Reading societies, political culture and public discourse

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Reading societies were social inventions of the 18th century that played an important role in the cultural process of modernization. Like other societies founded in the spirit of the Enlightenment, they were nonprofit organizations, had a democratic structure and pursued an educational goal: as their name makes explicit, they promoted reading. They built up libraries, circulated journals and often had reading rooms with newspapers. In the politically turbulent times of the 19th century, they were the location where political discussions and debates took place. Habermas (1989) states that the *reading societies constituted the bourgeois public sphere.* And he points out the contradiction between the liberal public sphere's constitutive catalogue of "basic rights of man" and their de facto restriction to a certain class of men. Indeed, access and membership were strictly regulated, and until the end of the 19th century restricted above all to male bourgeois. In the second half of the 19th century reading societies for lower class people emerged, but women were only admitted in the course of the 20th century.

Crucial for the further fate of reading societies was *the social-structural transformation of the public sphere*, as Habermas (1989) describes it in great detail in his famous book. Political debate moved to political parties whose organizational form proved to be more efficient on a national level than local reading societies, and journals and newspapers were complemented by new media, first radio, later TV and nowadays the internet with blogs, forums and social networks. In the course of this development, most reading societies either died or restricted their function to cultural and social activities (like providing literature and organizing cultural events and festivities). Nevertheless, there exist reading societies that still act as political organizations, discussing referendums, political initiatives and sometimes issuing recommendations for referendums and elections.

In this essay I shall firstly describe reading societies as carriers of the modernization process and as new social forms of association, secondly reconstruct the social history of a renowned local reading society in a middle-sized Swiss town, and thirdly report on my latest research on reading societies that are still politically active and thereby still co-constitute the public discourse.

1. Emergence of reading societies in the 18th century

1.1. Reading societies as carriers of the modernization process

Reading and writing have penetrated nearly all the realms of modern society. These practices have become so common that it is difficult nowadays to grasp how fundamental the cultural change was that took place during the past few centuries. Up to the high Middle Ages reading and writing were a privilege of the clergy. Ordinary people communicated orally. As a consequence, much of the lived culture was passed on to the next generation by oral tradition. Only gradually did a culture of reading emerge throughout the society. The invention of printing paved the way for new forms of literature, and the expansion of education advanced literacy. More and more social areas required paper work: the public administration, the administration of justice, bookkeeping, science and literature. Finally, during the Age of Enlightenment, reading became an activity of leisure, too (cf. Dann 1981a: 9).

During the 18th century, a significant change in the style of reading happened: a change from an

intensive, repetitive reading of the same few publications (particularly the bible, religious publications and calendars) to an extensive reading of new information (Engelsing 1970). The soaring middle-class, the economic and educational elite, was oriented towards the sciences and arts and demanded more and more information about all areas of knowledge and social life. This thirst for knowledge exceeded the potential of oral communication – written communication became a new social ideal (Engelsing 1974: 216ff.; Dann 1981a: 13).

The change in reading-styles was paralleled by a change in the structure of literary production. The book-market adapted to the demands of the new reading classes: In the course of the 18th century Latin, the language of the scholars, was thrust aside by the national languages (English, German, French, Italian, Spanish etc.), and theological literature was replaced by books that provided entertainment and general knowledge. An even more fundamental change was introduced by two new print products: journals and newspapers. Both set up new standards for written information and had an explosive quantitative growth in the second half of the 18th century – journals for a specialized audience and newspapers for a general audience (Dann 1981a: 15).

The reading societies were one important element in the social organization of this cultural change. Their primary goal was to motivate people to read and to provide them with literature. Reading societies were a cultural invention of the 18th century and emerged throughout Europe in increasing numbers. In Germany alone, historical research found more than 600 reading societies in the 18th century (Prüsener 1973; Reckmann/Dann 1978). The term "Reading Society" first showed up in 1770 (Prüsener 1973: 384) and figures as a key word in an encyclopedia already in 1790: "Reading Society, is a number of persons who have associated in order to read certain books and publications" (Krünitz 1790: 278). Presumably, the financial advantage was an important motive for forming such associations, as the prices of books and journals at the time were for most readers too high to afford (Stützel-Prüsener 1981: 72). Such readers' associations had manifold forms and different labels. But all of them had the same fundamental purpose: to make people read. And all of them pursued an educational goal: to spark people's interest in "good" literature, in scientific knowledge and in general information about what was going on in the world (Engelsing 1974: 216ff.; Dann 1981a: 13). In this sense, reading societies were – to use a term of Max Weber – "carriers" of the modernization process, "carriers" of a cultural change that is often overlooked by focusing only on the technical and economic side of modernization.

1.2. Societies as new social forms

Historical research in Switzerland and Germany (which started to investigate reading societies only since the 1970s)[1] views reading societies as part of the vast society-movement that unfolded above all in the second half of the 18th century (cf. Im Hof 1982). At the end of the century the whole of Europe – in particular France, Switzerland, Germany and Northern Italy – as well as European America were covered by hundreds of societies. Academies, scholarly and literary societies, reading cabinets, charitable, economic, agricultural and patriotic-political societies as well as freemason's lodges were founded everywhere. These societies represented new social forms in the spirit of the Enlightenment: They were oriented toward the future, and their objectives were to improve and reform given states of affairs; they were based on voluntariness, co-determination and joint responsibility; they had a republican organization and formed a new social stratum between the old classes. All these societies then can be characterized by two criteria: Firstly, they had a formal structure; thus they are to be differentiated from informal, unorganized associations, as the French "salons", the English "clubs" or the German "Zirkel" (circles) of all sorts. Secondly, they have to be distinguished from all religious communities, orders or brotherhoods: those were lacking voluntariness and served another world-view than the Enlightenment (ibid.).

Accordingly, historical research draws two distinctions: between reading societies and informal readers' associations (Dann 1981a) on the one hand, and the reading societies of the Enlightenment and those of the past on the other hand (Weisz 1934). The informal readers' associations or readers' circles, although serving the same goal of buying and circulating books, journals and newspapers, had no documented organizational structure. Over the years, thousands have been founded and dissolved within short periods of time, leaving no written testimony. In contrast, the reading societies were institutions with a clear, formal structure which in principle allowed them to exist longer than one person's life-span. In addition, historical research also draws a distinction between the reading societies of the Enlightenment and the literary societies of the past. These were institutions with formal structures as well but they were esoteric societies of the upper class, of aristocracy and clergy, lacking a democratic orientation and organization (cf. Milstein 1972).

Comparative studies show that the objectives and formal structure of the new, democratic reading societies were very much alike (Prüsener 1973). The goals typically were providing literature and organizing social and cultural events for their members. To this purpose they usually maintained a library with books, a reading room with newspapers and journals, and often additional rooms for gatherings, lectures and social events. How these services, the general management tasks and the democratic control were best organized, was intensely discussed and put down in formal rules. In the founding era, the second half of the 18th century, these organizing processes were very lively and an interesting topic for research:[2] At every general assembly established rules were confirmed, modified, replaced or complemented by new ones. The reading societies of the 19th century built on the collected experiences and usually copied a great deal of the rules of former societies. In the course of time, the typical formal structures had been developed which nowadays still are constitutive of societies and other formal associations: A managing committee with a president or chair and other members who had specialized functions (like a vice-president, a treasurer, a secretary, a librarian etc.), financial revisers and a general assembly of the members which elected the persons into these functions, determined the by-laws and controlled the proper course of affairs.

Reading societies were thus carriers of the modernization process in two ways: They did not only spread the ideals of reading and of acquiring knowledge but also represented – together with other organizations[3] – new social formations in which democratic behaviors were trained and practiced on a local, organizational level. In states with a feudal structure, such democratic practices were rather revolutionary; not surprisingly, aristocratic authorities often censored or even prohibited reading societies (cf. Prüsener 1973).

2. The Museum Society: a case study of a Swiss reading society

What was life inside these organizations like? In spite of their resemblance in regard to their programmatic goals, their legal structure and their formal procedures, each reading society developed a specific, complex organizational structure. The following case study deals with the Museum Society in St. Gallen, a middle-sized Swiss town with about 70,000 inhabitants (plus agglomeration). There existed several reading societies in town, but only two of them were of major importance: the Büsch Society (1836-1980) and the Museum Society (1856-1974; its main predecessor, the Literary Society, was founded in 1789). The Büsch Society was a reading society for the lower classes, the Museum Society a reading society for the upper classes. For my case study the latter was selected because most historical documents of the Museum Society have been preserved – in contrast to the Büsch-Society – which allows to reconstruct its organizational life in more detail. I will reconstruct the historical development of the Museum Society along some cultural contrasts with the organization.

2.1. Research methodology

How to study the organizational culture of a reading society? From an anthropological standpoint all the experiences, views and activities of the members in their local, temporal and spatial arrangements and in their material surroundings have to be examined. The definition of organizational culture must not be restricted to "a pattern of basic assumptions" of a given group "taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel" (Schein 1985: 9) or to the informal aspects of an organization, like myths, stories or special jargon (Jelinek et al. 1983). Reading societies represent an instructive example that the notion of organizational culture must also include the formal aspects of an organization:[4] All these societies had a conspicuous inclination to formalize and institutionalize nearly every aspect of the society's life. The by-laws regulated the conditions of becoming a member, its rights and duties, the conditions of leaving or expulsion; the tasks of the managing committee and the auditors as well as the mode of their election; the procedures of making suggestions and referendums; the rules of borrowing books and circulating journals; and even norms for all kinds of members' behaviors (where and when to speak or not to speak, to smoke or not to smoke, in which rooms women were allowed and in which only men, how to be disciplined when coming late to a meeting, how to handle the different kinds of publications, how misbehavior was punished and by whom, etc.). Thus the by-laws inform us, beyond the generally uniform structures, about many cultural specifics of a society, too.

An organization does not have a culture, it is a culture. And ethnography is the most promising method to investigate it in all its complexity. However, ethnographic fieldwork is bound to the present[5] – past cultures are the object of historical research. Most reading societies, including the one of this case study, do not exist anymore: They are past cultural realities which cannot be entered anymore, which cannot be experienced in any direct way. They have to be reconstructed on the basis of all sorts of objectivations[6] that have been preserved. Fortunately, the reading societies not only fostered reading, they also practiced writing: Many aspects of a society's life were documented in writing – there were not only the by-laws, the library decree or the bookkeeping, but also the minutes of the managing committee, the proceedings of the general assembly, the annual reports of the presidents, a members' and a visitors' book, correspondence and other documents. In addition, some members wrote a review of the society's history on the occasion of a society's "big" anniversary (like the 10th, 25th, 50th, 100th, 150th...). Each reading society, in other words, created its own little "symbolic universe" which documents the society's specific history. If preserved – much was lost![7] – these documents are a rich resource for historical analysis, much richer than the personal memory of people who try to remember what happened many years ago.[8]

In the case of the Museum Society in St. Gallen nearly all the documents ever written seem to have been preserved. When it was dissolved in 1974, the documents were handed over to the state library. An early president wrote the history of the first 15 years plus that of its forerunners (Linden 1871), another one the history of the first 58 years (Seiler 1914). Ample information can be found in the annual reports by the presidents, the by-laws and the library-decree. There are also guest-books, legal documents, correspondence, etc., and even some furniture of the former reading room is left. Interestingly enough, there are no minutes of the committee's meetings nor proceedings of the general assembly (except for the final years 1965-1974). It seems that, in contrast to other reading societes, they were simply not produced. To grasp some key aspects of the society's life, we have to concentrate on the annual reports[9] by the presidents and the early historical review by Linden (1871). These materials prove to be detailed enough to reconstruct some essentials of the cultural life as it is reflected in the president’s perspective.

2.2. Contrast between literary objectives and the goal of social entertainment

2.2.1. Merger of three forerunner societies

The Museum Society in St. Gallen was founded in 1856. There is no hint whatsoever why the founding fathers chose this name. Read nowadays, the name may be misleading as the society had nothing to do with a "museum" in the common sense of the word. The name was rather oriented to its ancient origin where Latin *museum* (stemming from Greek "mouseîon") meant "a site for scholarly work; library; academy" (Herkunftswörterbuch 1989: 475). Several other reading societies were named "Museum Society" before, in Switzerland as well as in Germany.[10] The goals of the Museum Society are described in the first two articles of the by-laws:

> "Art. 1: The Museum Society in St. Gallen has as its purpose the literary and social entertainment of its members.
> Art. 2: To this purpose it maintains reading rooms with journals with a political, entertaining and generally educating contents, a library and adequate rooms and facilities for social entertainment." (By-laws 1856)[11]

These goals are typical of reading societies and can be found in nearly the same wording elsewhere. Although these goals were not changed for more than 100 years,[12] life in the Museum Society changed quite a lot over time. The first decades were shaped by the heritage of the merger. The Museum Society was not a new foundation but the result of a merger of three locally prominent societies. To understand the cultural contrasts and tensions which developed within the new organization we first must look at the these three forerunners.[13]

The Cercle, often called the Casino, was founded in 1788 as a Society "for pleasant entertainment, as a meeting point of the educated classes, and for the furtherance of good form." (Proceedings 1788-1792) The idea came from young businessmen who were introduced into noble circles of other cities on their business-trips. Like the reading societies, the Cercle was organized as a formal association, in which all major rules were put down in by-laws. The primary goal was not reading but social entertainment. There were some newspapers offered but no journals or books. More popular were card-games and billiard. Gambling however was explicitly prohibited. Membership was restricted to men of high professional and social positions, like businessmen, medical doctors, senior civil servants, and the like. In 1814, the Cercle acquired the old Weavers' House in the heart of the old town, soon called "the Casino". Since then the Cercle gave soirées and balls on a regular basis and rented its hall and other rooms to other societies of the town.

The Literary Society was founded one year after the Cercle, in 1789. Its by-laws are introduced by detailed reflections about the reasons why the individual activity of reading shall be combined with a membership in a society. Among the most important reasons were mentioned: the opportunity to share the feelings and thoughts one had while reading literature; to learn about pieces of literature one did not know yet; to get inspired and more knowledgeable by such discussions and to increase one's appreciation of literature, of ideas, of "the good and the beautiful". In addition, this society had the explicit goal "to bring together citizens of different classes, to raise mutual esteem and love and invigorate trust and solidarity" (by-laws 1816: 3). The Literary Society maintained a library and had about two dozen newspapers and journals in a reading room. It also organized scholarly lectures by members and sometimes by guest-speakers. For a long time, games of all kinds were prohibited; later, some of them were allowed on Sunday afternoons. Since 1814, it had been renting rooms in the house of the Cercle.

The Reading Society To the Sun, in brief the Sun Society, named after the public house where its rooms were located, was founded in 1835 by members of the Literary Society. These had attempted to rejuvenate the Literary Society and to modernize the facilities after the model of the reading societies in Zurich and Geneva (Linden 1871: 35). When they failed, a number of prominent civil servants, lawyers and college professors decided to form a new reading society. Many of them sustained their membership to the Literary Society, others had left and new people joined. Only years later, the new society offered the old one to merge, this time attempting to introduce the reforms from the outside. As they could not find a suitable locality in town, they also asked the Cercle to join the merger. The Cercle refused, and there was no rapprochement between the two reading societies either: the members of the new society called the leading members of the Literary Society "pigtails" (conservatives), while these considered the others disdainfully as "furious radicals". It was the time of the liberal revolution (since 1830), a politically most dramatic period in Switzerland when liberals (so-called radicals) fought against the conservatives for more liberal rights and eventually for a federal state (which was founded 1848). These political debates were obviously reflected in the split-off from the Literary Society and the subsequent relationship between the two fractions. After the negotiations for a reunion failed, the new Sun Society developed into a modern reading society on its own with a well-organized library, several dozen journals and newspapers, and, since 1848, even a billiard facility.

In 1856, the three societies finally merged. This time, the initiative came from the Cercle. It is quite informative to look at the motives for the merger (cf. Linden 1871: 42-50). All three societies had a weak financial base and hoped to create a solid ground by joining forces. But there were diverse interests, too: The two reading societies were still primarily interested in the house owned by the Cercle (where the Literary Society had already been a tenant), with its big hall. The Cercle on the other hand strived for more membership fees after having suffered a sudden and significant loss of members. Indeed, there were a total of 259 members: 61 from the Cercle, 43 from the Literary Society and 155 from the Reading Society to the Sun. Yet, the members of the Cercle were hardly inclined to exchange or complement their goal of cultivated social entertainment with an interest in literature. Therefore, this merger left cultural contrasts and tensions within the Museum Society for decades to come.

2.2.2. Cultural schism: a heritage of the merger

The formal goals, "the literary and social entertainment of its members", seemed to encompass the objectives of all three former societies. However, each organizational culture persisted as a subculture in the new society. In 1871, the president stated that the particularities of the three former societies could still be recognized and that the new members of the Museum Society usually joined one of the subcultures instead of compensating the contrasts (Linden 1871: 53). Presumably, the contrasts between the members of the two former reading societies were an ongoing difference between generations and between conservative vs. progressive convictions. There is no further information available on this issue, and this fact in itself suggests that the two subcultures were not as diverse as to evoke major problems. Much more fundamental – and reported in more detail – was the cultural contrast between these two subcultures and the subculture of the former Cercle. This group of members was not interested in any literary activity but exclusively in social entertainment, as was the goal of their former society. In the first seven years of the Museum Society many lectures were hold, by members as well as by guest-speakers – occasions which may be viewed as combining literary and social entertainment. The members of the former Cercle, however, interpreted the goal of social entertainment quite differently: playing card-games and billiard, having banquets and balls. This was a clear divergence of objectives, which caused a cultural schism in the society and posed a persistent problem for the management.

The schism in the early Museum Society illustrates how informal views prevailed even when they contradicted the formal rules. The former members of the Cercle were still called the "Casino-Gentlemen", regarded as nobler and treated with considerable respect. Although the by-laws determined that every member had equal rights, those who did not belong to this illustrious circle did not venture to enter the saloons where the games were played (Linden 1871: 53). Since 1862 when reading rooms and saloons were separated and located on two different floors of the building, the cultural schism was even more discernible by the spatial separation of the subcultures. The Casino-Gentlemen managed, in other words, to continue their social life among themselves although they had merged with two other societies.

This schism produced a major problem for the managing committee. To ensure a vivid social life, the Museum Society maintained a pub in its house. As many members shied away from using the saloons or did not feel comfortable among the "Casino-people", consumption in the pub was scarce. As a result, profitability was low, the lease-holders often changed, and the managing committee of the Museum Society faced again and again the problems of finding a new pub-keeper and coming to terms with another financial loss. Time and again, longtime president Alfred Linden called on the members to visit the pub more frequently. He also encouraged the members to be more self-conscious toward the Casino-Gentlemen (Linden 1871: 53), but he had obviously little success. Finally, in 1884, he came up with the more radical suggestion to give up the Casino pub for good and thereby to reduce the functions of the society to “a pure Reading Society”. As the Society had a democratic structure, such decisions had to be taken by the general assembly of the members, and here Linden's suggestion met a strong opposition (AR 1884).

Let us consider this in more detail. Alfred Linden was the last secretary of the Sun Society before the merger. In the first year of the Museum Society he had the mandate to organize the society's archive, which meant to raise an inventory and sort out all the files of the three former societies. In the following year he became a member of the managing committee, since 1863 he was vice-president and from 1869-1889 president of the Museum Society. It is owed to him that many of the new society's activities were described. When he became president, he wrote a book on the history of the three former societies and the first fifteen years of the Museum Society. Then he introduced, sanctioned by the general assembly, the tradition that the annual reports by the president were printed and distributed among the members – a tradition which lasted until 1938. (All these reports have been preserved.) Linden was obviously interested in history but also in literature: since 1860 he headed the "literary committee", a sub-committee of the managing committee, like the "economic committee". When elected for president he came in charge of the general management issues but requested to remain head of the literary commission, too.

Interestingly enough, in his annual reports Linden hardly ever mentions literary issues but describes above all managerial problems. His reports are an illustrative account of the typical issues that the managing committee of a society was confronted with at the time: renovating parts of the house, acquiring a new heating system, getting better gas lights and later introducing electricity and telephone, buying decoration material for anniversaries or town festivals, finding a new pub-keeper, accounting of rent and lease, dealing with authorities, making contracts with neighbors, and so on. His annual reports give the impression that the president who was so much interested in literary issues, dealt above all with economic, financial and other managerial matters. Many of the problems resulted from the ownership of the house, thus, not surprisingly, Linden suggested repeatedly selling the house in order to get rid of that burden.

The Casino pub was just one of those management problems, but a rather persistent one. Maintaining the pub was directly connected to the society's goal of "social entertainment". At the

general assembly in 1875, after presenting the annual report the president was asked in form of an interpellation to say something about the social life of the society, too. In a detailed account he disclosed his view in the printed version of the report (AR 1875: 8-11): There is no getting round that the Museum Society, like her sister societies in other Swiss towns, is primarily – to about 80% – a reading society and only secondarily a Casino or a Cercle. The original idea to make the Museum Society to a center of the higher social life in town has to be buried. How low the members' demand for social entertainment actually is was well demonstrated by the fact that this year the annual banquet had to be cancelled for lack of interest.

> "Social life cannot be commanded (ibid: 9)," Linden stated, and added as an explanation: "Social life in this town has become completely different. It is so manifold and split up that it is impossible to compete in more than one respect. Much of what was believed that the 'Museum' should or wished to offer, has become the purpose of particular societies." (ibid.: 10)

Which societies he was referring to remained unclear. Yet the rather defensive account over four pages makes quite obvious that this president was not a great advocate or even lover of social events.

It came as no surprise when in 1884 president Linden, after another pub-keeper had left, suggested to abolish the Casino pub. The managing committee had called a special general meeting on this issue and urged the members to make a fundamental decision: 1. either to give up the pub or 2. to return to a pure society-pub (without admittance of non-members). For the latter variant a sound financial solution was demanded. The president and the secretary who diagnosed a financial impasse voted for abolishment, the rest of the managing committee and the majority of the present members voted for a return to a pure society-pub, a "real Casino". "It was called a testimonium paupertatis, a certificate of poverty, if the city of St. Gallen cannot even afford a Casino," and it was suggested to collect donations (AR 1984: 7) (which was done for years to come). In the president's judgment it was above all the supporters of the Casino pub who attended this special general meeting, and he was particularly upset that the rupture went right through the managing committee, too (ibid.: 3f.). In 1989 he made a final remark on this cultural schism: "If last year the centenary of the Casino pub was celebrated with a solemn banquet, the centenary of the reading society [of the Literary Society – T.S.E.] has passed by quietly, as yet being silent is a main virtue in reading societies." (AR 1888: 5)

When Linden resigned at the end of 1889 – he died shortly thereafter – the new managing committee immediately started off a wave of social events: soirées and balls were given, lectures hold, musical and theatrical performances staged – and this with considerable success, which seemed to prove that Linden's assessments were all wrong. In 1894 an "entertainment committee" was formed, a few years later the budget for social events got increased, and the new president soon stated that "our social evenings play a major role in the social life of our town" (AR 1893: 7). The Museum Society was financially restructured, right after Linden's resignation, by letting out the rooms on the first floor of the building, which yielded an additional rent. This way the Casino pub was saved, although with less rooms. In 1898 it was questioned once again and finally given up in 1912. when the house was expropriated by the city council (for own purposes) and a new house was built. However, this did not mean to reduce the functions of the Museum Society to a "pure reading society," as was Linden's intention – social life in the society had been flourishing for more than two decades meanwhile. From the initiatives of the 1890s, three types of social events became firmly institutionalized: 1. public lectures, 2. readings by authors, and 3. balls. After 1912, rooms outside were rented for these occasions: at a prominent local inn, at the university or at the concert hall of the city.

Hence, after Linden's resignation the Museum Society seemed to succeed in integrating the twofold objective – the business of reading and the organization of social events. If the cultural schism between the different groups of members had finally been overcome, is difficult to judge. But it is a fact that both goals were actually strived for in parallel and that no annual report ever mentioned this schism again. The fresh approach by the new management seems to have born fruit and was, around the turn of the century, assisted by favorable socio-economic conditions, i.e. by a booming textile economy in town.

2.3. Cultural gender contrast as a nonissue

Another cultural contrast was based on gender. It becomes visible when women were admitted as members for the first time in 1891. Previously, the Museum Society – like most reading and other societies of the 18th and 19th century – was a male society excluding women from membership. Yet, this exclusion concerned the social life but not the reading. The wife of a member as well as his children were entitled to use the library. But what if a member died and made his wife a widow? Did this entitlement then become invalid? Was she not allowed to use the library anymore only because her husband had deceased? Such questions prompted many reading societies to issue library cards to certain categories of people who could not become members. The Museum Society had such library cards, too. Thus, to abolish these library cards and allow women to become full members was quite a revolutionary act at the time. It was taken, once more, by the new managing committee right after Linden's resignation. Although this contradicted the rules of the by-laws, it did not bother the new president, Dr. Vetsch: "Among the new members there are – for the first time – three ladies. These have applied for membership in order to participate in the circulation of reading folders, and we have complied with this wish most readily although the by-laws did not provide that." (AR 1891: 3)

The "reading folder" – a social institution that was invented already in the 18th century – had just been introduced in the Museum Society when the ladies applied. Reading folders contained several magazines and journals and were circulated once or twice a week from household to household; one was passed on and another arrived. This institution was obviously quite popular at the time, in particular among women: It is not the first time that a strong interest of women in such reading folders is reported. The other major reading society in town, the Büsch-Society, which was founded in 1836 as a Society of the lower classes, had introduced reading folders already half a century earlier, in 1842. Chroniclers of that reading society report that by this act the Büsch-Society became "an institution of the family" (Koch 1911: 5), and that it was above all women and daughters who enjoyed the reading folders:

> "even if here and there the potatoes get burned and the milk boils over because of the reading folder: it is yet the most wide-spread, most welcome and most discreet friend of the house in all our town, comforting those women whose husbands are sitting at a glass of wine or beer" (Amrein 1886: 16).

That is, in the pub. The reading folders were so popular that the Büsch-Society, which concentrated exclusively on circulating reading folders and maintaining a library, became a mass-society since the 1870s with many more members than the Museum Society ever got. It is interesting to note that the reading society for the lower classes, the Büsch-Society, allowed women to become full members almost 20 years before the Museum Society, the reading of the upper classes, did so.

In the Museum Society of 1891, the only mentioned motive of the ladies to apply for membership was to become a recipient of the reading folders (AR 1891: 3). Were they only interested in the

reading folders or as well in the other rights and privileges of a member? And if so, were they allowed to exercise these rights or were their formally equal rights overridden and restricted by informal rules? Presumably, they did not venture to enter the Casino pub on their own and did not participate in the general meetings and the political life of the society. Unfortunately, there is no further data available on this issue as there are no proceedings of those meetings left. Concerning the other social events there was hardly any gender barrier, and especially balls presupposed couples anyway. What can be reconstructed is that 30 years later the quota of women was 10% (54 of 537 members; AR 1920) and another 30 years later 17,6% (45 of 255 members; AR 1950). When the Museum Society was dissolved in 1974, 20% of members attending the general meeting were women (4 of 19 members). Since 1921, there were also several female librarians mentioned who became members but were not part of the managing committee. It seems[14] that until the dissolution of the Museum Society there has never been a woman elected into the managing committee although there were several who had a Ph.D.[15]

Research on gender issues suggests that it makes sense to distinguish a male and a female culture, that each has different characteristics and that there are different forms of how they can be combined (Harding 1991). If this holds true, it makes sense to assume that in the Museum Society there was a cultural contrast between the minority of female and the majority of male members who dominated the general assembly as well as the managing committee. The women's perceptions, interests, values, motives etc. have not been put down in any written document of the Museum Society and have therefore perished. However, in a document of the Büsch-Society gender issues are mentioned: The (male) author of a commemorative publication for the 75th anniversary of the Büsch-Society in 1911 complained that the male majority had always treated women as "quantité négligeable", as "superfluous accessories", and had always made them feel their inferiority (Koch 1911: 16ff.). Several instances are mentioned to provide some evidence that gender issues were repeatedly discussed: For example, this reading society postponed to grant women full membership until 1872. In the following year there was a big debate on the question if dancing was dignified enough to include in an evening program (which implied to invite women to dance with). And when some women requested by way of a poetic petition to include a fashion magazine in the reading folder – family magazines did not yet include fashion themes at the time – the managing committee proudly refused with all kinds of excuses including a sniffy remark that the fashion would be out of date anyway by the time the women got the reading folder (ibid.). Presumably, comparable instances of paternalistic behavior towards women have happened in the Museum Society, too.

2.4. Contrast between elitist expert quality standards and the tastes of laypersons

From the outset, reading societies had the explicit goal to make people read, to spark their interest in all areas of knowledge and to provide them with good literature. What "good" literature was, however, had to be defined. What experts considered to be good was often not what people liked to read. When women in the 18th century – men were hardly mentioned – started to read novels, a new cultural product, reading societies were founded with the specific objective to fight the diagnosed "reading addiction" or "reading mania" (of women). The goal was not to prevent them from reading but to replace the "cheap novels" by "good literature" (Weisz 1934). How were such educational intentions handled in a reading society with a democratic structure, where the general assembly was the highest power and the members were the clients as well as the owners of the organization? Here, too, we can observe an ongoing cultural contrast between what experts defined as "good" literature and what members actually demanded.

The Museum Society had collected books from all areas: geography, ethnology, history, history of arts, history of literature, biography, belles-lettres, Helvetica, books in foreign languages and others

(Cf. AR 1883: 9). A statistical analysis however showed that member's actual demand was preferably belles-lettres and here above all novels and novelettes.[16] President Linden concluded that the Museum Society should reduce its aspiration and not build up a scientific library but rather concentrate on belles-lettres (AR 1878: 9). Yet, there was still a difference between "good" and "cheap" belles-lettres. In the 1920s, a strange ritual emerged: in their annual reports, the presidents time and again reproached the members with their bad literary taste. This judgment was regularly based on a little survey by the librarian that showed which eight or ten books were most requested. The validity of this procedure – to infer from the most requested eight or ten books to the general literary taste of all the members – was, of course, more than questionable. Nevertheless, this practice was repeated by many presidents to come. In 1946, e.g., the president notes: "The most read books are, as the experience of many decades teaches, time and again bestsellers, while the rich and precious stocks of older books are used only rarely or never at all." (AR 1946: 4) And in 1949 a formulation was created which stereotypically was repeated year after year, "that the quantity of the lent out books was generally larger than the quality" as was shown by the list of the most demanded books (AR 1949: 6). This reproach ritual that persisted for nearly four decades, indicates once again a rather paternalistic attitude of the presidents towards the members. The members were not treated as clients or even owners of the reading society but as people who needed guidance. Such an educational pose was hardly apt to stop the decrease of membership or even acquire new members in the 20th century.

This tension between the quality standards of literary experts and the taste and demand of laypersons persists in the modern debate on quality assessments vs. audience rating of radio and TV broadcastings. The librarians or heads of literary committees in reading societies were usually professionals – often college professors for German literature – who aspired after high quality standards of their library. On the other hand, they had to perceive the members as clients and therefore to balance out their diverse tastes and interests. After all, the society was democratically organized, each member had the right to make suggestions and the general assembly could take votes on every issue. How a librarian attempted to meet the different claims of quality standards and client demand is shown by the following quote where a librarian draws, based on the usual list of bestsellers, the following conclusion:

> "The literary taste of our readers is, as is shown once more by this list, of a remarkable stability. This shall not prevent the librarian (...) from smuggling in some demanding books of high poetic quality, which no doubt are rarely requested but which later will be desired again and again, while the bestseller after a span of 10 years mostly perishes unheralded and unsung." (AR 1953: 3)

Literary ratings, however, change over time. A brief analysis shows that many a "bestseller" of former times is considered a "classic" nowadays, while it may well be that those books which the quoted librarian smuggled in, have never found a reader.

Similar cultural contrasts can be identified concerning the social events. As noted above, three types of social events had become firmly institutionalized since the 1890s: 1. public lectures, 2. readings by authors, and 3. balls. The so-called Museum Balls were organized nearly every year, except for the years of war and crisis. They symbolized that the Museum Society was a distinguished, noble society that struck people in town with awe.[17] But only a part of the members enjoyed these balls; others designated them "as a boring and stiff institution" (AR 1925: 7). The managing committee was determined to stay with this tradition, even when members made other suggestions: "Proposals to organize a ball more in the sense of an entertainment evening should not be attached too much importance to as we want to keep up the tradition of a ball in proper style" (AR 1949: 6f.). But how to keep up a tradition the members do not want anymore? Only three years later, in 1952, a "certain

ball tiredness among the members" is reported (AR 1952: 7), and since 1953, "after the distressing experiences of the past years" (AR 1954: 5), no balls took place anymore.

The same happened with readings by authors and public lectures. The contrast between expert criteria used to select the speakers and members' tastes and interests was clearly measurable by the size of the audience. After World War I the success of these events was on the average rather modest, and time and again the managing committee asked if such readings and lectures actually met a demand or if the Museum Society should retreat to a pure reading society. However, as the president stated in 1935:

> "We could not decide so far to abandon the good old tradition of our society and to switch over to let our selection be guided only by the thought of the attraction of a big name and the box-office success. It is one of the noblest tasks of a literary society to help poets who are less known and successful to find their way to the reader. The poet is not always the best but always the most interesting conveyor of his work." (AR 1935: 3)

The tradition was kept, but the society suffered a financial loss every year. In 1952 the revisers uttered the explicit wish "to make some concessions to the general taste when selecting the authors" (AR 1952: 5). In 1954 the same managing committee whose president used to reproach the members with their bad literary taste, invited an author of a bestseller. This event attracted a much bigger audience than the hall could accommodate and was a tremendous success. And the president concluded: "Perhaps we must ... concentrate more on bestseller-poets who can, as this example has shown, be of a high caliber, too." (AR 1954: 3f.) This statement, however, rather expresses how deep the president's conviction actually was that a bestseller cannot be good literature and that a bestseller-author is usually not of a high caliber. It is therefore only logical that this remained the last bestseller-poet invited. When in 1958 a renowned German expert of contemporary stage-play was announced for a lecture, only 3 persons instead of the expected 700 showed up. Furiously, the same president resigned because of "this failure of the audience of St. Gallen" and stated: "Only when we come up with big names, people show up to see the famous woman or the important man. A true love for literature is missing in St. Gallen." (AR 1958: 4)

2.5. Decline and death of the Museum Society

No doubt, the Museum Society had its heyday in the period between 1890 and World War I. Membership peaked in 1919 with 573 members, then it decreased continually to less then 100 in 1974 when the society was dissolved. Already in 1952 the president stated that there were too many old people and hardly any young ones among the members. Many publicity campaigns were made but with no success. Of the remaining 100 members in 1974, 70% of the members were retired and there had been no new entries for many years (Proceedings 12.12.1974). Since 1930 the society had suffered a steady financial loss, and till 1965 the assets had waned by half. In the last 20 years the managing committee attempted all kinds of little innovations, but with little success. In 1966 radical measures were taken: the reading folders were cancelled, the library was integrated into the City Library, and the Museum Society's activities became restricted to the organization of lectures (Proceedings 17.3.1966). Death, however, was inevitable: the small library next to the large library and the small reading room next to the large reading room of the library were hardly attractive to anyone, and the lectures did not draw much audience either.

Was the decline of the Museum Society the result of the demonstrated cultural contrasts within the organization or was it rather caused by external factors? Undoubtedly, the change in the environment had been a tremendous one: Modern society is characterized by detraditionalization,

individualization, multiple options, pluralized life-worlds, different life-styles, high spatial mobility and new media, like radio, TV, telecommunication and computer.[18] Radio and TV have changed the sense of topicality dramatically and made reading folders anachronistic: Nobody in modern societies is interested anymore in reading magazines that have been out-dated for weeks. And the increasing economic wealth allows virtually everybody to subscribe to a newspaper and a magazine or buy a book, especially in the era of paperbacks and pocket books. These factors, each in its own intricate way, made the conventional goals of reading societies somewhat obsolete: People buy much of their reading material themselves, lectures are competing with information from radio, TV and the internet, and there is much diversity concerning social events. If we contend that it was no coincidence that so many reading societies were founded in the 18th and 19th century, we must conclude that it is no coincidence either that most of them died in the 20th century. Of the 36 reading societies that were counted in the canton (state) of St. Gallen in 1871 (Erne 1988), none has survived[19], and of the 123 in the canton of Zurich only a few still exist (Bachmann 1993).

The reasons why some reading societies have managed to survive in spite of such unfavorable conditions remain a topic for further research. They have obviously found a cultural niche where they are still attractive for many people. The Museum Society in St. Gallen, however, seems to have become rigid and frozen during the last 50 years and failed to rejuvenate. It was lacking another fresh management approach and a wave of innovations as it had experienced in the 1890s after Linden's resignation. Instead, the managing committees clung persistently to the traditions that were created in the 19th century, although the worsening crisis was well perceived and acknowledged. The cultural contrast and sometimes contradiction between an elitist, traditional interpretation of the society's goal and the tastes and interests of the members and clients was certainly aggravating the crisis. The educational style and the paternalistic attitude of the managing committee towards the members was hardly apt to attract new members, in particular not young ones. Yet, in the declining years the Museum Society found itself in a vicious circle: the vast majority of the members were old people who were eager to keep up the society's traditions, but this was exactly what did not inspire the young.

3. Reading societies in the 21st century

While most reading societies have died, there still exist a considerable number of them nowadays. How have they survived? As there still pop up many reading circles here and there, it may be noteworthy to restate that we only consider here reading societies in the traditional sense. Most reading societies that have survived into the 21st century are organizations which focus on cultural activities, organizing cultural events and sometimes running a library. In a particular area of Eastern Switzerland, however, namely in the canton[21] of *Appenzell Ausserrhoden,* we still find reading societies with political functions (which, by contrast, the Museum Society had excluded).

As nobody knew how many reading societies still exist, I made a survey some twenty years ago (Eberle 1989) and found that most communities of this canton still had reading societies, some of them even several. By assessment of the presidents, it turned out that of the 31 still active societies 4 were exclusively cultural, 3 predominantly cultural, 14 political and cultural and 8 exclusively political. Comparing these self-assessments with the actual activities, I found that the 14 “political and cultural” associations actually pursued more political than cultural goals, i.e. that the political component is even more important than was declared. Most perceived themselves as information and discussion societies, in which every member makes up his or her own mind after the debate. But 12 of the 31 also make recommendations for upcoming referendums, and 22 for political elections. In other words, while most reading societies have either died or exist nowadays as purely cultural organizations, the original form of a politically engaged reading society, which Habermas

praised as the locus where a really democratic public discourse was possible, has survived in this part of the country.

How come? This surprising result made me extend my research onto the minute books and *Festschriften,* which were produced and sometimes published for special anniversaries of the societies. I found that reading societies had and have a special meaning within the political culture of this canton. In the 19th century, they had engaged in multiple political initiatives for the local community, as other reading societies too, like public gas and water supply, fire fighting service, postal and telephone connection, dust plague, the danger posed by trains and cars, and many more issues. At the beginning of the 20th century, the national success of the social democrats who had organized themselves as a national party, made evident that the social form of political parties is more efficient for national politics than a rather loose cooperation of independent local associations. Many Swiss reading societies therefore reduced their functions to cultural activities, while political parties became the dominant organizations for political debate and strategy, as well as for public communication and opinion formation.

In the canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, this development was not welcome. The political culture in Appenzell was rather to discuss issues together, as individual persons with pragmatic reasoning and not along political partylines. In reading societies, people from the same community gathered and discussed political issues, the social democrat sat next to the conservative, and this one next to a liberal or a radical, and one was convinced that democracy means talking and listening to each other, forming a personal opinion and then voting based on one's own opinion. The reading societies of Appenzell were therefore called, time and again, the "primordial cells of democracy *(Urzellen der Demokratie)*". It must be added here that Switzerland is a country with a strong federalist (i.e. decentralized) structure (i.e. considerable autonomy of the cantons) and a basic democracy. The latter means that people not only elect their representatives to the parliament, but they vote on substantial issues, on the community level as well as on the cantonal and the national level. For example, citizens vote if a local school shall be built and how much it may cost, if the cantonal tax law shall be changed or if the country shall join the Schengen-Convention or the European Union. Another important aspect is that the canton of Appenzell, which has only little more than 50,000 inhabitants, has quite a rural structure, with many local communities and no single big city, and that people have therefore rather personal relationships with each other and not one which is just based on personal stereotypes and clichés. Upon closer inspection of course, the sociologist detects class barriers and either more liberal or more conservative profiles of given societies, and it is out of the question that affiliations are also influenced by personal emotions like sympathy or antipathy, as everywhere. Nevertheless, the political culture of discussing politics in associations, which are politically and religiously neutral (which most of the reading societies have declared in their by-laws), has survived in this part of the world.

Another factor that has certainly influenced the survival of these reading societies, is the fact that the Appenzellers are on the average quite tradition-minded. They are considered by outsiders as well as by insiders as having a distinct culture of their own, which encompasses alpine farming with many ancient customs, a world-famous cheese, a special kind of humor and a well-known folk music, plus many habits, mores and traditions which are still lived by and kept alive. This accounts for the fact that in Appenzell the reading societies have not only declined, but some of them have also been revitalized or were replaced by new foundations. My research revealed that there were 42 reading societies in the year 1958. In the 30 years thereafter, until 1988, eight have died, two existed only on paper and one was nearly inactive. However, this was not just a decline. While the number of societies was reduced by 25%, the membership in the active societies increased at the same time.

Currently, I am updating my research results from 1989. Between 1988-2008 another 5 of the 31 reading societies have died, but one has been revitalized and two were newly founded. Thus the total is still 29. My new survey is not yet complete (some responses are missing), but it becomes evident that about half of the politically active reading societies are above all interested in communal politics. However, many of them also discuss regularly political issues of the cantonal and the national level, especially before referendums, and this in spite of the fact that cantonal and above all national issues are intensely debated in the large newspapers and on the national TV stations. In other words, the social-structural transformation of the public sphere has not eliminated these traditional forms of public discourse, but only complemented them by new media.

In Habermas' (1989) conception, reading societies are the place where critical public opinion is formed beyond special interests, where in other words the *volonté générale* is expressed. Of course, this is a somewhat idealistic view. Ethnographic research is needed to get more insight into the actual workings of these organizations. I conducted participant observation in such a reading society during three years, acting as a board member. My observations cast doubt on Habermas' idealistic assumption that in such democratic societies a rational discourse takes place that constitutes the political public sphere. Even democratic procedures within small organizations have their own little intricacies that must be taken into account.

4. Conclusion

Modern society consists to a vast degree of organizations. Reading societies were typical organizations as they emerged in the 18th century and persisted until nowadays: associations with voluntary membership, voluntary objectives and voluntary structures and processes (meanwhile formally codified in the civil code). In contrast to many other organizations of modernity they were non-profit organizations and had a democratic structure. Born in the Age of the Enlightenment, they were pragmatic, future-oriented and educational: they organized the civic sense around specific goals, namely to provide good literature for their members and to ensure a cultivated form of political discourse and of social entertainment. Reading Societies represented a vast social movement throughout Western Europe, advanced cultural change and thus were carriers of the modernization process.

Most of the reading societies have meanwhile vanished. A rather self-evident explanation of this trend is by means of the social-structural transformation of the public sphere. In cultural sociology, however, it is advisable to pursue such developments not just on a macro-, but also on a meso- and micro-level and in greater detail. I have therefore reconstructed the history of a Swiss reading society that has persisted for nearly 200 years but finally died. Although the reading societies had many similarities, above all in regard to their formal structures, each developed a specific organizational culture. My historical case study reveals that the Museum Society developed a number of cultural contrasts which determined its organizational life for several decades. The decline of the society was not just caused by changing exterior conditions, but was also advanced by the internal social climate, notably by the prevailing educational, paternalistic style of its executives. They failed thereby at rejuvenating membership, which eventually made the dissolution of the society inevitable, even if it was not financially bankrupt.

There are many instances of reading societies that stayed alive well into the 21st century. Although they do not exist anymore in great numbers, their sheer existence manifests the possibility of survival, in spite of the social-structural change of the public sphere. An in-depth study of a currently prospering reading society would be a welcome complement to the presented historical case. So far I have made an inventory of still existing reading societies in Switzerland and found

still many in a comparatively small part of the country, namely in the canton of *Appenzell Ausserrhoden*. Surprisingly many of them have not, like the Museum Society, reduced their functions to cultural activities only but remained engaged in public political discourse. They represent what was called the "primordial cells of democracy *(Urzellen der Demokratie)*" and what Habermas considered the truly democratic opinion formation. Habermas' vision may be somewhat idealistic, and ethnographic studies will have to research how these democratic procedures actually operate in practice. However, if you compare the fact that the citizens of most European countries had no right to vote on such fundamental matters as, for example, the crucial question if their country shall join the European Union, you become aware that the political discourse in reading societies of a country with basic democracy, like Switzerland, comes pretty close to the Habermasian ideal. Therefore, further research in reading societies makes really sense.

Endnotes:

[1] For Germany see especially Prüsener (1973), Göpfert (1976), and Prüsener/Göpfert (1977). In autumn 1977 there was a conference in the "Herzog August"-Library in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, where researchers from seven European countries presented their work on Reading societies (see Dann 1981b; see also Dann 1977, 1984, van Dülmen 1996, Galitz 1986). For Switzerland see Im Hof (1982), Bernard/Reichen (1982), and Erne (1988) on societies; on reading societies see Braun (1965), Milstein (1972), Eberle (1989, in 1999), and Bachmann (1993).

[2] Most historical research on reading societies focused on this period, except Braun (1965), Eberle (1989, 1999, 2000), and Bachmann (1993).

[3] The very term "organisation" emerged in France during the 18th century (Herkunftswörterbuch 1989: 581f.), as a designation of these new, modern social formations with voluntary membership, voluntary objectives and voluntary structures and processes (cf. Türk 1989).

[4] For a review of different anthropological concepts of organizational culture concerning formal and informal aspects cf. Schwartzman (1993); see also Gregory (1983).

[5] On the construction of anthropology's object through temporal concepts and devices as a political act, see Fabian (1983).

[6] On the term "objectivation" see Berger/Luckmann (1966).

[7] As previous research by the author has shown, the materials were passed on from secretary to secretary, sometimes got lost, sometimes were forgotten in a closet or thrown away, or they burnt down in a house fire (cf. Eberle 1989).

[8] In previous research many interviews were made with persons who had been members of a reading society. Compared to the richness of the historical documents the memory of people proved to be scanty. For a theoretical discussion on the relationship of memory and history cf. Halbwachs (1950) and Assmann (1988).

[9] The Annual Reports (AR) are cited by the year the report is concerned with; the printed report however was usually published in the first months of the next year.

[10] In the Swiss cities of Zurich since 1834, of Berne since 1847; in the German cities of Hannover

since 1789, of Karlsruhe since 1808.

[11] All quotes from the by-laws, the annual reports and other historical documents were translated from German to English by the author. The sometimes heavy, complicated style reflects the German original.

[12] The goals changed in their wording – especially since the Civil Code defined some legal rules for associations – but not in their substance.

[13] Cf. Linden (1871: 1-50) and the preserved documents of each society.

[14] This cannot be reconstructed with ultimate security on the basis of the preserved materials.

[15] Being an academic and having a title was obviously important to get elected into the managing committee.

[16] The same was the case in other reading societies: cf. Amrein (1886, 1897), Koch (1911) and Eberle (1999).

[17] Personal interview by the author with someone who moved to town and later became a member. The interviewee reported that everyone talked with great respect about the Museum Society and that he felt greatly honored when being admitted as a member.

[18] For a further sociological analysis of these phenomena see Berger/Berger/Kellner 1974; Giddens 1991; Bauman 1991, 1993; Beck et al. 1994; Gross 1994.

[19] Survey by the author in 1994; cf. Eberle 1999, 2000.

[20] Linden states in 1875 that the seven members of the managing committee and the three auditor usually represent the majority at the general meetings (AR 1875: 11).

[21] A canton is a constituent state of the federal state of Switzerland. It has its own constitution, laws and by-laws and its own government, parliament and judicative system. It is in many respects fairly autonomous, has its own police, tax system, education and health system, and much more. A canton has subunits, something like counties and communities that have some degree of autonomy, too. Switzerland has 26 such cantons. Appenzell Ausserrhoden (AR) is a half-canton, the other half-canton is Appenzell-Innerrhoden (AI). The two separated in the 16th century in a protestant (AR) and a catholic (AI) part, to avoid a religious civil war.

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