manifestations of nationalism, religious identity or historical commemorations. Habermas' central thesis was very political from the outset: what are the practices that create a public sphere, independent from the state, and that produce political opinions and political debate? How is publicity generated and for what purposes? The popularity of the concept of public sphere was part of the evolution of political history at the time. The new and exciting element was that politics was no longer limited to policy-making and elections, but a broad 'context' for those activities was discovered, the structure of which provided not only the opportunity to discuss policy-making, political issues and elections, but also profoundly influenced their outcomes. Generally speaking, press and public debate are at the forefront, and institution-building is pushed more into the background.

The concept of civil society is popular amongst today's political scientists, political historians, historical sociologists, politicians and political observers. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote its founding text: *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, based on his observations of the young democracy of Jacksonian America in 1831-1832.<sup>13</sup> This field of study is concerned with the relationship between state and civil society – are they mutually exclusive, or do they constitute each other? – and the relationship between civil society and democracy. Robert Putnam and others have argued that a strong civil society, with a dense network of voluntary associations, would bring forth and foster a strong and stable democracy.<sup>14</sup> According to Tocqueville, the press was of utmost importance, but he placed special emphasis on associational life, which constitutes the core element of civil society research.

In the study of both the public sphere and civil society, scholars have identified inclusion and exclusion as central themes. Who has access to the public sphere? What social identity (think of gender, race, religion, income and edu-

ry of the Concept', *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam, New York 2001) 1897-1903; Hoffmann, *Civil Society*, 17; Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt etc. 1962), translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge 1989) passim. For the historiographical debate on the emergence of a public sphere, see also Dena Goodman, 'Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime', *History and theory. Studies in the philosophy of history* 31 (1992) 1-20.

13 Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (Paris 1835, 1840)

14 Robert D. Putnam, *Making democracy work. Civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton etc. 1992).

cation level) is required for entry? Who can speak in public, who can participate in public debates? Who is considered a member of civil society? What is considered legitimate behavior for expressing dissent? For example, being a woman made access to the public sphere difficult: not just because obstinate men were barring the entrance, but also because of the prevalent conceptions of what being a woman entailed only a relatively small group of exceptional women longed for and attempted entry. Not only did the structure and the unwritten rules of what belonged in the public sphere prevent women from participating in public debate, but when historians let the public sphere structure their argument, the excluded are hardly noticeable and easily neglected.<sup>15</sup>

A large part of civil society is missed or, at the least, marginalized, when the perspective of public sphere is employed. Organized charity, for example, is not located in the public sphere (because philanthropy does not directly imply participating in public debate), but because of its values and organizational structure it makes up an important element of civil society. In general, for most part of the nineteenth century, a narrative based on the development of the public sphere will have trouble incorporating large parts of the population, such as middle-class women or working-class men and women, who hardly participated in public debate.

In the case of Dutch antislavery movements it is clear that the boundaries between the different spheres and categories are blurred. While all abolitionists were members of civil society, not all of them manifested themselves and their protests in the public sphere. The women who were needlepointing against slavery and selling their needlework to make money for the Society for the Abolition of Slavery that did not allow them to become members claimed that they were not interfering in (public) political debate. But they were at the same time transcending the boundaries of the private sphere: their needlework was done within the regulated confines of an association that published its reports and organized widely publicised antislavery bazaars. The women chose a form and style of protest that was situated neither in the public nor in the private sphere, but it was situated in civil society. Notwithstanding their claims, they did discuss politics during their institutionalised needlework sessions, and mixed religion and politics during their public prayers against slavery. Some men felt uncomfortable with the women's activities, and denounced them by pointing out the boundaries of their proper sphere.<sup>16</sup> The question is: does this not imply that after all, these women *were* participating in the public debate about slavery?

The rigid dichotomy between a (female) private sphere and a (male) public sphere has in the past decades been heavily criticized as an ahistorical model,

15 Upon the translation of Habermas' work in English, a vast amount of criticism was published, which cannot be dealt with here. A comprehensive introduction to the main criticism on Habermas' argument can be found in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge 1992).

16 Janse, *Afschaffers*, 103-105; male criticism in Idem, 'De balanceerkunst van het afschaffen. Maatschappijhervorming beschouwd vanuit de ambities en de respectabiliteit van de negentiende-eeuwse afschaffer', *De Negentiende Eeuw* 29 (2005) 1 28-44.

and recently, civil society has been favored by some historians as a more nuanced and more inclusive historical perspective.<sup>17</sup> This does not imply that we should stop using the concept of the public sphere – but rather incorporate it into the broader civil society it originated from. Based on the literature that had been published since the early 1990s, Americanist John L. Brooke reinterpreted the public sphere/civil society debate by stressing that deliberation in the public sphere was thoroughly influenced by persuasion from outside that sphere. ‘Formal “rational” deliberation is intermingled in the public sphere with a much more pervasive informal, cultural persuasion [which] involves both tacit consent and the various forms of cultural dissent.’<sup>18</sup> This means that those excluded from the franchise or from public debate in general could nevertheless successfully challenge the political decision-making process. In fact, in the long run, persuasive politics were also successful in the sense that they were incorporated into the political process: ‘Women’s exclusion from deliberation meant that they constructed an entire politics of reform in the persuasive domain, a politics that was gradually inserted into the deliberative domain.’<sup>19</sup>

In the history of the expansion of access to the public sphere and the political decision-making process, the fundamental difference between the public sphere perspective and the civil society perspective once more becomes clear. The history of the public sphere is mainly concerned with the quality and structural transformation of public discourse, and the ‘decline in quality of rational-critical discourse’ that was the result of increasingly larger numbers of people participating in public debates. This led Habermas to present the structural transformation of the public sphere as a story of decline.<sup>20</sup> To put it simply, the participation of crowds changed politics and public life for the worse.

Seen from the perspective of the history of women, members of the working classes, or ethnic and religious minorities, there is a history to be told that is diametrically opposed to that of the *Structural Transformation*. The history of ‘the ascension of women into politics’, and of the surprising fact that orthodox Protestants and Catholics gained political power after decades of liberal domination, or the socialist movement, all begin in the 1870s and 1880s, the very years that were in Habermas’ account marked by the collapse of the public sphere.<sup>21</sup> A history of civil society is not a story of decline, but one of expansion, democratization and politicization. It is possible to do justice to all ‘practitioners of civil society’, instead of just focusing on the mainly white, Protes-

17 The Spring 2008 issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic*, is a special issue on ‘Women and Civil Society’, in which several contributions make the case that women associating in literary and debating societies can be regarded a civil society phenomenon. Goodman, ‘Public Sphere’ argues that Habermas’ account is far more nuanced than he is given credit for.

18 Brooke, ‘Consent, Civil Society’, 228–229.

19 Ibidem, 234. For a similar incorporation of persuasive politics into the political process in the Netherlands, see my *Afschaffers*.

20 Calhoun, ‘Public Sphere/Civil Society’, 1900.

21 Mary P. Ryan, ‘Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth-Century America’, in: Calhoun, *Habermas*, 259–288, 262.

*Afb. 1 This photograph of the 1905 congress of the Dutch Social Democratic Workers' Party reveals that the organizing practices of the Social Democrats were deeply influenced by the bourgeois culture they despised in other respects.*



tant, middle-class men who succeeded in gaining access to the public sphere early on.

This is not to argue that during the nineteenth century civil society encompassed everyone. Who was considered 'civil' enough to be included varied from person to person and from period to period, but generally speaking, slaves and indigenous people in the colonies were excluded, as well as paupers, convicts, members of the working class and of the lower middle class, and children. For some of them there was hope of being included one day, which required some effort – some education, proper, 'civil' behavior, acceptance of rules and regulations, and of the rhetoric of the general good over selfish interests.

But gaining access to civil society through respectable and civil behavior was far easier than being recognized as suited for participation in political debates, although such behavior was a prerequisite for the latter. Organizing, that is creating a group, formulating a common goal, regulating proceedings (often following democratic practices) and publicizing proceedings, can be regarded as a public manifestation that constitutes membership of civil society. This was, of course, contested – civil society, like the public sphere, is a site of contestation. But the very fact that people formally excluded from processes of policy-making could organize implied they did have some freedom to influence that decision-making process from without through persuasion. Membership of an organization constituted a public presence that was difficult to ignore.

## II Hoffmann's *Civil Society*

*Civil Society: 1750-1914* by German historian Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann is a remarkable achievement. The slim volume offers a transnational history of the practices of civil society as well as an overview of the historical and contemporary debate on the concept. With its extremely valuable Selected Bibliography of over 200 titles, this book is an ideal introduction into the field. Originally



published in 2003, as the slightly more elaborate *Geselligkeit und Demokratie. Vereine und zivile Gesellschaft im transnationalen Vergleich 1750–1914*, the English version (published in 2006) is part of the Palgrave series *Studies in European History*, which aims to present the ‘state of debate’ for students.<sup>22</sup> Its conciseness and helicopter view of the history of civil society in the long nineteenth century make Hoffman’s work a valuable starting point for anyone interested in learning more about civil society and processes of democratization.

But it offers more than just that. Its transnational character, comprising examples from the United States and Europe, including the oft-neglected Eastern European countries, opens up a new perspective on civil society. The older historiography mainly focused on national divergences in the outcomes of the political process, which led to the development of different literatures. American and British Scholars, who ‘saw their countries in an unbroken liberal tradition, attributed paramount importance to their history of voluntary associations as evidence of that continuing liberal tradition’ (45). In Germany, on the other hand, the failure of liberalism was explained by the absence of a viable civil society and the decline of the public sphere. Whatever associational life scholars encountered was labelled as weak and irrelevant because it had failed to ward off catastrophe. Eastern European countries were thought to lack civil society because the middle classes had not developed as in other parts of the world – and middle class and civil society were long thought to presuppose each other. And as far as France is concerned, Tocqueville’s assertion that, in contrast to the United States, in France no associational life of any significance existed had long convinced scholars to look no further.

Still, historians of all those different continental European countries have in the past decades found many traces of associational cultures much more vibrant than had commonly been thought. By bringing together the results of different national and political traditions, Hoffmann now is able to show that the extent to which similar types of organizations and similar motives for organizing can be found under very different circumstances, is ‘astonishing’, as is the enthusiasm for organizing occurring simultaneously in all these countries (46). He is interested in ‘the entanglement between nations, not the differences that were of obsessive interest for nationalists in the last two centuries; in the contingent outcomes of this process, and not the construction of a “normal” Western path to modernity’ (7).

In this book, we can discern three clusters of countries that started to appreciate civil society as a historical phenomenon at different times: the United States and United Kingdom, with their proud liberal traditions, have an abundant literature on the subject of civil society (in the British case, its development of an associational culture is at least 50 years ahead of other countries);

<sup>22</sup> Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Geselligkeit und Demokratie. Vereine und zivile Gesellschaft im transnationalen Vergleich 1750–1914* (Göttingen 2003); Idem, *Civil Society, 1750–1914* (Basingstoke, New York 2006). Page numbers refer to the English edition.

then Germany and France, long thought to have lacked a associational culture, and, hence, civil society, an argument that historians have challenged since the 1970s; and Eastern European countries, with the legacy of the Habsburg and Russian Empires, where only since the 1990s has a literature developed in which a civil society without democracy is made visible. It is this post-Cold War perspective that challenges the idea that there can be no civil society without a middle class, American exceptionalism, and more generally the notion that Western and Eastern Europe are fundamentally different. Thus seen, the similar intellectual and cultural origins are as striking as are the different political effects.

Hoffmann does not provide his readers with a definition of civil society, a concept he acknowledges is contested in current political theory. He concentrates on 'associative sociability, the one element that most political theorists agree is essential for civil society and which ... was at the heart of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political discourse' (8). The types of associations are somewhat vaguely described as groups pursuing sociability and 'civic' imperatives. Political and commercial associations are not included. However understandable – as it is, this book is already a brave attempt to tackle a gigantic subject and vast literature – the exclusion of political organizations is especially disappointing: the development of political organizations was intimately related to the development of moral reform.

Throughout the book the author stresses the relevance of seemingly apolitical organizations for the development of political life: even those solely aimed at sociability had a democratizing effect (87). The book can hardly be accused of disregarding political life – which is at the centre of the analysis. This analysis, however, would have gained from including the development of mass political parties that were often inspired by the surging popularity of organizing in general and, together with single-issue pressure groups, deeply influenced political life.<sup>23</sup> Antislavery and temperance movements are only briefly discussed, as examples of moral reform movements, but the book does not do justice to the fact that they (partly) developed into political movements and played a pivotal role in the politicization of society.

Because civil society is a paradoxical phenomenon, characterized by demands for participation as well as many forms of exclusion, Hoffmann emphasizes the tension between civil society and its democratic practice. This highlights once more the limits of liberalism, its innate elitism and its insistence that democracy is dangerous. In the historical analysis of the development of civil society, Hoffmann places special emphasis on the rise of nationalism, which promised more political participation by eroding traditional social boundaries,

<sup>23</sup> Examples of interaction between (reform) societies and political parties include Daniel Walker Howe, 'The Evangelical Movement and Political Culture in the North during the Second Party System', *The Journal of American History* (March 1991) 1216-1239, 1223-1224; Janse, *De Afschaffers*, ch. 6; D.A. Hamer, *The politics of Electoral Pressure: A study in the history of Victorian Reform Agitations* (Hassocks 1977).

but at the same time created new political divisions, especially those between different ethnic groups. However, he insists that in a historical approach, nationalism should be depicted as ‘neither “civilized” nor “barbaric”, “modern” nor “backward”, but bound to the history of civil society’ (10).

Following Philip Nord’s periodisation, the historical narrative is divided into four time periods, or rather four waves of enthusiasm for organizing: the 1770s and 1780s; 1820–1848; the 1860s and 1870s, and the period from 1890–1914.<sup>24</sup> The first chapter on Enlightenment sociability shows how the existing practice of organizing acquired political significance. Under the influence of Enlightenment ideas of the importance of self-fashioning, virtue, fraternity and equality, societies challenged and transcended traditional boundaries, and implicitly criticized the old corporate order and the old regime. People felt attracted to Masonic lodges, reading societies or (in England from the 1780s onwards) societies for social and moral reform, because they provided a safe, delineated space to experiment with exciting notions such as equality. This did not mean that they were harbingers of democracy, sites of political radicalism, or that anyone who wanted to was welcome to join (membership was often controlled by introduction and secret ballot). Rather, ‘By inventing “the social” as a distinct sphere separate from politics and absolutist hierarchy, enlightened sociable society could enjoy the theatre of equality with its tone of transgression and excitement, without seeking to undermine the existing political order’ (22–23).

In continental Europe, in the years leading up to the French Revolution, enlightened sociability suffered a crisis because of its politicization. Most French lodges, Academies and reading circles were closed after 1789, and in 1795 all political clubs were banned, including the Jacobin clubs. It is telling that the Declaration of the Rights of Man did not include the right to free association. For decades to come, the egalitarianism of enlightened sociability would be associated with revolution, and political clubs with the Terror that followed. In his conclusion to this first part, Hoffmann suggests that the birth of civil society was in some ways the unintended by-product of the ideas, discourses and social practices of the Enlightenment – the irony being that the practitioners of enlightenment sociability were in fact representatives of the old regime. In his analysis, following Margaret Jacob, he places special emphasis on Freemasonry as the birthplace of political modernity.

The second period is the so-called ‘golden age’ of voluntary associations: the surging popularity of organizing in the three decades before the revolutions of 1848–9. A new type of association developed out of enlightened sociability. Against the traditional view of intellectual history, Hoffmann stresses the strong historical continuity between classical republicanism and enlightened liberalism. This new type of voluntary organization did not replace the older forms of enlightened sociability; they existed alongside each other. Organizational goals

<sup>24</sup> Philip Nord, ‘Introduction’, in: Idem and Nancy Bermeo (eds.), *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York etc. 2000) xiii–xxxiii.

were typically charity, social, moral, and religious reform, promoting culture or the economy. Associations predominantly consisted of members of the middle class, but an important factor in their growing popularity was their ability to bring the old and new elites together, and promote social harmony instead of conflict. Again, 'these bourgeois organizations were egalitarian with respect to their members, but elitist with respect to the outside world' (31-32).

Earlier, Carol Harrison's important study of the notion of emulation had explained that this paradoxical combination of egalitarianism and exclusion 'enabled bourgeois men of the post-revolutionary era to reconcile the older notions of civic equality with the new desire for social order' (32). Clubs furthermore offered amusement in a socially respectable context and provided relief from conflicts in career, family, and politics. They were sites of a shared male gender identity and civic virtue, that often functioned as an alternative to the criticized class-based society.

Class, gender, race and religion defined participation in this associational culture. The excluded founded their own organizations, and emulated in turn the example of middle-class associational life. Jewish, African-American, and working-class organizations were sites where the (formerly) excluded claimed that they, too, deserved recognition as members of civil society. Friendly societies or mutual aid societies – extremely popular amongst the black community of Philadelphia in the 1830s and 1840s – proved their members' self-sufficiency and economic independence; libraries, reading societies, and debating clubs gave evidence of their willingness to learn and become educated members of society. Hoffmann follows the argument of Maurice Agulhon about France, when he claims that the politicization of continental European society in the 1830s and 1840s took place essentially in voluntary associations and circles. Both for liberals and socialists, organizing became associated with the advancement of a better society. Thus in 1848, in contrast to 1789, freedom of association was one of the most important demands. State surveillance of associational life followed upon the defeat of the Revolutions.

Some years later, the decades of the 1860s and 1870s saw another, even more forceful explosion in the number of organizations. Again, the incredible spread and gradual liberalization of associational life typical of this period can be discerned 50 years earlier in the case of England. This growth was closely connected to the rise of the nation as a political entity and the political invention of nationalism. Organizations based on the presumption that they represented the nation were less socially exclusive and promised prospective members more political participation. The press and the public sphere in general became more accessible for citizens. But an example from Hungary shows that in the early 1860s, societies that had previously united Czechs, Germans, and Hungarians separated and multiplied along 'ethnic' lines. (53) Their members had earlier fostered allegiances other than their ethnicity, and Hoffmann rightly observes that, 'As in Western Europe, the nationalism of the 1860s and 1870s was not a return to a lost identity but a new political invention.' (55)

Typical organizations of these decades include gymnastics clubs and working men's clubs aimed at moral improvement. Both are instances of apolitical organizations that clearly had political aspects and implications. Working men's associations claimed to promote moral improvement, which was supported by the staging of respectability through dress and behavior. The political implication was that moral improvement was regarded as a precondition for civic and, hence, political engagement. The rise of the German and French gymnastics movement was linked to militarism and war. The disciplining force of physical exercise was thought to provide moral education. As a German contemporary put it in a speech at a gymnastics competition in 1865, 'Associations constitute a preparatory school for *Bürgertum*.'

Freemasonry struggled with the rise of the nation state. The universalism of the 'moral International' was tested in the interactions of German, American and French Masons: the French and Germans demanded that the Americans treat the 'Negro lodges' equally, while the French criticized the Germans for excluding Jews from membership. Both the Americans and Germans repudiated the French for their strictly secular version of Freemasonry – their own rituals and language were strongly colored by Protestantism.

The fourth surge can be identified from 1890 to 1910, when '[h]ardly a segment of civil society was left untouched by this final transnational "club mania".' (61) At the same time, however, especially among liberals the enthusiasm for civic associations was fading. Now that everybody was organizing, voluntary associations lost their exclusivity. Mass culture and leisure were often organized into associations, as was the case with cinema, sports clubs, and Boy Scouts. Catholics frantically started to organize, and political life was structured by mass political parties, rather than political debate among individual citizens.

Even in Russia and Austria-Hungary a passion for organizing manifested itself. In Russia as early as the 1860s and 1870s, charity and social reform organizations blossomed and several middle-class clubs prospered, and around the turn of the century organized protests against alcoholism and prostitution as well as the Esperanto club and vegetarian society that could be found everywhere else could operate freely. Thanks to the understaffing of the Russian bureaucracy, in practice there was a large degree of freedom of association. In France and Germany freedom of association was not guaranteed by law until 1901 and 1908, respectively, reflecting the fears of 'uncivil' elements in society.

For many immigrants, ethnic organizations made them think of themselves in ethnic terms for the first time. In due time, certain types of immigrant organizations were exported back to the homeland, the same way other associational forms spread and were transferred to other countries. Together with the unprecedented number of international organizations and federations they underscored the internationalism of the time. Paradoxically, this internationalism was founded in a rampant nationalism, which in its turn fed the ethnic chauvinism, as well as the mass democracy and mass politics of the times. The level of

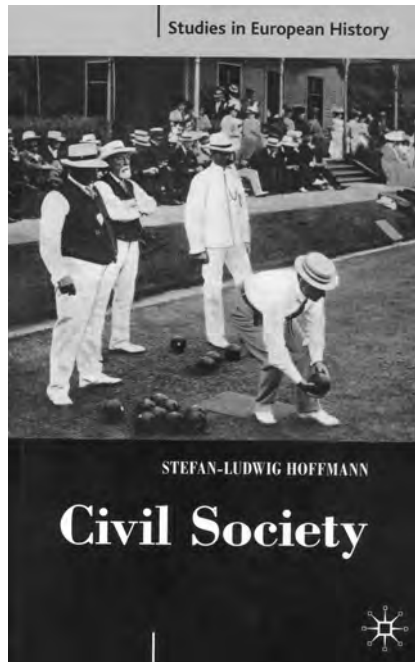
participation and democracy in society rose, while the same process increased the antagonism and widened political divisions.

Liberals feared they might lose their claim to moral and political leadership. A new criticism of associative sociability arose, which openly doubted the values and the functioning of civil society. The most extreme expression of this criticism came from Nietzsche, who believed that true virtue could not be acquired through social interaction, but, on the contrary, could only be developed in isolation and through individualism. Hoffmann ends his book with a glance into twentieth century, in which 'the state, special interest groups, and the media increasingly shaped the public sphere' (82) and people started once more longing for the lost ideals of civic virtue and civil society. In the end, liberalism was defeated by its own success. The expansion, democratization and politicization of civil society – according to Hoffmann the three main trends in its history – had led to a democratic pluralism that threatened liberal dominance. Once again, the history of civil society underlines the tension between liberalism and democracy.

### III The Dutch case: how do we compare?

For those who know their Dutch nineteenth-century history, Hoffmann's history will sound familiar. And indeed, the existing historical overviews of Dutch associational life and civil society generally give an account structured similarly to Hoffmann's.<sup>25</sup> To quote De Vries' 'hypothetical outline':

Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century associations functioned mainly as a unifying element in Dutch society. They contributed to an open civil society with a public sphere, to the spread of enlightened ideas, democratic practices and the development of national identity (...) Membership of voluntary associations was inclusive and based on egalitarian principles (...) After c. 1870 the role of voluntary societies changed markedly. National unity was taken for granted and new groups wanted to participate in civil society. Voluntary societies were one of



*Afb. 2 The illustration on the book cover of the English version of Hoffmann's book shows a bowling club, in a reference to Robert Putnam's famous book Bowling Alone, on the decline of associational life in the twentieth century.*

the means by which Catholics, orthodox Protestants and socialists, mostly from lower middle-class origins, shaped their own identities in opposition to the dominating liberalism of the bourgeoisie (...) From a unifying force around 1800, by the early twentieth century Dutch voluntary associations had changed into political and cultural organizations that articulated religious antagonisms in the social order.<sup>26</sup>

It will not come as a surprise that time and again special emphasis is placed on the 'verzuiling' or 'pillarization' of Dutch society, which was to a large extent supported and made possible by a highly differentiated and dense associational life. The older notion that the process of pillarization reflected existing groups in society, which were only now 'emancipated' from liberal dominance, has in recent years been challenged. This group identity was to a large extent shaped in associational life, in much the same way the ethnic identity of citizens of the Habsburg Empire became a decisive force only from the 1870s onwards. The suggestion to interpret the different pillars as 'etni's' is not new and can, for example, be found in the work of Hans Knippenberg.<sup>27</sup> The international literature on the 'ethnicization' of civil society, that Hoffmann makes use of, invites us to rethink pillarization, and ponder the question whether this was really such a unique phenomenon.

It is not a straightforward task to place the Netherlands in one of the three clusters of countries described by Hoffmann, as it seems that Dutch civil society can be positioned somewhere in between the Anglo-American and French-German experiences. On the one hand, like Britain and the United States, it has a longstanding tradition of free development of civil society, without infringement by the state, as both De Vries and Nijhuis point out.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, for most of the nineteenth century there was a great reluctance to engage in political organization, and civic virtues were often interpreted in cultural terms, as was the case with Germany.<sup>29</sup>

25 De Vries, 'Voluntary Societies' or Idem, 'Eeuw vol gezelligheid'; Thomas Ertman, 'Liberalization, Democratization, and the Origins of a "Pillarized" Civil Society in nineteenth-century Belgium and the Netherlands', Bermeo and Nord, *Civil Society before Democracy*, 155-178; Ton Nijhuis, 'So nah - so fern: Das Verhältnis von Staat und Zivilgesellschaft in den Niederlanden im Vergleich zu Deutschland', in: M. Hildermeier, J. Kocka, Chr. Conrad (eds.), *Europäische Zivilgesellschaft in Ost und West. Begriff, Geschichte, Chancen* (Frankfurt am Main 2000) 219-244.

26 De Vries, 'Voluntary Societies', 104.

27 Hans Knippenberg, 'National integration and growing ethnicity among Dutch Roman Catholics and Protestants in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The impact of education', *The Netherlands' Journal of Social Sciences* 35 (1999) 37-52. See also Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1570-1990* (Amsterdam 1996).

28 De Vries, 'Voluntary Societies', 116; Nijhuis, 'So nah, so fern', esp. 226-233.

29 Jansse, *De Afschaffers*; See also Te Velde's remarks in his contribution to this issue.

#### IV Writing a history of civil society

In 2006 British historian Robert Morris, who has written extensively on middle-class associational culture, observed that historical approaches have tended to focus on the intellectual genealogy of the concept, and he urged fellow historians to write a history of the practice of civil society. Earlier he wrote: ‘Civil Society as presented in the current literature seems to be a *concept*, normative, descriptive, and analytical, but it is not yet at least a *narrative*. Civil society does not seem to have acquired a stages theory like the 1960s account of “economic growth”’.<sup>30</sup> Building on Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord’s *Civil Society before Democracy*, Stefan Hoffmann’s *Civil Society* has provided such a framework.

But an issue that was brought up earlier as part of the reason historians might be wary of using this concept still stands. Can historians study the history of civil society in their own words, and without participating in political science debates? Because of its ‘double life’ as a normative concept and a social reality, we cannot reify civil society to mean ‘all associations and non-state institutions together’ and simply write a history of those groups. The historical development of civil society can only be understood when we take contemporaries’ conceptions into account. Hoffmann’s valuable book once more underscores that there was an awareness of and reflection on the values of civil society among the ‘practitioners of civil society’. How can historians take that notion one or two steps further?

While political scientists, traditionally preoccupied with democratization processes, bring democracy to the fore in civil society research, historians would ask: did contemporaries really care about democracy when they were organizing? While reading *Civil Society*, I kept wondering whether a history of the practice and the conception of civil society and of voluntary associating could be written without focusing on the political and moral philosophy of sociability that came naturally to thinkers like Tocqueville, but might not have been so widespread after all. A historian would ask: is there perhaps too much Tocqueville in the debate on civil society? What does Tocqueville have to do with the thoughts and actions of, let us call them ‘ordinary’ people in the nineteenth century – the middle-class men and women who were crazy about founding and joining organizations?

What is the relationship between the practice of organizing and the moral philosophy and history of political thought? Can the remarkable similarities in the development of civil society be explained by the philosophical ideas stemming from the tradition of enlightened liberalism? Exactly to what extent were these ideas disseminated and popularised? How did they influence people who were themselves not familiar with these ideas? Associational life and the pro-

30 R.J. Morris, ‘Introduction: Civil Society and Associations in the Nineteenth Century Urban Place: Class, Nation and Culture’, in: Idem, De Vries and Morton, *Civil Society*, 1-16; Idem, ‘Civil Society, Subscriber Democracies, and Parliamentary Government in Great Britain’, Bermeo and Nord, *Civil Society before Democracy*, 111-134, 115.



cess of democratization were supported by hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women, most of whom had never rigorously considered concepts such as democracy and civil society, but had, on the other hand, clear cut ideas about organizing, good politics and desirable social change. This calls for a new history of civil society, which focuses specifically on popular conceptions of organizing, voluntary organizations, participation in the political process, and issues of inclusion and exclusion. In some ways history of mentalities more than intellectual history, this type of history would not only add another perspective to the study of civil society, but also show civil society as a 'normal' historical subject.

Sources for this type of history are harder to find: unlike Tocqueville, 'ordinary' practitioners of civil society did not usually publish their observations of democracy and associating in two volumes. I would like to suggest three ways to unearth their perspectives on civil society through their views on organizing and organizing behavior. First, how do people speak of their own organization? The traditional sources for associational history (organizational archives and/or publications of the organization itself) offer plenty of material to answer such questions as: what do the founders and members expect from their organization? What metaphors do they use for it? How did founding or joining an organization change their conceptions of themselves and their relation to society at large?

Second, how do outsiders or opponents speak of organizations? Do they refer to them as dangerous, impertinent, ridiculous, disgraceful? Do they criticize their members for not behaving respectably or violating regulations? Such comments would all be valuable information about the perception of organizing and of the (often unspoken) rules of civil society. Sources like this are harder to find, but newspapers and periodicals hold innumerable – often critical – editorial remarks on the founding of new voluntary associations or comments added to meeting reports. The slow but steady digitization of these types of sources means that such information is becoming more readily available, and delving into them in pursuit of outsiders' comments could prove a promising research strategy.

The third is the most elusive: taking a step back to observe, as it were, the organizations themselves and look for changes in their behavior over time. To give just one example to illustrate this last point: American historian Mary Ryan reconstructed from newspaper reports the way nineteenth-century American 4<sup>th</sup> of July parades were organized. In their public performance of their 'civic ceremony', the participants represented the 'ideal pattern of social life' and presented how they saw themselves in a social context, its major classifications and categories. Strikingly, these classifications changed dramatically from 1825 to 1880. From 1825 to 1850, corporate groups based primarily on occupation marched in hierarchical order. The urban elite led the parade, and the different trades followed, in order of the status allocated to their specific occupation. From 1850 to 1870, the parades were organized along the lines of

different voluntary associations, such as fraternal orders, militia companies, temperance associations and benefit societies. From the multiple identities the actors of civil society could choose from – class, ethnicity, occupation – they chose to participate in the public event as members of their ‘civic societies’. By the late 1870s the participants adhered to yet another organizational principle. As Ryan puts it, ‘By 1876, (...) the American parade had apparently become an ethnic festival’. Native-born Anglo-Saxons, as well as elite groups, ceased to participate.<sup>31</sup> Ryan does not only suggest that the voluntary associations were important tools for the reorganization of the social order – the middle period in her analysis being a transitional phase from a corporate to an ‘ethnic’, pluralist social order –, but has also successfully written a narrative of the transformation of civil society without theoretical tools borrowed from political science.

Historians who study associational life should be aware of the political science debate on the *concept* of civil society, but need not participate in that highly theoretical debate in order to write a history of civil society. In the tradition of the liberal *juste milieu*, historians should teach their inner rattlesnakes some self-restraint, so that they neither swallow whole nor kill anything that even remotely looks like theory, but instead train them to sniff, try a little, and use moderately, as much as needed.

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31 Mary P. Ryan, ‘The American parade. Representation of the Nineteenth-Century social order’ in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The new cultural history* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1989) 131–153.