

One

Introduction

WITHIN democratic theory a remarkable consensus is emerging around Tocqueville's view that the virtues and viability of a democracy depend on the robustness of its associational life. The consensus is rooted in a renewed appreciation for the limits of states and markets as means for making collective decisions and organizing collective actions. Associations promise other ways of getting things done, from supporting public spheres and providing representation to cultivating the virtues of citizens and providing alternative forms of governance. When institutions are properly designed, according to the consensus, associations provide the social substance of liberal-democratic procedures, underwrite the very possibility of markets, and provide means of resistance and alternatives when states or markets fail. Moreover, when associational life is multifaceted and cuts across identities, communities, geographies, and other potential cleavages, it provides a dense social infrastructure enabling pluralistic societies to attain a vibrant creativity and diversity within a context of multiple but governable conflicts.¹ A robust associational life may enable more democracy in more domains of life, while forming and deepening the capacities and dispositions of democratic citizenship. Finally, for those committed to political equality, associations promise the means for voice for those disfavored by existing distributions of power and money.²

There are, of course, many other reasons to value associational life. Most if not all of the goods related to sociability, intimacy, socialization, and freedom have associative dimensions and conditions. My interest in associational life here, however, is somewhat more narrowly focused on its democratic effects. I use the term *effects* because associations formed for a variety of goods and purposes may serve democratic goods and purposes as well. To be sure, there are often trade-offs between democratic and other kinds of goods. The extent to which freedom and democracy trade off, for example, is a staple of liberal political thought. But there are many cases in which a single purpose produces a variety of effects that, although different, do not trade off against one another, as when a nonpolitical association develops skills of organization that can be put to political use in other venues. And sometimes the trade-offs among associational effects are internal to democracy, a problem that has gone almost unremarked in the literature. The solidarity required for effective political

voice and representation, for example, may work to dampen dissent and deliberation within the association, and thus limit members' experiences of dealing with conflict by deliberative means.

Given the current state of democratic theory, however, it is virtually impossible to relate these democratic hopes and expectations to the kinds of associational life we have or might have in the future. Associational life may be moving to the center of many democratic theories today, but there has been relatively little theoretical work that specifies

- *what* we should expect associations to do for democracies or
- *why* we should expect associations to carry out these democratic functions.

This book is a modest attempt to think about and theorize these two questions.

The most important reasons to attend to the associational terrain of democracy have less to do with democratic theory, however, than with social and political changes that are surpassing its conceptual capacities. Our received democratic theories were crafted during an era in which the nation-state was consolidating and had become the primary locus of nonmarket collective action. Under these circumstances, the business of doing democratic theory was relatively simple—at least compared to what it has become. Democratic theorists could focus on questions of representation, inclusion, distributions of state and state-sanctioned powers, and the characters of citizens. These traditional issues in democratic theory are hardly obsolete. Strong constitutional states are necessary to robust democracies, remaining central agents in achieving distributive justice, enforcing rights, providing security, and carrying out many other functions necessary to democracy. But they are now less encompassing of politics and collective action: the locus, domain, and nature of politics is changing, becoming more extensive and many times more complex.³ The era of the nation-state is not gone. But the forces and capacities distinctive of the state are increasingly overlaid by numerous other forces and contingencies, so much so that the terrain of politics is no longer focused solely by state-centered institutions, organizations, and movements. Nor, with changing modes of production, technology, and communication, is the landscape of economic interests as it was even a few decades ago. Combine these changes with an increase in identity politics and other postmodern features of political culture, and we can see that we are now faced with the very generic problem of rethinking the nature and location of collective action.⁴

The new prominence of associations—and the need for a democratic theory of association—needs to be understood broadly within this context, which involves four distinct although interrelated features. In different ways, each pushes the question of association to the foreground.

Globalization

Numerous forces are now pushing toward interdependencies among nation-states, including the development of global markets in finances, capital investment, labor, manufacturing, and services. There is an absolute increase in the numbers of immigrants and refugees flowing across borders. Environmental degradation likewise flows across borders, in many cases producing global effects. Global security alliances are in flux, as state-based actors such as NATO seek to redefine their missions in the aftermath of the Cold War. At the same time, new forms of communication are enabling new global publics, especially in the areas of human rights and environmental issues. There are new global associations as well as new transnational political regimes such as the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) labor and environmental riders. Each such development means that states lose some of their control over their resources and populations, a condition that can limit the extent to which democratic self-rule can be achieved through the state. But these same developments can weaken the powers of predatory states, while opening new, global venues of democracy.⁵

Differentiation

Late-modern societies reproduce themselves through differentiated systems and sectors, each with its own distinct logics, purposes, criteria, and inertia. At the highest level of abstraction, states are differentiated from markets, with states attending to matters of social order through law and administration and markets organizing production and consumption via the medium of money. States and markets are in turn differentiated from systems of social reproduction located in families, schools, religious institutions, and other social groups. Late-modern societies likewise involve specialized systems for the reproduction of knowledge and culture located in universities, sheltered government research programs, and institutions devoted to arts and culture. More generally, differentiation enhances capacities for segmented collective action, not only owing to the advantages of specialization, but because distinct sectors develop their own norms and criteria. Markets respond to effective demand, art responds to aesthetic criteria, states work within the domain of positive law and administrative law, science develops factual claims, families cultivate primary socialization and intimacy, and so on. At the same time, differentiation tends to politicize society in ways that constrain these enhanced capacities. In differentiated societies, states do not control the resources necessary to the reproduction of society. Ironically, perhaps a measure of the success of liberal-democratic constitutionalism is the extent to which capacities for collective action migrate into society. But these same developments

shift political conflict into society in ways that exceed the capacities of state institutions to mediate. In addition, differentiation fuels coordination difficulties—not just because of the lack of agents with capacities to coordinate, but also because the criteria embedded within sectors are often incommensurable. For example, socialization within families often conflicts with demands of the market; art for art’s sake can conflict with moral socialization; market-driven demands for technology can conflict with pure science; and ethics of duty cultivated by religious and secular moral codes can conflict with the instrumental reasoning typical of markets and government bureaucracies. Differentiation thus increases sectoral capacities for collective action, while also increasing the zones of political conflict and undermining political responsibility. The state’s control over coercive resources makes it a key player—maybe even the *ultimate* player⁶—but it increasingly lacks capacities to respond to political conflict, let alone engage in global planning.

Complexity

While increasing differentiation increases capacities, it also increases the complexity of collective actions. As Ulrich Beck has argued, the era in which collective actions could be conceived on the *modern* model—the application of rationally developed and monitored plans to deal with social problems—is over. Large-scale collective actions within complex environments produce unintended consequences, which in turn politicize their environments in reactive ways. Owing to the unanticipated side effects of engineering-based models of social change (for example, the costs of monoculture and pesticides in food production, dysfunctional neighborhoods resulting from planned urban renewal, birth defects caused by new medicines, and stockpiled nuclear wastes), there is a broadly based public skepticism about large-scale planning—what in a similar spirit James Scott refers to as the unmasked pretensions of “high modernity.”⁷ We have, in Beck’s terms, entered into an era of risk avoidance.⁸ In a “risk society,” collective actions are accompanied by political calculations that distribute risk according to the constituencies that are mobilized by any given plan. Risk consciousness tends to focus on complexity and contingency, increasing the potential political opposition to any given collective action. As Claus Offe puts it, “The larger the horizon of ‘actually’ possible options becomes, the more difficult grows the problem of establishing reflexive countertendencies which would make reasonably sure that one’s own action remains compatible with the ‘essential’ premises of the other affected spheres of action.”⁹ This “absence of concern for consequences” is crisis inducing and erodes tolerance for modernization processes.¹⁰ In Beck’s terms, political institutions have become subject to an increasing “congestion”: mobilization around distributions of risk produces an “in-

voluntary deceleration” of the political capacities of governments as “various groups and levels of decision-making . . . mobilize the legal means of the state against one another.”¹¹

Pluralization and Reflexivity

These developments are intertwined with changing patterns of individuation. Owing to their differentiation, complexity, and fluidity, modern societies array multiple biographical choices before individuals. As with other developments, this one is paradoxical as well. On the one hand, individuals are subject to the late-modern condition of choice. Choice cannot, as it were, be refused, nor can the responsibility that accompanies choice. And yet, paradoxically, individuals’ capacities to be responsible for the consequences of their choices are diminished by the complex and fluid contexts within which they are made. Add to this the fact that choices and risks are unequally distributed, and we can see how protean, postmodern personalities can coexist with closed, fundamentalist personalities, produced by slightly different locations and experiences within the same kind of society.¹² Identity politics is, in part, the result of the kind of society that raises—indeed, forces—the question Who am I? and in the process induces individuals to discover and think about how their social locations interact with their race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, profession, regional attachment, and lifestyle. Insofar as this pluralism of identities is not merely a matter of interesting difference, it is the result of raised consciousness of differential distributions of risks—injustices, if you will. The political consequences are ambiguous. On the one hand, the increased reflexivity provoked by these circumstances provides the space for ethical growth in politics.¹³ Only reflexively conscious individuals can ask the political questions (as Max Weber put them) What should we do? and How should we live? In this sense, politics permeates individuation as never before, as feminists noted two decades ago with the slogan “the personal is political.” On the other hand, the persistence of choice can also make the temptations of fundamentalist identities more irresistible, which in turn can produce a politics within which little reciprocity or compromise is possible.¹⁴

Paradoxically, then, late-modern societies cultivate capacities for self-rule at the same time that they dislocate the institutions through which these capacities might be realized. As Claus Offe notes in commenting on the changing fortunes of parties, legislatures, and other familiar political actors, “What turns out to be surprisingly and essentially contested is the answer to the question ‘who is in charge?’”¹⁵ I am not going to argue here that associations in general provide new locuses of political agency—or that by extension they provide, in general, new locations and meanings for democracy. No such generalization could be meaningful in today’s

environment, given the extensive diversity of associational forms, and given the fact that their capacities are quite different from those of states and markets. Rather, the question of associational life provides a more modest take on democratic possibilities: it provides an opening to the domain of questions we need to ask if we are to grasp the potentials and dangers of the changing terrain of democracy.¹⁶ The question Who is in charge? will begin to make sense only if disaggregated. The topic of association is a key trajectory of disaggregation, one that will allow us to put reasonably precise questions about whether and how these new patterns of politicization might admit of democratic possibilities.

The relationship between democracy and association stands out from a normative perspective as well. Associational life is distinctive as a linkage between the normative and conflictual dimensions of politics—a linkage that has always defined the heart and soul of democracy. If we resist for the moment limiting what counts as an “association” (say, by speaking only of secondary associations, voluntary associations, and the like), we can see that questions about associational life return us to those defining features of politics that enable democracy. The concept of association evokes the possibilities of collective action, but in a way that retains social (as opposed to legal/bureaucratic or market) modes of mediation among people, through language, norms, shared purposes, and agreements. The concept of association thus connects the normative questions that define politics—What should we do? and How should we live?—to the social and linguistic media that enable these questions to be asked, discussed, and decided. In this sense, as John Dewey appreciated, democracy is closer to associational life in spirit and ethos than it is to any other means of organization.¹⁷ States, for example, can embody these definitive questions only encumbered by its systematic functions and their legal-administrative modes of organization—although they can use their resources to structure associative venues within which these questions might live. Markets displace such questions: there is no “we” in a market, and therefore no structural possibility of collective self-rule, but only an aggregate of individual preferences and firms responding to these preferences—although democracy can often live within such market-oriented organizations. Insofar as democracy evokes the ideal of collective self-rule; insofar as self-rule evokes decision making with the possibility of normative content; insofar as democracy evokes the collective consideration of future purposes, democracy regenerates itself through its *associative* medium, however necessary state and market modes of organization. Of course, there is nothing new about these ideas in themselves: liberal constitutionalism has always been based on the premise that states must structure associative venues for political judgment—parliaments, for example. What is new, rather, is the possibility that democracy might, via its asso-

ciative media, expand within and beyond its current state-centered venues. The resurgence of the interest in associations across the ideological spectrum draws on this generic democratic idea.

Given the current state of democratic theory, however, it is virtually impossible to relate even these generic democratic hopes and expectations to the kinds of associational life we have or might have in the future. No doubt our suspicions should be aroused by the breadth of the current consensus about the democratic contributions of associations. Of course, an authentic consensus would be a remarkable achievement. But it is difficult to gauge the extent of consensus, owing to numerous conceptual and normative differences, not least about the meanings of “democracy,” but also about what constitutes an association and its virtues, what the domain of associational life entails, and—perhaps most importantly—what the nature of the society is within which these associative relations are conceived.

Thus Michael Sandel, Robert Bellah, and other civic republicans have emphasized the impact of associations on the civic virtues.¹⁸ Influenced by civic republicanism, Robert Putnam’s important *Making Democracy Work* argued that in Italy successful democratic governance and associational life are interdependent. Putnam’s work has spurred a wave of debates and focused an increasing amount of empirical work on the nature and effects of associational life in amassing “social capital”—the dispositions of reciprocity and trust that enable collective actions.¹⁹ Nancy Rosenblum’s *Membership and Morals*—the first careful theoretical account of associational life—details the multiple ways in which the diverse landscape of association contributes to pluralistic democracy through multiple effects upon character.²⁰ The work on political culture within the American pluralist tradition represented most prominently by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture*, has not only regained its stature, but has combined with a normative emphasis upon democratic participation in an impressive survey by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*.²¹ Liberals have rediscovered associational life as well. John Rawls’s hopes for the moral effects of association expressed in *A Theory of Justice* have gained rare mention until recently.²² In addition, there has been renewed attention within the field of constitutional law to the fact that the U.S. Constitution does not explicitly protect freedom of association—a fact that sits uneasily with the liberal view that freedom of association is an intrinsic value.²³

In a different vein, critical theorists who favor radical democracy, such as Jürgen Habermas, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, Claus Offe, Ulrich Preuss, and Ulrich Beck, have emphasized the ways in which liberal rights—traditionally understood as protections from the state—may also be understood as constituting a society within which associations can de-

velop distinctive means of collective judgment and action. Associations can provide the social infrastructure of robust democracy by enabling direct self-governance, providing venues for participating in public conversations and opinions, and securing influence over states and markets.²⁴ Finally, there is an emerging school of “associative democrats”—most prominently Paul Hirst, Joshua Cohen, and Joel Rogers—who see associations as means of unburdening the state and revitalizing smaller-scale, functionally delineated arenas of democratic decision making.²⁵ In most cases, growing interest in associations tracks the rediscovery of the political weight of civil society—a sectoral rubric I shall explain but do not use here for reasons elaborated in chapter 3.

Moreover, the sheer complexity of the associational landscape provides ample opportunity for selective exemplifications of associative virtues. The *Nonprofit Almanac* lists 576,133 tax-exempt organizations, excluding religious organizations, as of 1995. These associations are distributed over virtually every social need, identity, and function, and represent 645 identifiable kinds.²⁶ Add to this count religious associations, groups that lack tax-exempt status owing to their political purposes, the numerous groups that simply lack a tax status because they lack income (neighborhood watch groups, sporting and other social groups), as well as various semilegal and criminal associations. Even more expansively, Robert Wuthnow reports that over 3 million small, informal support groups exist in the United States, covering virtually every conceivable social need.²⁷ Broader conceptions of association provide an even more extensive picture: counting workplaces as modes of association, for example, would add many millions more.

If the sheer diversity of associational landscape should give us pause about the difficulties of theorizing, recent commentators have not let it pass unnoticed that there seem to be no obvious generalizable ways in which associations enhance democracy. Indeed, many kinds of associations do not seem good for democracy at all, as Amy Gutmann rightly emphasizes when she suggests that the contemporary enthusiasm for associations is even irresponsible given our relative lack of knowledge about the associational terrain.²⁸ Wherever associations have capacities for collective action, they also possess the potential to convert their control over one resource into another, as firms may do when they control social investment, urban design, the lives of their employees, and even public policy through their power of exit.²⁹ Jon Van Til calculates that 77.5 percent of nonprofit expenditures and 64 percent of nonprofit employment are within associations that act much like for-profit organizations in that they pursue economic interests within competitive markets.³⁰ These include hospitals, private schools and universities, organizations providing social services under government contract, business and professional associa-

tions, unions, and fee-based arts groups. Business associations in particular can use their unparalleled capacities to accumulate money to undermine the powers of deliberation and voting, the two key means of democratic influence. Hate groups damage deliberation through their combined racism and secretiveness, even when they do not bypass politics through violence. Some kinds of associations transform pluralism into parochialism, as do fundamentalist religious sects when they breed intolerance that carries over into political life. Nancy Rosenblum notes that freedom of association and social mobility “are vast engines of social cliques. They generate groups that labor to preserve their social restrictiveness and pretended distinction, and to claim deference from others. Above all, there is the American penchant for secret societies and the groups formed in reaction, to combat their ‘conspiracies’—the Masonic fraternity, for example, and the rabid associations, also secretive, organized to counter Masonic power.”³¹

From the point of view of democracy, then, it seems that there are associations and then there are associations. Perhaps it was for good reason that Madison was suspicious of factions, and Rousseau outlawed secondary associations in *The Social Contract* altogether as incompatible with the common good! At a minimum, one might be forgiven for wondering, as does Rosenblum, whether it might be meaningless to generalize about the democratic effects of associational life at all.

I am convinced that we can generalize. But to do so we shall need to move beyond the abstractions that too often dominate the debates and make the right kinds of distinctions—distinctions that capture the diversity of associational goods, powers, and structural locations, and then compare these with the many different kinds of democratic functions associations might serve. After discussing background conceptual and methodological issues in chapters 2 (the literature) and 3 (the concept of association), in chapter 4 I delineate the many democratic effects associational life might potentially have. These I consider under three broad classes of effects: *developmental* effects on individuals; effects in constituting *public spheres* of political judgment; and effects that underwrite *democratic institutions* such as representation. The point of distinguishing these effects is threefold. First, the differences among democratic theories today tend to register in different views of what the functions of associations ought to be. Second, once the functions are detailed, it is clear that a democracy requires all of them. Differences among democratic theories are, from the perspective of associational life, differences in the mix and weight of their functions, both manifest and latent. The meanings of “democracy” are now plural—not just because the term is contested, but because the venues of politics are increasingly plural while decreasingly contained by formal political institutions. Third, distinguishing these functions makes it clear

that not every kind of association can perform every kind of function. To the contrary, there are trade-offs: associations that are able to perform one kind of function may, for that very reason, be unable to perform another. A robust democracy will require, at the very least, a pluralism of different effects related in aggregate as if it were an associational ecology with numerous niches and specializations—an ideal I denote with the metaphor of a “democratic ecology of associations.”

The reasons for trade-offs among the democratic effects of associations become clear in chapter 5, the theoretical core of the book. Here I develop three sets of distinctions that have an impact on democratic potentials of associations. First, whether an association is *voluntary* or *nonvoluntary* is important for how conflict is handled within associations, and hence whether politics is internalized or externalized. These differences affect what I refer to as the *developmental* effects of associations on individuals’ political capacities, knowledge, civic orientations, and other dispositions relevant to forming democratic citizens. Second, the *constitutive media* of association—whether it is primarily embedded within or oriented toward social resources (such as solidarity, friendship, or identity), power, or money—make crucial differences in the capabilities of an association (for collective action, resistance, representation, and the like) as well as the structural pressures that come to bear on its capabilities. In addition, differences in media affect the kinds of dangers associations may potentially pose for democracy. A corollary distinction has to do with whether an association is *vested* in its medium of reproduction or not—a distinction that indicates associational resources as well as whether or not it seeks change through opposition. Third, the *purposes* or *constitutive goods* of an association make a difference for democratic effects. Some kinds of goods (for example, the public good of community development) require collective action, and so will foster coalition building. Other kinds of goods (for example, individual material goods sought by wage-oriented unions) lend themselves to bargaining and compromise. The identity goods that hold together lifestyle or religious associations tend toward public displays aimed at recognition. And still other kinds of goods (the status good of private schooling, for example) are difficult to achieve in democratic settings, and will tend to be pursued in nondemocratic ways.³²

In chapter 6, I suggest that when these distinctions are combined, we have the beginnings of a theory of association within democratic theory. Together, these distinctions cut across one another to show that associations with different kinds of attributes speak to democratic functions in highly diverse ways. Here I develop a set of typologies designed to distinguish associational kinds according to differences in their democratic effects. Finally, in chapter 7, I suggest that democracies require a mix of different kinds of associations to carry out the diverse and complementary

tasks that, together, enable democratic responses to political conflict—a democratic ecology of associational life. Fostering and maintaining a democratic society depends upon protecting, adjusting, empowering, and regulating associational life to achieve an optimal mix of democratic effects.

The analyses I provide in this book are not empirical claims. They are nothing more than theoretical elaborations of questions, and I do not intend them as anything more. What I provide, in the end, is a relatively modest piece of middle-level theorizing—without empirical evidence or analysis—devoted solely to the question of what we might expect of associations based on their structural locations and their purposes, if only we know what our expectations are. The analysis is not simple, and I shall be the first to admit that detailing the complex, plural, and ambiguous terrain of associational life in terms of democratic effects has its tedious aspects. Knowledge can bear a certain amount of tedium; what it cannot bear is pointless tedium. While ultimately the reader will be the judge, my own view is that conceptualizing the terrain of associational life is now one of the most important tasks for those democrats who, like myself, believe that democracy can still be expanded and deepened.

I do have hopes for this analysis that go well beyond what I am able to accomplish here. Within democratic theory, I should like to contribute to reviving the radical core of the democratic idea—the idea of collective self-governance. I am impressed with the possibility that even today democracy might be rethought and even radicalized within the vast array of participatory spaces that large-scale, complex, and differentiated societies now offer combined with the multiple means of making collective decisions that now exist.

In characterizing my aims in this way I do not intend to be sectarian. Depending upon how my analysis is read, it may also contribute to liberal problems of boundaries, liberties, and distributional justice, pluralist interests in multiplicity and diversity, deliberative democrats' interests in conditions of rational public judgment, utilitarians' concerns with efficient kinds and levels of organizations, realists' concerns with checking and balancing power, neo-Marxist interests in class structures, rational-choice interests in conditions of collective action, and postmodern interests in symbolism and spectacle. All these concerns are implicated in the multiplicity of associational attachments and the spaces they generate, and there are many potential books in each one. This book is, however, no more than a preface to any of these possibilities.

Although this is not a work of social science, I do have hopes it might aid in generating propositions that could bridge democratic theory and empirical research. It is possible to read this book as offering hypotheses as to how specific associational ecologies enhance or constrain democracy. If we can develop a good account of the associational ecology of the devel-

oped liberal democracies, we should be able to predict what kind of adjustments, inducements, laws, policies, movements, and other forces might, in aggregate, be good for democracy. This kind of project, however, goes far beyond the knowledge and resources I am able to marshal here.

My analysis is limited in another respect as well. Although I think my approach says something about all the developed liberal democracies, it is written from an American perspective. There are peculiar features of the American political system and social landscape that make the question of association more obvious, if not more important, than in other liberal democracies. Thus, in the colonization of America from the Mayflower Compact through the settlement of the frontiers, the associational form often preceded organized government. American politics continues to be marked by this history. Americans have a propensity to create or join associations in response to perceived needs, threats, and conflicts—a propensity often combined with a generalized suspicion of government. In part for the same reasons, “the state” in the United States is, in fact, a diverse patchwork of some eighty thousand or more units of government with their associated supports, clients, and cultures. Relative to most European states, the American state is decentralized and fragmented. Thus, especially at the local level and within functionally delineated policy areas (school boards, water conservation districts, transportation authorities, etc.), government often looks more like “association” than “state.” Certainly these qualities make the American state more open to the influence of associations—for better or worse, depending upon their purposes and powers.

Then again, there are also distinctive political functions for associations generated by American single-member-district electoral system when contrasted to the proportional representation systems more common in Europe. Because the single-member district denies representation to minorities, it produces, prior to elections, incentives for coalition-building under the umbrellas of the two major parties. In proportional representation systems, majority coalitions are formed after elections among smaller parties. In the American system, political associations have the informal role in pre-election coalition building that is formalized in proportional representation systems. Thus, the American system is more likely to generate political associations than a proportional representation system.

At the same time, because the system of single-member districts tends to leave substantial minorities in different locales permanently without representation, it also generates incentives for these minorities to turn to associative venues not only for political voice, but also for redress of social needs that go unrepresented in political institutions. The “at-large” system of multimember districts in local government often has the same effects. In addition, in contrast to parliamentary systems, the American sys-

tem of checks and balances between the legislative, judicial, and executive branches means that any significant collective action requires overwhelming majorities, while powerful minorities can effectively block initiatives at multiple points within the system. The overall effect is a system that is less responsive to social needs and disadvantaged minorities than other institutional mechanisms would be likely to be. One celebrated effect is to reinforce the view among the less wealthy and educated that voting is not really very important. A less noticed effect is, again, to displace much collective action onto associations—either as means of influencing government through lobbying or public pressure or as means of addressing needs, threats, and conflicts when government does not respond.

These and other distinctive features of American politics suggest that associative means of collective action have been more prominent in the American case than in other developed liberal democracies. From the perspective of democracy this is not always a good thing, and I certainly do not mean to idealize the American example. As will become clear, a political system that diminishes the impact of the vote (in contrast to parliamentary systems) will tend to increase the power of those with the means to organize associations—usually those with money and education. Weak or unresponsive units of government, or those captured by associations, can fail to protect vulnerable members of society—as when they fail to enforce civil rights laws or worker safety regulations under pressure from conservative and business associations. Nonetheless, I think my analysis, with modifications, transcends the American case to encompass other developed liberal democracies.

My analysis speaks less well to countries where ethnic or religious communalism remains a dominant force—Afghanistan, Iran, some Balkan states, and many African states, for example. As will become clear in chapters 2 and 3, I am assuming an associational landscape that is pluralized in the two senses. First, the purposes of associations are segmented rather than encompassing, so that associations express discrete interests (or clusters of interests) or nonencompassing identities. When associational attachments become encompassing, no democratic process can mediate conflicts. Under these circumstances, every conflict or threat cues an entire universe of meaningful social attachments, which will tend to provoke (rigidly principled) war rather than deliberation, negotiation, and bargaining. Although the most prominent examples are abroad, the United States is not exempt from this pattern of attachment. The Christian Right comes very close to exemplifying such encompassing attachment, but is held in check by the fact that it exists within a pluralized society, meaning that its members will often have interests in and allegiances to jobs, public schools, regions, hobbies, and the like that are not encompassed. Fortunately, most associations in the United States are relatively discrete in the

interests and identities they embody and express. Added together, they produce a pluralism of interests and identities that, ideally, check and balance one another in ways that make democratic responses to politics more attractive even for those involved in encompassing associations.

Second, the pluralism of discrete associations in the United States and other developed countries tends to be matched by individuals with corresponding identities. Most individuals inhabit a variety of roles with corresponding identities: those of parent, son or daughter, church member, employee, union member, consumer, sports fan, man or woman, lifestyle aficionado, member of a neighborhood, city, and region, parent-teacher association member, gardener, protester, Democrat, and so on. People are more likely to have some basis for understanding and empathizing with others in societies where they inhabit crosscutting and overlapping roles. At the very least, complex identities disincline people to fight with arms—few threats are encompassing enough to justify this form of struggle, as compared to deliberating, demonstrating, bargaining, exiting, and other strategies that are the lifeblood of democracy. In contrast, those violent struggles that have occurred periodically in the United States almost always involve cases in which associational attachments are not overlapping, but are marked by cleavage. Historically, for example, discrimination against African Americans has extended to political enfranchisement, housing and neighborhoods, social associations, employment, career mobility, union membership, schooling, and religious worship. We should not be surprised that such a history coincides with associational attachments that rarely bridge race and provide too few incentives for democratic responses to conflict. The American case provides exceptionally rich terrain for conceptualizing the democratic possibilities of association not because it is exemplary, but because it combines a rich tapestry of associative venues for collective action with more than enough cautionary tales to give pause to anyone inclined toward uncritical celebration.