Johann Peter Hasenclever’s painting “The Newspaper Readers: Tavern Scene, 1835” depicts a quotidian moment from a Rhenish inn: three men listen with rapt attention to a man reading aloud the Düsseldorfer Zeitung, a prominent liberal newspaper. Gestures and facial expressions signify the three different responses of approval, qualified acceptance, and rejection toward the political topic, which collectively evoke the independent judgment and spirited participation of ordinary Rhinelanders. A younger interlocutor, either exhausted or bored, sleeps in his chair. In using a chiaroscuro technique to evoke the luminous power of print to enlighten and politically engage common people, Hasenclever betrayed his political assumptions. But it also provided a nineteenth-century answer to a current question: how modern political publics arose.

That the typeset word transformed the political world of the old regime is irrefutable. It remains the core of what scholars call the public sphere, a term linked with the Enlightenment ideal of civil society, which posited the free exchange of ideas between autonomous individuals as a necessary step toward a rational, self-governing society. In seventeenth-century Britain and in eighteenth-century Europe and North America an expanding open market of ideas spawned reading communities that unleashed a new dynamic in forming literary taste and further undercut the state and church as arbiters of intellectual, political, and religious
Introduction

Over the course of the eighteenth century, a western European and North American ‘public’ informed and organized itself to become a cultural and political force autonomous from corporate, ecclesiastical, and state viewpoints.¹ This imagined collectivity posited itself as a dogma.² Over the course of the eighteenth century, a western European and North American ‘public’ informed and organized itself to become a cultural and political force autonomous from corporate, ecclesiastical, and state viewpoints.⁴ This imagined collectivity posited itself as a


² In Germany, the Enlightenment’s public sphere did not counterpose itself against state and church as it did in France. See Richard van Dülmen and Anthony Williams, The Society of the Enlightenment: The Rise of the Middle Class and Enlightenment Culture in Germany (New York, 1992); Michael J. Sauter, “Preaching, a Ponytail, and an Enthusiast: Rethinking the Public Sphere’s Subversiveness in Eighteenth-Century Prussia,” CEH 37 (2004): 544-67.
legitimate subject of public affairs, thereby redefining the premises and precepts of statecraft. For some scholars, then, the public sphere is used as a prescriptive model to explain the rise of modern society and the ability of individuals and social groups to act on their own behalf. Historians, however, wield the term descriptively to think about how news and information circulated, the degree to which new ideas penetrated society, and the ways in which social groups deliberated as publics.

In theory, the public sphere is a politically neutral space of communication accommodating many voices, yet by the eighteenth century it also served as a solvent of the old regime. New reading practices, scholars argue, promoted a sensibility of individualism that chafed under the collective identities of corporate society. The proliferation of reading material opened up a broader “horizon of expectations” among readers, who came to question the political privileges of birthright and the circumscribed liberties of the lower social orders. By encouraging communication, commentary, and private reflection, the public sphere strained the social contract of absolutism, which assumed compliant subjects. While absolutist rulers disseminated knowledge for more efficient and productive subjects, reading publics also perceived “publicity,” “transparency,” and the “openness” of Öffentlichkeit as a means of checking arbitrary rule and of initiating reform. Moreover, the eighteenth-century themes of rationality, utility, and natural law redefined subjects as rights-bearing citizens. Following the French Revolution, Europeans defined sovereignty not only as dynastic prerogative but as the collective will of the nation. Indeed, the very idea of the modern nation as a political community is difficult to explain without recourse to the phenomenon of “public opinion.”

This definition of the public sphere is indebted to Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a landmark work of 1962 that offered philosophers, social scientists, and literary critics a historical trajectory in tracing the impact of public opinion on modern culture.

---

5 In his brilliant survey of old regime culture, T. C. W. Blanning argues that the public sphere “was not essentially or even mainly bourgeois” and that nobles “made the most of the emancipatory opportunities provided by the public sphere” (*Culture of Power*, p. 181). This view is plausible, but the cultural dynamic of opinion formation nonetheless undermined the status society of the old regime.

political sovereignty.7 Not surprisingly, scholars – including Habermas himself – have sedulously critiqued, reworked, and redefined the historical accuracy of the public sphere.8 By focusing on the normative exclusion of women from the public sphere, for example, historians have challenged the public sphere’s putative universality.9 Others questioned whether opinion formation is class-specific and national in nature.10 Further, Habermas’s premise that the print world of civil society superannuated representative publicity has also been dismantled. Nations, monarchs, and the bourgeois deployed public space to project power and control; the rituals and invented traditions of nations and bourgeois political cultures are thus part of the public sphere.11 Social histories of


8 For a good introduction to the English reception and its critical assessments see Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, MA, 1992). For Habermas’s own revisions, see his Vorwort in Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, pp. 11–15.


Grub Street printers, journalists, and their all-too-human motives also provide correctives to Habermas’s ideal of print communication as an arena of rational and critical deliberation. Recent scholarship has furthermore queried the conceptual dichotomies of state/society and private/public; in place of strict division, they see porosity and interconnectivity. And, inevitably, there are prominent scholars who question the concept altogether. In spite of the criticisms and modifications, the intrinsic importance of the public sphere endures. At issue is the ability of a civil society to communicate and establish a consensus for governance. Although history repeatedly shows that social groups excluded from the realms of political discussion must exercise violence to access it, the heuristic of non-violent dialogue and reform remains critical.

This study positions itself as a contribution to a broader understanding of the public sphere, the mechanisms by which public opinion is formed, and the shifting boundaries of political citizenship in the early nineteenth century. It responds to the challenge of Hasenclever’s painting of 1835, which boldly claimed that common Rhinelanders participated in the public sphere and sought to join the political nation as rights-bearing citizens. But Hasenclever’s deft brushwork covers the question of how these common laborers arrived at this point of political engagement. Whence the motivation to read and listen to political reportage? Where and how did these workers acquire the necessary mental equipment to participate?


The claim is still bold, for some scholars continue to argue that ordinary nineteenth-century Germans were unpolitical, uninformed, and not prepared to participate in public life. See Karl H. Wegert, German Radical Confront the Common People: Revolutionary Politics and Popular Politics, 1789–1849 (Mainz, 1992).
display the partisan spirit exhibited in the canvas? What media and institutions were the cultural agents that allowed the Rhenish underclasses to imagine alternative political vistas? The rudimentary, initial phase of popular politicization is not addressed. Prior to the fixed party-political positions in the mid and late nineteenth century, there was a preliminary period that awakened a population to political alternatives and the possibility of participation in a new political landscape. To debate a newspaper article in a tavern, or eventually join a political party, presupposes a disposition that is no longer disengaged. This study centers on this phase and asks how forms of popular culture inducted broader publics into the civic realm of participatory politics.

For this crucial non-institutional phase, scholarship is particularly wanting. The Habermasian model does not account for social groups outside the upper echelons of the bourgeoisie. For both Habermas and subsequent generations of scholars, the engines of transformation remain elite prior matter – journals, novels, gazettes, scientific treatises – and its consumers, whose associational bases composed the imagined community of the literary and political nation. In Karl-Georg Faber’s landmark study on the Rhenish press in the Vormärz, the well-heeled merchants, industrialists, notables, pastors, civil servants, court councilors, military officers, free professionals, and other bourgeois elite constituted the political class. Agrarian laborers, factory hands, and waged workers were certainly not part of this communicative network, nor were lower-middle-class artisans, craftsmen, and rural farmers. How ideas and information disseminated throughout German society, and how it became widely politicized in the first half of the nineteenth century, remains largely unresolved. Clearly Habermas’s template of associational networks and elite print culture does not accommodate investigations of popular political communication. For the popular realm, the public sphere should be understood less as a fixed set of institutions and social groups than as an elusive communicative phenomenon in a state of play, movement, and development.

17 Habermas briefly addressed the idea of a plebeian public sphere, which briefly opened up in the French Revolution, but did not pursue the linkage between the liberal and plebeian public sphere (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, p. 52).
18 Dülmen and Williams, The Society of the Enlightenment; Melton, Rise of the Public; Hohendahl, Institution of Criticism.
19 Faber, Die Rheinlande, pp. 419 ff.
20 Robert Darnton has criticized scholars’ reification of the public sphere as a “thing-in-itself” with causal agency (“Book History, the State of Play: An Interview with Robert Darnton,” SHARP News, Summer 1994, p. 3). To a large degree, the interpretive role of Vereinswesen in historiography has fallen victim to this problem.
In the mid-1980s, the German historical profession turned its energies to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of nineteenth-century civil society. The voluminous research is of a high standard, and we are indebted to the questions, theorizing, and empirical research that has transported the discussion to new levels. Two research programs in particular merit attention. The first is the University of Frankfurt’s multi-dissertation research project on the old urban bourgeoisie (Stadtbürgertum) and its role in effecting continuity between old-regime corporatism and early civil society. Although each of the urban case studies offers its own particularities, the research approach emphasized the centrality of city burghers and patricians in transforming a stratified society of rank into a civil society inspired with principles of self-governance, individual autonomy, and civic freedoms. The second Bürgertum project emanates from Bielefeld University, another massive project that produced a formidable phalanx of doctoral theses. This cluster of studies resists any simple generalization because of differing theoretical and comparative frameworks. Nonetheless, this project’s Bürgertum is wrought more from the modernizing forces of capitalism, professionalism, and state building than from patricians and notables. Conventional class definitions proved insufficient to capture the fragility and complexity of Bürgertum, with its dizzying array of economic relationships, cultural attitudes, and social behaviors. Instead, Jürgen Kocka and others viewed Bürgertum as a cultural formation, whose values and aspirations bound together numerous social classes and


In spite of the projects’ different points of departure, both share the assumption that urban (mostly male) bourgeois groups—with their print culture, associational bases, professional networks, and economic needs—constituted the principal motor of change. This premise, however valid, has unintentionally produced a narrow definition of the political cultures that made nineteenth-century civil society, looking other social groups and their spheres of activity. Staying within conventional boundaries of the bourgeois experience, these projects do not explore the communicative links between civil society’s core and peripheral groups. The question of civil society’s elasticity and expansive capacity is not posed. If cultural commonality lent coherence to a socially fragmented Bürgertum, then the power of culture to attract and bind other social groups to the ideals of civil society should also be assessed.

Although narrow, juridical definitions of Bürgertum and civil society in central Europe can easily elide plebeian classes, there is a wider meaning of civil society (bürgerliche Gesellschaft). Eighteenth-century political discourse advocated forms of individualism and contract theory that envisioned a classless society of free citizens. More pointedly, the French Revolution altered the terms of debate on sovereignty and governance, setting new notions of citizenship into circulation that affected German political development.

For a succinct discussion of this matter, see Sperber, “Bürger, Bürgertum,” p. 275.


The impact of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars on German society has traditionally produced exaggerated claims. For Rhenish historiography, however, a judicious balance has been struck in the last decades. See Michael Rowe, From Reich to State: The Rheinland in the Revolutionary Age, 1780–1815 (Cambridge, 2003); Hanns-Michael Hüttler, Der Untertan zum Bürgertum. Studien zur französischen Herrschaft und zum Verhalten der Bevölkerung im Rhein-Mosel-Raum von den Revolutionsbeginn bis zum Ende der napoleonischen Zeit (Wiesbaden, 1980).
regional, and state levels, common social groups acquired partisan views and exercised political agency. Such politicizing processes should be part of an interpretative framework of civil society. Because common classes constituted roughly three-quarters of German society, the capability of civil society to convey political ideas to other social groups is hardly a side show. When viewed as a cultural formation, civil society enveloped additional groups that facilitated the expansion of political activity to non-elite classes.

Excluding ordinary Germans from the early nineteenth-century public sphere has enormous ramifications. At issue is the central question whether common people grasped the ideals and ideological impulses of post-revolutionary civil society – a precondition for participation in the partisan, ideological world of German politics after 1815. Whereas the mutually reinforcing effect of bourgeois and popular politics is a long-established theme in French and English historiography, the relationship between the political cultures of ordinary and middle-class Germans rests on a less firm basis. The relative neglect in German historiography is partially explained by the long-standing dominance of the Sonderweg thesis; the model’s arguments about retarded nationhood and undeveloped bourgeois political culture posited in turn a politically backward


Although historians have long punctured the myth of an under-developed civil society in nineteenth-century Germany, the links between bourgeois and popular political cultures remain understudied. More fundamentally, how ordinary Germans encountered and acquired political opinions and how a participatory political culture took root in post-Napoleonic Germany remains rudimentary.

The social history of common people has not been neglected in Germany, but methods and questions have elided the issue of political communication prior to workers’ associations. Structural histories have, for example, carefully traced the socioeconomic turmoil of the Vormärz period, especially in regard to the transition from artisanal trades to industrial labor, but this approach has little need to inquire about opinion formation and the communicative link between bourgeois and popular classes. The approaches of historical anthropology, Alltagsgeschichte, and the microhistorical use of Eigensinn have also de-emphasized cultural commonality between the working and middle classes. On the one hand, historical anthropology has pushed the historical discipline in a new direction.