
Cultural Contrasts in a Democratic Nonprofit Organization

The Case of a Swiss Reading Society

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A long-term case study of a Swiss reading society is presented based on historical documents that cover 187 years. Reading societies were social inventions of the 18th century. They often lasted into the 20th century and played an important role in the cultural process of modernization. Like other societies founded in the spirit of the Enlightenment, they were nonprofit organizations with a democratic structure. With regard to their programmatic goals, their legal structure, and their formal procedures, reading societies were conspicuously similar and uniform. On closer look, however, each had its specific cultural complexity. In the following case study, three cultural contrasts inherent in the organization are reconstructed, each of which shaped the organizational life for several decades.

Reading Societies: Carriers of the Modernization Process

Reading and writing have penetrated nearly all the realms of modern society. These practices have become so common that nowadays it is difficult 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. Consequently, much of the lived culture was passed on to the next generation by way of an 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 paperwork: public administration, administration of justice, book-keeping, science, and literature. Finally, during the age of Enlightenment, reading also became an activity of leisure (Dann, 1981a, p. 9).

During the 18th century, a significant change in the style of reading occurred—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 toward 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 (Dann, 1981a, p. 13; Engelsing, 1974, p. 216ff).

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. During 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 printing products—journals and newspapers. Both set 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, p. 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 appeared in 1770 (Prüsener, 1973, p. 384) and is already a key word in an encyclopedia printed in 1790: "**Reading Society** is a number of persons who have associated to read certain books and publications" (Krünitz, 1790, p. 278). Presumably, the financial advantage was an important motive for forming such associations because the prices of books and journals at the time were too high for most readers to afford (Stützel-Prüsener, 1981, p. 72). Such readers' associations had many forms and different labels. All of them, however, had the same fundamental purpose: to make people read. All of them also 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 (Dann, 1981a, p. 13; Engelsing, 1974, p. 216ff). In this sense, reading societies were—to use a term of Max Weber's—"carriers" of the modernization process; carriers of a cultural change that is often overlooked by focusing on only the technical and economic side of modernization.

Societies: New Social Forms Originating in the 18th Century

Historical research in Switzerland and Germany (which began investigating 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 (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, and charitable, economic, agricultural, and patriotic and 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, codetermination, and joint responsibility; and they had a republican organization and formed a new social stratum between the old classes. All these societies can be characterized by two criteria. First, they had a formal structure; thus, they are to be differentiated from informal, unorganized associations such as the French "salons," the English "clubs,"

or the German "*Zirkel*" (circles) of all kinds. Second, they have to be distinguished from all religious communities, orders, or brotherhoods; these lacked voluntariness and served a worldview other than that of Enlightenment (Im Hof, 1982).

Accordingly, historical research draws two distinctions: between reading societies and informal readers' associations (Dann, 1981a) and between the reading societies of the Enlightenment and those of the past (Weisz, 1934a, 1934b). 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 that in principle allowed them to exist longer than one person's lifespan. 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 (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 to provide literature and organize 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 intensively discussed and written 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 many of the rules of former societies. In the course of time, the typical formal structures had been developed that nowadays are still constitutive of societies and other formal associations; a managing committee with a president or chair and other members who had specialized functions (such as a vice president, a treasurer, a secretary, a librarian, etc.), financial revisers, and a general assembly of the members that elected the persons into these functions, determined the bylaws, and controlled the proper course of affairs.

Reading societies were thus carriers of the modernization process in two ways; they not only spread the ideals of reading and of acquiring knowledge but also

represented—together with other organizations³—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 (see Prüsener, 1973).

The Museum Society: The Case of a Swiss Reading Society

What was life inside these organizations like? Despite their resemblance with 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 small Swiss town of about 70,000 inhabitants (since 1900). There were 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, and the Museum Society a reading society for the upper classes. The latter was selected for a case study because most historical documents of the Museum Society have been preserved (in contrast to the Büsch Society), which makes it easier to reconstruct the inherent contrasts in its organizational life.

Research Methodology

How does one 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 should 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, p. 9) or to the informal aspects of an organization such as myths, stories, or special jargon (Jelinek, Smircich, & Hirsch, 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 bylaws regulated the conditions of becoming a member; the members' rights and duties;

the conditions for resigning or being expelled; the tasks of the managing committee and the revisers 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' behavior (where and when to speak or not to speak, to smoke or not to smoke, in which rooms women were allowed and in which ones only men were allowed, 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 statute book also informs us, beyond the generally uniform structures, about many cultural specifics of a society.

An organization does not have a culture but rather it is a culture. Ethnography is the most promising method for investigating it in all its complexity. Ethnographic fieldwork, however, is bound to the present;⁵ past cultures are the object of historical research. Most reading societies, including the one in this case study, do not exist anymore. They are past cultural realities that cannot be entered anymore and that can no longer be experienced in any direct way. They have to be reconstructed on the basis of all kinds of objectivations⁶ that have been preserved. Fortunately, the reading societies not only fostered reading but also practiced writing. Many aspects of a society's life were documented in writing—there were not only the statute book, 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, etc.). Each reading society, in other words, created its own little "symbolic universe" that documents the society's specific history. If preserved (much was lost!), these documents may be 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 including that of its forerunners (Linden, 1871), and another one wrote the history of the first 58 years (Seiler, 1914). Ample information can be found in the annual reports by the presidents, the bylaws, and the library decree. There are also guest books, legal documents, correspondence, and so on, and even some furniture of the former reading room is left. Interestingly, there are no minutes of the committee's meetings or proceedings of the general assembly (except for the final years—1965-1974). It seems that, in contrast to other reading societies,

they were simply not produced. To grasp some key aspects of the society's life, we have to concentrate on the annual reports⁹ by the presidents and the early historical review by Linden (1871). These materials are detailed enough to reconstruct some essentials of the cultural life as it is reflected in the president's perspective.

Contrast Between Literary Objectives and the Goal of Social Entertainment

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 because the society had nothing to do with a "museum" in the common sense of the word. Rather, the name was oriented to its ancient origin from which in Latin *museum* (stemming from Greek "mouseion") meant "a site for scholarly work; library; academy" (Herkunftswörterbuch, 1989, p. 475). Several other reading societies were previously named Museum Society in Switzerland as well as in Germany.¹⁰ The goals of the Museum Society (1856) are described in the first two articles of the statute book:

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. (p. 3)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 bit over time. The first decades were shaped by the heritage of the merger. The Museum Society was not a new foundation but rather the result of a merger of three locally prominent societies. To understand the cultural contrasts and tensions that developed within the new organization, the three forerunner societies must be examined.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" (Cercle, 1788-1792). The idea came from young businessmen who, on their business trips, were introduced into noble circles of other cities. Like the reading societies, the Cercle was organized as a formal

association with all major rules put down in bylaws. The primary goal was not reading, however, but rather social entertainment. There were some newspapers offered but no journals or books. Most popular were card games and billiards. Gambling, however, was explicitly prohibited. Membership was restricted to men of high professional and social positions, such as businessmen, medical doctors, senior civil servants, and so on. In 1814, the Cercle acquired the old Weavers' House in the heart of the old town that was soon called the Casino. From that point on, the Cercle held soirées and balls on a regular basis and lent out its hall and other rooms to other societies of the town.

The Literary Society was founded in 1789, one year after the Cercle. Its statute book is introduced with 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 mentioned were the opportunity to share the feelings and thoughts one had while reading literature, to learn about pieces of literature one did not know about, to get inspired and more knowledgeable by such discussions, and to increase one's appreciation of literature, of ideas, and 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 enervate trust and solidarity" (Literary Society, 1816, p. 3). The Literary Society maintained a library and had approximately two dozens 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. In 1814, it began 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 members 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, p. 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 left, and new people joined. Only a few years later, the new society offered to merge with the old one, this time attempting to introduce the reforms from the outside. Because 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. The members of the new society called the leading members of the Literary Society "pigtails" (conservatives), whereas the members of the Literary Society considered the others disdainfully as "furious radicals."

Subsequently, 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 (see Linden, 1871, pp. 42-50). All three societies had a weak financial base and hoped to create a solid ground by joining forces. There were diverse interests, however; the two reading societies were still primarily interested in the house owned by the Cercle (in which the Literary Society had already been a tenant) because of its big hall. The Cercle, however, strived for higher membership fees after having suffered a sudden and significant loss of members. Indeed, there was a total of 259 members: 61 from the Cercle, 43 from the Literary Society, and 155 from the Reading Society to the Sun. The members of the Cercle, however, 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.

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. Each organizational culture, however, 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, p. 53). Presumably, the contrasts between the members of the two former reading societies was an ongoing difference between generations and between conservative versus progressive convictions. There is no further information available on this issue. 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 rather exclusively in social entertainment, as was the goal of their former society. Although in the first 7 years of the Museum Society many lectures were held, by members as well as by guest speakers (an occasion that combined literary and social entertainment), the members of the former Cercle interpreted the goal of social entertainment differently: playing card games and billiards and having

banquets and balls. This was a clear divergence of objectives that 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 contradicting the formal rules. The former members of the Cercle were still called the "Casino-Gentlemen" and regarded as nobler and treated with considerable respect. Although the bylaws determined that every member had equal rights, those who did not belong to this illustrious circle did not venture to enter the drawing rooms in which the games were played (Linden, 1871, p. 53). After 1862, when reading rooms and drawing rooms 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. Because many members shied away from using the drawing rooms or did not feel comfortable among the "Casino-people," consumption in the pub was little. As a result, profitability was low, the leaseholders often changed, and the managing committee of the Museum Society faced again and again the problems of finding a new pubkeeper 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 explicitly encouraged the members to be more self-conscious toward the Casino-Gentlemen (Linden, 1871, p. 53) but had little success. Finally in 1884, he came up with the more radical suggestion to close the Casino pub and thereby reduce the functions of the society to a "pure Reading Society." Because the society had a democratic structure, such decisions had to be made by the general assembly of the members, and here Linden's suggestion met a strong opposition (Museum Society, 1884).

Let us consider this situation 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 take 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, in 1863 he became vice president, and from 1869 to 1889 he was president of the Museum Society. It is owing to him that much of the new society's activities were described. When president, he wrote a book on the history of the three former societies and the first 15 years of the Museum Society. Then, sanctioned by the general assembly, he

introduced the tradition that the annual reports by the president be printed and distributed among the members—a tradition that lasted until 1938. (All these reports have been preserved.) Linden was obviously interested in history but also in literature. From 1860 onward, he headed the "literary committee," a subcommittee of the managing committee like the "economic committee." When elected president, he became responsible for the general management issues but requested to remain head of the literary commission too.

Interestingly, 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 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 pubkeeper, laying down 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 interested in literary issues, mostly dealt with economic, financial, and other managerial matters. Many of the problems resulted from the ownership of the house and, not surprisingly, Linden repeatedly suggested selling the house to get rid of that burden.

The Casino pub was just one of the many management problems, but it was 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 also asked, in the form of an interpellation, to say something about the social life of the society. In a detailed account, he disclosed his view in the printed version of the report (Museum Society, 1875, pp. 8-11): There was no getting around that the Museum Society, like her sister societies in other Swiss towns, was primarily (approximately 80%) a reading society and only secondarily a Casino or a Cercle. The original idea to make the Museum Society into a center of the higher social life in town had to be buried. How low the members' demand for social entertainment actually was is demonstrated by the fact that in that year the annual banquet had to be canceled for lack of interest. "Social life cannot be commanded," Linden stated (Museum Society, 1875, p. 9) and added the following 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. (p. 10)

Which societies he referred to remains unclear. The rather defensive account of more than four pages, however, makes it quite obvious that this president was not a great advocate or even lover of social events.

It was no surprise that in 1884 president Linden, after another pubkeeper had left, suggested abolishing the Casino pub. The managing committee had called a special general meeting on this issue and urged the members to make a fundamental decision—either to give up the pub or to return to a pure society pub (without admittance of nonmembers). For the latter option, a sound financial solution was demanded. The president and the secretary who diagnosed a financial impasse voted for abolishment, and 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” (Museum Society, 1884, p. 7), and it was suggested that donations be collected (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 also went right through the managing committee (p. 3f). In 1889, 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] has passed by quietly, as yet being silent is a main virtue in Reading Societies” (Museum Society, 1888, p. 5).

When Linden resigned at the end of 1889 (he died shortly thereafter), the new managing committee immediately began a wave of social events. *Soirées* and balls were given, lectures were held, and musical and theatrical performances were staged, all with considerable success, which seemed to prove Linden’s assessments wrong. In 1894, an “entertainment committee” was formed, and a few years later the budget for social events was increased and the new president soon stated that “our social evenings play a major role in the social life of our town” (Museum Society, 1893, p. 7). The Museum Society was financially restructured, right after Linden’s resignation, by renting out the rooms on the first floor of the building, which yielded additional income. In this way, the Casino pub was saved, although with less rooms. In 1898, the Casino pub was questioned once again and finally given up in 1912 when the house was expropriated by the city council (for their own purposes) and a new house was built. This did not, however, 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. Among the initiatives from the 1890s, three types of social events became firmly institutionalized: public lectures, readings by authors, and 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. Whether the cultural schism between the different groups of members had finally been overcome is difficult to judge. Both goals, however, were actually strived for in parallel and no annual report ever mentioned this schism again. The fresh approach by the new management seemed fruitful and was, after the turn of the century, supported by favorable socioeconomic conditions—that is, by a booming economy in town.

Cultural Gender Contrast as a Nonissue

Another cultural contrast was based on gender. It became visible when for the first time women were admitted as members in 1891. Previously, the Museum Society—like most reading and other societies of the 18th and 19th centuries—was a male society excluding women from membership. This exclusion, however, concerned the social life but not the reading. The wife of a member as well as his children were entitled to use the library. What if a member died, however, and left his wife a widow? Did this entitlement then become invalid? Was she not allowed to use the library anymore only because her husband had died? Such questions made many reading societies issue library cards to certain people who could not become members. The Museum Society also had such library cards. Thus, to abolish these library cards and allow women to become full members was quite a revolutionary act. This step was initiated, once again, by the new managing committee right after Linden’s resignation. It contradicted the rules of the bylaws but this did not bother the new president, Dr. Vetsch (Museum Society, 1891):

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. (p. 3)

The “reading folder,” a social institution that had been invented 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. This was not the first time that a strong interest of women in such reading folders was 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 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, p. 5), and that it was above all women and daughters who enjoyed the reading folders (Amrein, 1886),

Even if here and there the potatoes get burned and the milk boils over because of the reading folder, it is yet the most widespread, most welcome and most discreet friend of the house in all our town, comforting those women whose husbands are sitting over a glass of wine or beer. (p. 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, in the 1870s became a mass society with many more members than the Museum Society ever had. 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 society of the upper classes, did.

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 (Museum Society, 1891, p. 3). Were they interested only in the reading folders or in the other rights and privileges of a member as well? 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 or the political life of the society. Unfortunately, there is no data available on this issue because no proceedings are left of those meetings. Concerning the other social events, there was hardly any gender barrier and balls especially presupposed couples anyway. What can be reconstructed is that 30 years later the quota of women was 10% (54 of 537 members; Museum Society, 1920) and another 30 years later 17.6% (45 of 255 members; Museum Society, 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 appears¹⁴ that up to the dissolution of the Museum Society there has never been a woman elected into the managing committee, although there were several who held PhDs.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 a cultural contrast existed 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, and so on have not been recorded in any written document of the Museum Society and have therefore perished. In a document of the Büsch Society, however, gender issues are mentioned. In 1911, the (male) author of a commemorative publication for the 75th anniversary of the Büsch Society complained that the male majority had always treated women as "quantité négligeable" and as "superfluous accessories" and had always made them feel inferior (Koch, 1911, p. 16ff). Several instances are mentioned to provide some evidence that gender issues were repeatedly discussed; this reading society postponed granting women full membership until 1872. In the following year, there was a big debate on the question of whether dancing was dignified enough to include in an evening program (which implied inviting women to dance with men). 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 snuffy remark that the fashion would be out of date anyway by the time the women got the reading folder (Koch, 1911, p. 16ff). Presumably, comparable instances of paternalistic behavior toward women have also happened in the Museum Society.

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) began to read novels, a new cultural product, reading societies were founded with the specific objective to fight the diagnosed "reading addiction" or "reading mania." The goal was not to prevent them from reading but rather to replace the "cheap novels" by "good literature" (Weisz, 1934a, 1934b). How were such educational intentions handled in a reading society with a democratic structure, in which 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 (see Museum Society, 1883, p. 9). A statistical analysis, however, showed that members' actual demand was preferably belles lettres and, above all, novels and novellettes.¹⁶ President Linden concluded that the Museum Society should reduce its aspiration to build up a scientific library and concentrate on belles lettres (Museum Society, 1878, p. 9). There was still a difference, however, between good and "cheap" belles lettres. In the 1920s, a strange ritual emerged; in the annual reports, the presidents time and again reproached the members for their bad literary taste. This judgment was regularly based on a survey by the librarian that showed which 8 or 10 books were most requested. The validity of this procedure—to infer from the most requested 8 or 10 books the general literary taste of all the members—was, of course, more than questionable. Nevertheless, it was repeated by many presidents. In 1946, the president noted (Museum Society, 1946, p. 4), "The most often read books are, as the experience of many decades teaches, time and again best-sellers, while the rich and precious stocks of older books are used only rarely or never at all." In 1949, the following phrase was created that 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 (Museum Society, 1949, p. 6). This reproaching ritual, which persisted for nearly four decades, indicated once again a rather paternalistic attitude of the presidents toward the members. The members were not treated as clients or even owners of the reading society but rather as people who needed guidance. Such an educational pose was hardly apt to stop the decrease of membership or even acquire new members.

This tension between the quality standards of literary experts and the taste and demand of laypersons persisted in the modern debate on quality assessments versus audience rating of radio and TV broadcastings. The librarians or heads of literary committees in reading societies were usually professionals—often college professors of German literature—who aspired after high-quality standards of their library. They had to conceive of the members as clients, however, and therefore had to balance 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 demands is shown by the following quote in which a librarian draws, based on the usual list of best-sellers, the following conclusion (Museum Society, 1953):

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 best-seller after a span of 10 years mostly perishes unheralded and unsung. (p. 3)

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

Similar cultural contrasts can be identified concerning the social events. As noted previously, three types of social events had become firmly institutionalized in the 1890s: public lectures, readings by authors, and 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 Only some of the members enjoyed these balls, however; others designated them "as a boring and stiff institution" (Museum Society, 1925, p. 7). The managing committee was determined to keep this tradition, even when members made alternative 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" (Museum Society, 1949, p. 6f). The question was how to keep up a tradition the members did not want anymore. Only 3 years later, in 1952, a "certain ball tiredness among the members" was reported (Museum Society, 1952, p. 7) and after 1953, "after the distressing experiences of the past years" (Museum Society, 1954, p. 5), no balls took place.

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 rather modest, and time and again the managing committee questioned whether such readings and lectures actually met a demand or if the Museum Society should retreat to a pure reading society. As the president stated in 1935 (Museum Society, 1935), however,

We could not decide so far to abandon the good old tradition of our Society and to change 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. (p. 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 authors" (Museum Society, 1952, p. 5). In 1954, the same managing committee whose president used to reproach the members with their bad literary taste invited an author of a best-seller. This event attracted a much bigger audience than the hall could accommodate and was a tremendous success. The president concluded, "Perhaps we must . . . concentrate more on best-seller-poets who can, as this example has shown, be of a high caliber, too" (Museum Society, 1954, p. 3f). This statement, however, rather expressed how deep the president's conviction actually was that a best-seller cannot be good literature and that a best-seller author is usually not of a high caliber. It is only logical that this remained the last best-seller poet invited. When in 1958 a renowned German expert of contemporary stage and play was announced for a lecture, only 3 persons instead of the expected 700 showed up. Furious, 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" (Museum Society, 1958, p. 4).

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 than 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 (Museum Society, 1974). Since 1930, the society had suffered a steady financial loss, and by 1965 the assets had vanished by half. During the last 20 years of the society, the managing committee attempted all kinds of little innovations but without much success. In 1966, radical

measures were taken; the reading folders were canceled, the library integrated into the city library, and the Museum Society's activities were restricted to the organization of lectures (Museum Society, 1966). Death was inevitable, however. The small library next to the large library and the small reading room next to the large reading room were hardly attractive enough, and the lectures did not draw much of an 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 lifestyles, high spatial mobility, and new media such as radio, TV, telecommunications, and computers.¹⁸ Radio and TV have changed the sense of topicality dramatically and made reading folders anachronistic. No one in modern societies is interested in reading magazines that have been outdated for weeks. In addition, 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 the reading society 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. It was no coincidence that many reading societies were founded in the 18th and 19th century; we must conclude that it is also no coincidence that nearly all of them have 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 despite such unfavorable conditions remain a topic for further research. They have obviously found a cultural niche in which they are still attractive for many people. The Museum Society in St. Gallen, however, seemed to have become rigid and frozen during the past 50 years and failed to rejuvenate. It lacked a 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 last 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 toward the members was hardly apt to attract new members, in particular young ones. In the declining years, however, 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.

Conclusions

Modern society consists to a vast degree of organizations. Reading societies were typical organizations as they emerged in the 18th century and persisted until today: associations with voluntary membership and self-determined objectives, structures, and processes. In contrast to many other organizations of modernity, they were nonprofit organizations and had a democratic structure. Born in the age of the Enlightenment, they were pragmatic, future-oriented, and educational. They organized civic sense around specific goals—namely, to provide good literature for their members and to ensure a cultivated form of social entertainment. Reading societies represented a vast social movement throughout western Europe, advanced cultural change, and thus were carriers of the modernization process. Despite the similarities among them, each developed a specific, complex organizational culture. The case study of the Museum Society in St. Gallen, Switzerland, allowed to elicit some cultural contrasts within the organization that determined the organizational life for several decades. The following paragraphs present a summary of some major insights of this case study.

The first decades of the Museum Society and the history of its forerunners represent an interesting case of organizational politics. When a minority of people in the Literary Society did not succeed in reforming the society democratically, they founded a new society with the same goals (the Sun Society). Soon, they suggested a merger with the old society, thereby attempting to introduce the reforms from the outside. The same people also invited the Cercle to join the merger, although they were not interested in those people and their goals at all—they had the sole motive of acquiring the house of the Cercle that provided a suitable locality with a big hall. Later, sometime after the merger, they suggested giving up the Casino and withdrawing to a pure reading society; because they had the house, they wanted to abolish the goals and activities of the former Cercle. This process happened over a time span of 50 years; thus, it was hardly a conscious, goal-oriented, and politically calculated strategy. It was, however, presumably a

cultural mind-set that was passed on within the Sun Society and from there, in the person of the secretary and later longtime president and in many other members, to the Museum Society.

This case study shows how diverse the motives for a merger can be and what kind of a cultural schism they may produce. The Cercle wanted the additional income of membership fees to pursue their hitherto goals and activities, and the two reading societies were interested only in the house of the Cercle. The diverse orientations could be subsumed under the goals of the Museum Society, but there was a persistent cultural schism inherited by the merger between those interested in the business of reading and those interested in social entertainment. The subcultures persisted for decades and even new members did not bridge and integrate the cultural diversity but rather joined one of the preexisting subcultures. The managing committee and the president had quite an influence on advancing one kind of activity (reading) over the others (social events), and the longtime president disclosed clearly his view that the Museum Society should give up the goal of social entertainment. It is difficult, however, to judge if he was just lacking in initiative for social events or if he systematically demotivated or even suppressed other people's potential initiatives. In any case, it is amazing to observe what kind of innovations took place and how social life suddenly soared after his resignation.

Introducing innovations that met the formal goals of the society was obviously easier than changing the goals themselves. The democratic organization of the society did not allow for radical change. When the longtime president suggested radical measures, such as giving up the Casino pub, the opposing members showed up at the general meeting to smash the suggestion, and because there were only a few people attending the general meetings²⁰ it was easy even for a minority of members to become a voting majority. This mechanism may have prevented later managing committees from suggesting a radical change even when the society suffered a continuous financial loss. It took 30 years, up to the 1960s, until radical measures were suggested and implemented. Before that, the presidents only posed rhetorical questions as to whether one possibly should consider doing this or that, and they added immediately that the managing committee had decided to go on with business as usual. When radical measures were finally suggested in 1966 and 1974, the managing committee developed a careful operational plan to build up a coalition strong enough to win the vote: There was a written plan determining who had to convince whom of the committee's proposal and motivate him or her to attend the general meeting and to vote for it. Thus, it may well be that the democratic structure of the organization accounts for a certain inertia of the

managing committee to take adequate measures in a perceived crisis and to delay radical change as long as possible.

In connection with the democratic structure, the nonprofit orientation proved to be fatal in one way. Although during the first half of the society's lifetime the managing committees tried hard and, on average, succeeded in achieving a balanced budget, the managing committees after 1930 got used to reporting a financial loss. Although they undertook all kinds of measures to reduce costs and increase membership fees, the annual statement of accounts continued to show a deficit. With a nonprofit orientation, the financial loss could be legitimized by the honorable goals and activities of the society, and nobody wanted to value the virtue of a balanced budget over those. Thus, each managing committee diagnosed the problem but went on with business as usual hoping for a better next year. The alarm clock calling for radical measures was set off only in 1965, when an extrapolated scenario of business as usual showed that the society would go bankrupt within 10 years. The managing committee of 1966 took action, sanctioned by the vote of the general meeting, and thereby preserved some of the society's assets.

The decline of the Museum Society, like that of other reading societies, may be attributed above all to the change in the social environment. Reading societies emerged as carriers of the modernization process and later became victims of the very same process. The cultural contrast within the Museum Society between an elitist, traditional interpretation of the society's goal and the tastes and interests of the members and clients, as described in this case study, was not a main cause of the decline but certainly aggravated the crisis. Presumably, the actual problem was not so much the committee's striving for elitist standards and cultural values as the way it communicated them and the way it dealt with other people's tastes. The annual presidential ritual to reproach the members for their tastes may well be an indicator of a generally repulsive climate within the society, with people applying many kinds of impression management techniques to appear to be scholarly and savant while showing disrespect for ordinary people with ordinary tastes. This type of behavior and communication—this educational, paternalistic style—was hardly apt to attract new and young members, especially during and after the 1950s when the offered advantages (reading folder, library, and lectures) became less attractive. When a democratic organization with voluntary membership fails to rejuvenate its membership, however, it runs the risk of rotating in a vicious circle, with increasingly older members who foster traditions that do not appeal to the young generation. Failure to rejuvenate means aging of members and organizations, and death becomes inevitable.

Notes

1. For Germany, see Prüsener (1973), Göpfert (1976), and Prüsener and Göpfert (1977). In autumn of 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; Galitz, 1986; van Dülmen, 1996). For Switzerland, see Im Hof (1982), Bernard and Reichen (1982), and Erne (1988) regarding societies; regarding reading societies, see Braun (1965), Milstein (1972), Eberle (1989, 1997), and Bachmann (1993).
2. Most historical research on reading societies focused on this period, except Braun (1965), Eberle (1989, 1997), and Bachmann (1993).
3. The term *organization* emerged in France during the 18th century (Herkunftswörterbuch, 1989, p. 581f) as a designation of these new, modern social formations with voluntary membership, voluntary objectives, and voluntary structures and processes (see Türk, 1989).
4. For a review of different anthropological concepts of organizational culture concerning formal and informal aspects, see Schwartzman (1993) and Gregory (1983).
5. Regarding the subject of anthropology through temporal concepts and devices as a political act, see Fabian (1983).
6. Regarding the term *objectivation*, see Berger and Luckmann (1966).
7. As previous research by the author has shown (Eberle, 1989), 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.
8. In previous research, many interviews were conducted 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, see Halbwachs (1980) and Assmann (1988).
9. The annual reports 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 and of Berne since 1847; in the German cities of Hannover since 1789 and of Karlsruhe since 1808.
11. All quotes from the bylaws, the annual reports, and other historical documents were translated from German into English by the author. The sometimes heavy, complicated style reflects the German original.
12. The goals changed in their wording—especially because the civil code defined some legal rules for associations—but not in their substance.
13. See Linden (1871, pp. 1-50) and the preserved documents of each society.
14. This cannot be reconstructed with ultimate certainty on the basis of the preserved materials.
15. Being an academic and having a title was obviously important for getting elected into the managing committee.
16. The same was the case in other reading societies: See Amrein (1886, 1897), Koch (1911), and Eberle (1997).
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, and Kellner (1974), Giddens (1991), Bauman (1991, 1993), Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994), and Gross (1994).
19. Survey by the author in 1994 (see Eberle, 1997).
20. Linden stated in 1875 (Museum Society, 1875, p. 11) that the seven members of the managing committee and the three revisers usually represent the majority at the general meetings.

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Inherent Contrasts
and Contradictions

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Editor

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