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1848 : clubkoorts en revolutie. Democratische experimenten in Parijs en Berlijn

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Cover Page



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Summary

In the revolutionary year of 1848, the European continent witnessed new and massive forms of democratic participation by millions of citizens, which shaped a new political culture outside the formal political spectrum of parliament and government. These forms of participation are the subject of this PhD thesis in political history, defended in May 2016 at Leiden University. The thesis is entitled (translated from Dutch): *1848—Club Fever and Revolution: Democratic Experiments in Paris and Berlin*. The core of this thesis is a dual case study of the revolutionary capitals of Paris and Berlin, both of whose inhabitants suddenly began to experiment with democracy in political meetings and clubs. The case studies show the similarities in political organization and participation in 1848 on the European continent, and as such they mark a watershed moment in the development of the modern democracies, but they also underline the different objectives, shapes and outcomes of these grassroots “democratic experiments” in two different revolutionary contexts.¹

In Paris, economic and social crises were followed by a political crisis. Discontent among the urban population led to a revolution on February 24, after which the Second Republic was established, along with universal male suffrage, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. In the weeks after, hundreds of political clubs were founded. Despite earlier experiences with Jacobin clubs during the French Revolution and radical and socialist secret societies during the Restoration period, the clubs of 1848 were a novelty in Paris. They were independent, legalized, broadly accessible organizations that explicitly focused on debating political (and social) issues and organizing peaceful

1 For an elaborate analysis in English, see Geerten Waling, ‘Organizing in a Moment of Madness: Political Meetings & Clubs in 1848’, in: Maartje Janse and Henk te Velde eds., *Organizing Democracy. Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century* (expected: Basingstoke 2016).

political action. Therefore, this thesis claims that they should be regarded as “institutionalized popular assemblies.” The clubs aspired to both a parliamentary and an electoral role: lacking a legitimate parliament between February and May of 1848, they followed the actions of the Provisional Government closely. In the meantime, they focused on the parliamentary elections by scrutinizing candidates and by planning campaigns. In that sense, they assumed the task of democratic surveillance that is, according to Pierre Rosanvallon, inherent to popular sovereignty. Also, the clubs set out to educate citizens about politics and to mobilize them for the elections.

The organizational structure of the clubs varied. Small clubs of dozens of participants mostly adopted an “egalitarian-democratic model” in which issues, decisions, and appointments were subjected to elaborate discussions and voting rounds in which the visitors (often subscribed as members) could participate. Larger clubs, attracting anywhere from hundreds to thousands of participants, were characterized by an “authoritarian-democratic model,” in which one charismatic leader assembled, addressed, and directed the meetings. The audience (a small number of which were subscribed as members) participated and voted by cheering and shouting. Both types of clubs showed interest in collaborating with other clubs in Paris and elsewhere in France. They worked towards the establishment of a nationwide club network as well as the “republicanization” of France—this was especially true of the most prominent Parisian club alliance: the “Club des Clubs.”

“Paris had the club fever,” as Second Republic Minister Garnier-Pagès would remember later. The organizational euphoria did not last long. In a demonstration on April 16, the clubs sided with the Provisional Government against the Parisian workers’ population, a decision that compromised their legitimacy as the (self-proclaimed) “voice of the people.” One week later, in the parliamentary elections, their legitimacy was further damaged. The candidates supported by the clubs hardly gained any seats in the new National Assembly. At that point, many clubs disappeared, and the remaining organizations radicalized into an antiparliamentarian force. On May 15, a mass of discontented citizens, led by major club leaders such as Blanqui and Barbès, stormed the National Assembly in the Palais Bourbon, dis-

solved the parliament, and then moved on to the Hôtel de Ville to replace the new government. Their attempt failed, many were arrested, and the most influential clubs were decapitated and dismantled. The final blow to the Paris club movement was struck in the last week of June, after a violent clash between armed forces and revolting workers in the labor districts of Paris in the June Days Uprising. The subsequent dictatorship of general Cavaignac actively repressed political assemblies and associations—a policy that was continued by President Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte after December 1848. The Paris club fever had been ardent but short-lived.

This thesis presents Berlin as a useful counterstudy to better understand the shape and impact of bottom-up democratic experiments as newly (re)invented political tools to channel popular participation in, and the legitimacy of, a new democratic state. Compared to the city by the Seine, the city by the Spree shows a rather different kind of revolutionary development and outcome, but a strikingly similar tendency of experimenting with democracy among ordinary citizens. After news from the Parisian revolution had reached the Prussian capital on February 28, crowds of Berliners gathered in Tiergarten, outside the Brandenburg city gate. In a matter of days, spontaneous and chaotic discussions turned into organized popular meetings. Their organizers, mostly middle-class intellectuals with radical democratic ideas, succeeded in reaching out to a large audience. As the Berliners' political awareness increased, the meetings grew bigger, and the orators soon acquired heroic reputations. Two weeks after the first *Zelten* meeting, the force of public opinion suddenly seemed insuppressible and asserted concrete political influence. A request for political reforms addressed to the head of government, King Frederick William IV, was signed by thousands of Berliners. After a series of agitated meetings in an increasingly revolutionary atmosphere, the Prussian king finally broke his silence on March 18. He publicly conceded to the reformers' demands in front of a worried crowd in the palace square. But the monarch was too late: the situation escalated and barricades were put up all over the city. After one violent night, the king withdrew his troops from the city, appointed new ministers, and sought peace with his "dear Berliners." Although the monarch remained in power, the reforms that he was

forced to make marked a watershed moment in the history of Berlin.

In the week following the “March Revolution,” mass meetings continued to take place—now also within Berlin’s city walls. Out of these gatherings, several clubs were founded. Radical (“democratic”) clubs, but also moderate (“constitutional”) clubs started to meet in restaurants and theaters to discuss political reform. Founding documents from these clubs show that they had largely the same objectives as their Parisian counterparts. They formulated demands for electoral and constitutional reform and pleas for social solutions and participation of Prussia in a united Germany (in the Frankfurt Parliament). Similar to the Parisian clubs, the political clubs in Berlin had ambitions to collaborate with other organizations, especially with those outside the city limits: they joined and hosted congresses of likeminded associations from all around Germany. Unlike those of the Paris club movement, club meetings in Berlin were mostly structured according to the “egalitarian-democratic model.” The “authoritarian-democratic model” was applied by the outdoor popular mass meetings, which at first retained their autonomy, but over the course of 1848 were more often annexed by the clubs to gain broad legitimation for their political stances. Even more than in Paris, orderly procedures seemed to be crucial to the club organizers in Berlin.

The Prussian monarchy, contrary to France, had never experienced a revolution before, nor was it used to seeing political participation and organization happen outside the realm of court, church, and nobility. Surprisingly, the Prussian authorities proved willing to negotiate on several occasions in 1848—before *and* after 18 March—with the leaders of the popular meetings and clubs. Whereas in France, the Provisional Government was a product of the revolution and thus a natural ally of the revolutionary clubs, the clubs in Berlin automatically belonged to the opposition, yet they were less activist and violent than their Parisian counterparts. Another difference with Paris was that in Berlin the political organizations were separated along ideological lines. Initially, the two most influential clubs were those of the radicals and of the moderates. But with a delay of two months, after the shock and confusion of the March Revolution, even conservatives started to organize. From May

onwards, conservatives gathered in several *Vereine*—political associations that were explicitly not called clubs—and started to use the printing press—in the form of posters, pamphlets, and newspapers—to win over public opinion. By adopting the techniques that were initially applied and developed by reformers and revolutionaries, conservatives accepted and entered a new political playing field: the public debate.

The reaction of the conservatives in Berlin symbolizes the weakening of the formerly interwoven and impenetrable structures of church, crown, aristocracy, and academia—and the coming of a new, public, political culture. This development in the authoritarian Prussian state illustrates how the whole of Europe, in a matter of months, underwent a Tocquevillian transformation of (the perception of) civil society and the public sphere. In Berlin more than in Paris—France would follow an alternative path of political organization in the second half of the nineteenth century—the plurality of political organizations in 1848 precluded the era of the political mass party, a model that would be developed in the 1850s and 1860s. Although the revolutionary atmosphere of Berlin was squashed by the Prussian government in November 1848, and all clubs were closed, the experiences with the organization of likeminded people for political discussions and actions would have their influence.

Historians who have studied 1848, such as Peter Amann in his important 1975 study *Revolution and Mass Democracy: The Paris Club Movement in 1848*, often describe the revolutions in terms of failure. This thesis, inspired by the works of Jonathan Sperber, rejects that view by focusing on the popular meetings and clubs of 1848 and what their existence may have contributed to the development of modern civil society. Their history was tumultuous and short, and the results surely did not match the ambitions of their main leaders and organizers, but that should not lead us to conclude that their efforts were meaningless. First of all, apart from success or failure, these organizations were unique democratic experiments in an extraordinary historical moment. They drew in thousands of politically inexperienced citizens. The clubs functioned as institutionalized popular assemblies, as campaign offices, and even as parliamentary-style

institutions representing the people. Although many goals of the respective club movements were not met, the clubs offered a popular forum to instruct and train citizens in political theory and practice. Also, before elections, the clubs offered a platform where candidates were selected, where voters were mobilized, where republican missions (in Paris) were planned, and where the electoral process was surveilled.

1848 was a laboratory, not only for the revolutionaries who made that year notorious in European history, but also for the historians of today: it is a place where we can observe phenomena that are not so clearly perceivable in other moments in time. The political meetings and clubs were not just results of a development of associational life and civil society on the one hand, or of a “repertoire” (Charles Tilly) of collective action and protest on the other. They were fed and shaped largely by the specific revolutionary circumstances of 1848, the “moment of madness” (Aristide Zolberg) of the revolution, in which dreams became possibilities. Hence the clubs of 1848 should be regarded as unique and innovative grassroots experiments with democracy.

The diversity of tasks the clubs assumed shows the growing need for organizations to facilitate the political participation of citizens and to channel their influence on the national governments. This need would later appear to be inherent to modern (party) democracies. The epilogue of this thesis argues that the democratic experiments of 1848 have greatly affected the political culture in the European nation states. They aided the development of the later, modern European democracies in three respects. Firstly, they marked the acceptance of a non-violent, independent and political civil society and public debate. Secondly, the democratic experiments of 1848 established—especially in the case of the authoritarian German countries—a culture of political opposition in which different ideologies compete with each other on a level playing field within and outside of parliament. Thirdly, the experience of thousands of political meetings and clubs on the continent made clear to those in power that the “the people” were a force to be reckoned with. Both Napoleon III and Bismarck, along with many other “populists” in the decades after 1848, must have been aware of the fact that denying the desires and demands of their populations would not go unpunished.

The “springtime of the peoples” may have been short, tumultuous and disappointing to many, but 1848 would have a long-lasting effect on the modern democracies that we consider so self-evident today.