

SOCIETY

A Nation of Joiners?

"The Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940" by Gerald Gamm and Robert D. Putnam, in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Spring 1999), 147 North St., Norfolk, Mass. 02056.

If Americans in recent decades have exhibited a worrisome decline in civic engagement—as Harvard University scholar Putnam argued in his famous “bowling alone” article of 1995—is that unprecedented? Have Americans until now always been “a nation of joiners,” their civic life growing steadily ever stronger? Poring over city directories from 1840 to 1940 for 26 cities and towns, Putnam and Gamm, a political scientist at the University of Rochester, find a more complicated picture of the past.

There was “steady growth in associational life throughout the second half of the 19th century, accelerating between 1880 and 1900,” they write. That was when the “foundation stone of 20th-century civil society was set in place.” But then the growth slowed to a halt, followed by decline and stagnation. From slightly more than two voluntary associations per 1,000 people in 1840, according to the average city directory, the number increased to more than five by 1910, then dropped to a little above four in 1920, remaining at that level for the next two decades.

Many studies of particular types of associations have likewise found that the late 19th century was a time of vigorous growth. “In Peoria and St. Louis, in Boston and Boise and Bath and Bowling Green, Americans organized clubs and churches and lodges and veterans’ groups,” the authors note. But this usually is attributed to urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. Experiencing turmoil in their lives, runs the conventional argument, men and women in the nation’s great cities formed the associations to make human connections again.

Putnam and Gamm, however, find that “associational life [then] was most vibrant . . . in the small cities and towns of the hinterland, rather than the great cities of the Northeast or Midwest.” The authors are not sure why, though they mention several possible causes, including the greater availability of professional entertainment in the big cities. If a good explanation of what happened can be found, they believe, it might shed some useful light on “the condition and prospects of American civil society” today.

The Tremendous Tuber

“How the Potato Changed the World’s History” by William H. McNeill, in *Social Research* (Spring 1999), New School Univ., 66 W. 12th St., New York, N.Y. 10011.

Neither GIs peeling them nor well-dressed diners eating them au gratin would be likely to imagine it, but potatoes have altered the course of world history. So contends McNeill, the noted historian and author of *The Rise of the West* (1963).

The tuber’s first big role came on the high plateaus of the Andes, McNeill says. There, potatoes served as the main energy source for the Inca Empire, of the 12th through the 15th centuries, as well as for its predecessors and its Spanish successor. “In the altiplano . . . grain did not flourish nearly as well as potatoes,” which grew abundantly on artificially raised fields around Lake Titicaca (between what are now Peru and Bolivia). The Incas converted the moist tubers into

frozen *chuño* by exposing them to the cold night air, then stored them in natural underground deep freezes, where they could be kept for several years.

This method of food preservation allowed Andean civilization to emerge, beginning about A.D. 100, McNeill says. “By collecting *chuño* as taxes from the peasants who worked the raised fields, and disbursing it from imperial storehouses to labor gangs, working at official command, it became possible to wage war, build roads, construct the monumental stone structures that still amaze visitors, and sustain all the other aspects of imperial civilized society in the altiplano, both before and after the Spanish conquest,” McNeill writes.

After Spanish ships returning from South

America (presumably) brought the tuber with them, *Solanum tuberosum* spread to European gardens and fields. Its dissemination was encouraged, McNeill says, by the fact that, left in the ground, it was relatively inaccessible to troops foraging for food. Soldiers might make off with a peasant family's grain stores, but the family members could still avert starvation. The Thirty Years' War (1618–48), McNeill says, was "the last war fought in northern Europe before potatoes became widespread enough to cushion the human cost of military requisitioning."

During the 18th century, potatoes gained new significance, as they became a field crop in northern Europe. In Ireland, the potato gained such importance—it was cultivated by landless laborers—that the blight of 1845–47 killed more than a million people, and drove another million to the United States.

Even more world shaking, McNeill writes, "was the extraordinary ascendancy that a few states in northern Europe exercised over all the earth [between the mid-18th century and the mid-20th] on the strength of industrial, political and military transformations which could not have come about without an enormously expanded food supply from fields of potatoes."

Traditional grain cultivation required leaving as much as half the ground fallow each year so that it could be plowed in summer, eliminating weeds before they went to seed



In pre-Columbian Andean civilizations, potatoes were a source of wealth. This planting scene is from about 1615.

and ensuring a nearly weed-free harvest the next year. Farmers in Germany and elsewhere discovered that by planting potatoes in the fallow ground, and using hoes to eliminate the weeds, they could have their grain and potatoes, too. "Many times more people could count on having enough to eat, even when population growth exceeded any need for extra labor in the fields," McNeill writes. "Consequently, the industrial transformation of northern Europe could and did proceed at a very rapid rate." All thanks to the potato.

White America's Stigma

"The Culture of Deference" by Shelby Steele, in *Academic Questions* (Winter 1998–99), National Assn. of Scholars, 575 Ewing St., Princeton, N.J. 08540–2741.

In the mid-20th century, white America finally gave up the notion of black inferiority and committed itself to equality. But in thus accepting the shame of centuries of racial inequality, argues Steele, the noted black author of *The Content of Our Character* (1990) and *A Dream Deferred* (1998), white America—which previously had seen itself as a "universal" people—acquired the disabling stigma of racism. "The stigma of whites as racists mandates that they redeem the nation from its racist history but then weakens their

authority to enforce the very democratic principles that true redemption would require."

"Here were whites exclaiming the sacredness of individual rights while they used the atavism of race to deny those rights to blacks," he points out. "They celebrated merit as the most egalitarian form of advancement, yet made sure that no amount of merit would enable blacks to advance. Therefore these principles themselves came to be seen as part of the