Conclusion: Contrasting Patterns of Participation and Democracy

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The foregoing chapters suggest a number of striking conclusions, they ask for analytic comment, and they raise questions that will remain open but that can be stated with cogency and precision. We begin with a few broad comparisons—of the eastern European cases with the West and of the welfare states of northwestern Europe with the United States. This leads us into questions of how to explain the contrasts (as well as the similarities) and how to assess their impact on the future of democracy.

I. Some Comparisons and First Interpretations

Contrasts between East and West

What is the situation in the new East European democracies in comparison to the West? Both participation in politics and involvement in various kinds of civic organizations are not strongly developed. And the articulation of collective interests is often rather inchoate, probably because it is still in the process of formation. The countries examined differ considerably from each other, however, and the authors focused on different aspects of social and political participation in their analysis.

Andrzej Rychard describes political disinterest and relatively low participation in Polish politics, but he insists that individuals and families are not passive. In particular, he points to local economic and social initiatives and to the networking involved in individual economic activities. He anticipates that these initiatives and activities are creating the basis for a new civil society supportive of democracy, even if at this time they do not—yet?—constitute a dense networks of associations.

Michal Illner focuses on local democratization in the Czech Republic. Even though voter turnout in the first local elections of the Czech Republic was with 75 percent higher than in Poland (42 percent) and Hungary (51 percent in communities of 10,000 or less, 30 percent in larger communities), he sees the Czech electorate as politically passive, an observation he relates both to the experience with state socialism and persistent older themes in Czech history. Civic engagement is stronger in smaller communities. Overall, a little more than one in four adults were involved with clubs and associations—not a high level of civic engagement in a comparative perspective.¹

In the eastern states of unified Germany, participation in politics that goes beyond voting and involvement in voluntary associations appears to be higher than in other East-Central European countries, though there has been a decline after the early transition phase (Priller 1996). Marilyn Rueschemeyer explores the difficulties encountered by the Social Democrats in rebuilding their party after the forcible absorption into the Socialist Unity Party forty years ago. In addition to the generic problems of creating anew a broad-based organization with a complex mission, her analysis identifies other factors depressing participation, problems that derive from the transformations of East German society during the time when the SPD was excluded from politics as well as problems that derive from the dominant role of West Germany and West German politicians and civil servants in the development of the eastern states after 1989.

Ferenc Miszlivetz and Jody Jensen distinguish three phases in the development of political and civic engagement in Hungary since the late 1980s. Paralleling observations by Illner, they argued that the enthusiasm of the transition period gave way to a predominance of passive behavior. Though the number of associations today exceeds the previous peak in 1932, the total membership is only 1.5 million, a level comparably limited as that found in the Czech Republic.

A common theme of these chapters, then, is a comparatively weak self-organization of society in Eastern Europe, especially as it articulates with politics. Union membership seems to be an exception to this generalization, even though the available statistics may well overstate membership and are still less indicative of active involvement; in fact, both Illner and Miszlivetz/Jensen comment on the mostly passive character of union membership. Nevertheless, unions do represent vital interests and articulate them vis-à-vis the political process. And union membership—albeit declining since the early 1990s—is comparable to Western European levels and higher than in the United States. In the first years after unification, the organization rate in eastern Germany actually exceeded that of western Germany, and it is still substantial (cf. Wessels,
Chapter 9 in this volume). In the Czech Republic, union membership has declined from two-thirds to one-half of the labor force, union membership in Poland covers about 40 percent, and in Hungary there seems to have been a decline from a 50 percent level in the early 1990s to one much lower, perhaps as low as one in four or even five members of the labor force.\(^2\)

The exceptional position of the unions in the organizational landscape seems to derive from two simple factors: continuities in organization from the past and a widespread sense that protection of working-class interests is of critical importance under the new and evolving economic conditions. The relatively large union membership does not contradict the picture of an otherwise weakly organized civil society. Thus Miszlivetz/Jensen and Illner not only emphasize the passive character of most people's union membership but also report that overall membership figures in clubs and associations would be drastically lower if union membership were not included.

Well-informed people will hardly be surprised by these findings. Yet it is useful not to take them for granted. Those who argue that it was the renaissance—and in some cases, most prominently Poland, the insurgency—of civil society that made a critical contribution to the fall of communism, surely must ask themselves how the current weakness is possible. If the self-organization of society was indeed a critical factor in the initial transformation of Eastern Europe, why should there be a drastic decline after success? Even if one sees the collapse of the state socialist systems of Eastern Europe less closely tied to popular opposition (but rather caused primarily by economic and geopolitical developments and by political processes internal to state and party), one might well have expected strong and broad-based attempts to represent varied interests in the rapidly changing postcommunist situations.

What, then, are some major factors accounting for the comparatively low level of civic engagement and in particular the relatively weak development of a politically relevant self-organization of society?

Our chapters on Eastern Europe suggest a number of explanations. The developments in Hungary described by Miszlivetz and Jensen fit rather precisely the axiom that movements die easily. Small circles that share opposition to a powerful status quo can be knitted together into a movement (or a set of movements), once certain activating events come along. But such movements do not have the stability of an organization, and organizational consolidation often defies short-run efforts, however energetic these may be pursued at the moment.

A corollary of this explanation is the claim that stresses the advantage, which lies in existing organizational machinery. The relative success of associations and parties with roots in the past is mentioned by Rychard for Poland and Illner for the Czech Republic. East Germany demonstrates the importance of organizational resources in a particularly dramatic way. The parties that grew out of the opposition to the state socialist regime and had no organization before 1989, in particular the Social Democratic Party and the more movement-like Bündnis 90/Greens face far greater obstacles than the parties that had the advantage of existing organizations—the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, and the Reform Communists.

Andrzej Rychard advances a somewhat different argument for Poland, the country in which Solidarity and the church undoubtedly played a significant part in challenging communist rule. The organizations that helped bring down the communist status quo, he argues, were ill prepared to deal with the issues and problems the country faced after communist rule. Thus they now either look much more one-sided than they did when their main concern was opposition to the communist regime—a case in point is the position of the Catholic church on abortion and related issues—or they splintered in the face of the problems of postcommunist transformation. In either case, they now often stand in the way of new organizational initiatives that would be better able to respond to the current situation.

Michal Illner sees participation in Czech Republic against a long historical background of heteronomous rule. Similarly, Miszlivetz/Jensen and Rychard agree on the important point that the old regime was grounded in people's lives and that it is a mistake to conceive of communist rule as a temporary imposition from which people emerge as free agents unaffected by their past biographies.

The consequences of the fact that the past regimes became rooted in people's lives are varied and not yet well understood. For many, the political pressures to participate in the old regime and its organizations still gives political participation a bad taste. Quite a few others who participated in the state socialist system voluntarily—be it because they were committed to its ideas or because participation was a prerequisite for having influence, making a contribution, or gaining advantage—now face a radical redefinition of the past, one in which their lives are stripped of the protective veneer of public legitimation. While true opportunists may make an easy transition into the new world, many others respond with withdrawal from civic engagement.

The past also has effects beyond individual motivations, structural effects. All the state socialist systems tried to monopolize the major forms of associational life, and many of their groups and organizations disappeared when the regimes crashed. There were, of course, important differences between countries, and even in the most controlled cases there were autonomous, if often informal, groups, as well as some semi-independent organizations with their own position on particular issues. Nevertheless, the end of the past regimes typically involved a radical decline in the number of established and func-
The difficulties of starting afresh seem a major factor in accounting for the relatively low level of social and political participation. Some interests, of course, encounter fewer difficulties of reinventing themselves than others. Gardening, pigeon breeding, and sports associations are obvious examples. The situation is not so simple in the case of, say, women's organizations, unions, and political parties. Here the tasks of formulating collective goals and symbols that appeal to a broad constituency and of developing the needed organization and effective strategies for pursuing these goals are much more complex. This is likely to be a major reason for the particular weakness of politically relevant associations—for low levels of participation in them, for weak involvement of the membership, and for uncertainty in the associations' definition of comprehensive collective interests.

Finally, there are the effects of economic transformation. The freedom of choice associated with the market economy is often seen as closely akin to political freedom and democracy. Both, it is claimed, reinforce each other. Yet the relationship appears in reality to be much more complex. At least in the short run, the transition to a market economy seems to have disorganizing effects. Michal Illner notes that both the opportunities and the difficulties created by the market economy seem to discourage social and political participation. The pressures and insecurities associated with the new phenomenon of unemployment are a major reason for union membership but in many other ways undercut active civic engagement. If Ferenc Miszlivetz and Jody Jensen point to the absence of an economically secure middle class and write, "there are not enough financially independent and socially and politically conscious people to fulfill the task of building and running NGOs," they only apparently advance a very different argument. In fact they point to quite similar factors constraining social and political participation. The difficulties many encounter in making ends meet in the new economic order and the threat as well as the reality of unemployment have a counterpart in the insecurities of newly minted entrepreneurs. Andrzej Rychard sees the energy and social activity involved in economic initiatives as harbingers of a new civil society, but he does not deny that for the time being organizational involvement is limited and—equally important—not well articulated with political decision making.

Contrasts between the Welfare States of Northwestern Europe and the United States

What are the major differences among the western cases? Our chapters suggest a clear and very interesting pattern that sets the United States apart from the three northwestern European countries examined. Again, the authors focus in their analyses of social and political participation on slightly different specific questions and themes: Bo Rothstein emphasizes the historic roots of the relations between a dense civil society and an inclusive polity in Sweden. Per Selle examines the changes in the social and political participation of women as indicative of broader social and political change. Bernhard Wessels relates social and political participation in Germany with people's sense of being represented in political decision making. And Robert Putnam describes the "strange disappearance of social capital in America," as he put it in the title of a subsequent publication (Putnam 1995). Still, a close comparison of the four chapters yields some striking conclusions.

Even though European pundits have diagnosed a deep disaffection with politics, it appears from the contributions of Rothstein, Selle, and Wessels that in Sweden, Norway, and western Germany there is little evidence of a significant decline in social and political participation. The countries differ in important respects. Bo Rothstein does note "signs of declining 'social capital' also in Sweden," and he registers fewer expressions of trust in the political system. But these comments must be read against the background of an extremely dense pattern of civic engagement with voter turnout and associational participation rates still at 85 percent or higher, while reductions in the system of public provisions are likely to account for expressions of dissatisfaction and lower levels of trust in unions and parties. Both Bo Rothstein and Per Selle use the standards of the most active civil societies, when they express concern about passive, rather than active, membership.3 Both Rothstein and Selle suggest that the kind of participation has changed—people's interests tend to be more individualized and instrumental (Rothstein), less ideological and less linked to the classic social movements, more oriented to the satisfaction of their members than toward effecting social and political change, with local participation and central organizations now more often uncoupled than they were in the past (Selle). Western Germany may have an overall level of social and political participation less intense than either Sweden or Norway, but Bernhard Wessels reports that involvement with associations and clubs other than unions and parties has actually increased in recent years, while direct political participation has seen some recent decline though there is no clear long-term trend. The great majority of German citizens feel that their varied interests are well represented by the existing complex of organizations and parties.

The overall picture in all three countries contradicts what classic liberal thought would have led us to expect: that state-supplied protection from "cradle to grave" leads to a decline in participation, be it because the powerful state apparatus overwhelms social initiatives or because its benevolence
makes the voicing of broad-based interests superfluous. The welfare states of Western Europe do not seem to have choked social and political participation in their societies.

By contrast, the United States is experiencing a substantial decline in social and political participation, though this decline occurs at a relatively high level. This trend, documented and analyzed by Robert Putnam (Chapter 10 in this volume), puts into question the persisting Tocquevillean self-understanding of the United States as a thriving civil society. The weakening of social and political participation in American society goes hand in hand with a profound disillusionment about politics, a development that has been noted since the 1970s. Some observers have pointed to countertrends and question whether there is a long-term decline in civic engagement in the United States. It is true that some types of groups seem to have substantially increased in numbers—neighborhood associations, perhaps support groups of various kinds, and mailing-list associations (such as the American Association of Retired People) aptly labeled by Putnam “tertiary associations.” But there is no evidence that such countertrends come even close to compensating—quantitatively or qualitatively—for the declines in social and political participation observed (Putnam 1995, 666; Norris 1996, 474). Moreover, thesecountertrends involve, on the one hand, tertiary organizations with little personal engagement and, on the other, rather small-scale participation that is often politically impotent or nonpolitical in character.

Perhaps even more significant than the overall decline of social and political participation and of trust in public institutions in the United States are the relative shifts of participation in different segments of the population. The most outstanding development here is the drastic decline of union membership. The rate of organization in unions now stands below 15 percent of the labor force. Another important component of the overall picture is the decline in the collective organization of African Americans. Blacks as a group are characterized by levels of income, occupation, and education that on their own depress social and political participation. In comparison to whites with similar education and income, however, blacks were until the 1980s more strongly involved in associations than whites. But then their social participation declined significantly (Putnam 1995, 672–73; Norris, 1996, 478), a development that is not contradicted by such mobilizations as the recent “Million Man March” called for by Louis Farrakhan. Such declines in the social and political participation of subordinate groups stand side by side with increases in the collective organization of conservative religious groups.

Robert Putnam initially explained the weakening of participation in large part with the increase of women’s participation in the labor force. Plausible as this account may seem, it does not fit well with the evidence from Sweden and Norway, where women’s employment is higher than in the United States and has been so for a long time. Nor does the German pattern of participation seem to rest much on the German women’s lower labor force participation. Such comparative evidence does not rule out increases in women’s labor force participation as a factor in the decline of participation in America, but it suggests looking for particular contextual conditions that link changes in women’s work to a decline of social and political participation. What comes to mind in particular is the scarcity of institutions and regulations supportive of women’s work outside the house—affordable day care, for example, or rules about reemployment after child care at home. The decline of such social provisions in Eastern European countries after 1989 appears to be a major factor depressing both women’s participation in the labor force and their social and political participation (see Rueschmeyer, 1994). Responding to complex findings on trends in participation among housewives and employed women in the United States, Putnam has distanced himself from this explanation, though he insists that the greater relative decline in participation among American women remains a puzzle (Putnam 1995, 670–71).

Another line of explanation is emphasized more strongly in Putnam’s most recent work (1995)—the emergence of television as a privatizing factor in people’s lives. Here again we may note that the comparative evidence raises questions: television is also a major cultural presence in Scandinavia and Germany, where civic involvement is not decreasing substantially or even increasing. Again, the context may make a decisive difference. 5

This would suggest looking at the development of social and political participation in the light of recent social and political history, both in the United States and in northwestern Europe. That seems particularly plausible to the extent that civic engagement is closely related to trust in public institutions. Political and institutional developments are likely to interact with changes in people’s lives that arise from a markedly higher standard of living and changed class relations and that are associated with transformed uses of leisure time. Bo Rothstein and Per Selle note tendencies in Scandinavia, too, that could be associated with lower social and political participation—a decline in social and political activism, growing individualization of interests, and an increase in more self-centered and “expressive” leisure activities—but in fact participation did not decline substantially. This may well be related to differences in the political and organizational landscape. In Scandinavia, unions and political parties are organizationally stronger and more involving than they have been in post–New Deal America. Other, nonpolitical associations are more closely connected with public institutions.
and their resources than they are in the United States, and Per Selle points to the increased survival chances associations derive from such links. In seeking to understand the development of social and political participation, then, one critical factor seems to be what is "on offer." The changes in the kinds of organizations appealing to the public are likely to have a dynamic of their own, one that is linked to broad-based changes in individual needs and interests but not simply determined by them.

II. Causal Conditions Affecting Participation

What do the contrasts suggest analytically? Across countries, a number of interrelated factors seem to play a crucial role. We focus in the following brief remarks on politically relevant participation—on the organized expression of interests at the local, regional, and national levels, leaving aside more inward-oriented associations such as hobby and support groups, although these, too, can on occasion acquire direct political importance.

A first factor of importance is the classic collective action problem—the generic difficulty of getting organizations and participation going. Participation begets participation; where it’s weak, it’s hard to get it going. This is an important factor even in societies with a thriving organizational life. Changing conditions create new interests, while they let others wither (see, e.g., Per Selle’s historical observations on Norway, Chapter 8 in this volume). It is, however, of far greater importance in societies with a weaker overall density of participation, because here new initiatives cannot count as much on the benefits of successful models, of supportive social norms, and of effective help from friendly associations and institutions. Underlying these classically recognized problems of collective action, there is the more profound difficulty of defining collective interests for a broad constituency with varied needs and wants. Again, articulating interests to be pursued collectively is most difficult in radically new and rapidly changing situations.

In Eastern Europe, rapid and pervasive change makes it—in the first place—more difficult for people to find their way in new and ever changing institutional structures. This throws many back on caring for elementary needs individually, as a family, or in small networks. Where larger-scale collective action is undertaken, it faces the difficulty of formulating collective goals that must be made appealing to new and uncertain constituencies. The cases of Solidarity and the Polish church illustrate how difficult rapid redefinitions of collective political goals can be.

One important—and perhaps the most important—aspect of the changes in Eastern Europe are more or less radical market-oriented transformations. These deserve special comment. Market-oriented reform appears to have, at least in the short run, a particularly strong disorganizing impact. It is not just that market reform transforms people’s everyday life radically—similar to transformations in public administration, the emergence of competing mass media, and democratic forms of government, though changes in property relations, income patterns, and employment security tend to affect most people’s lives more than such political developments. Market-oriented reforms also introduce competition into the relations among people and groups that otherwise share important interests, thus inhibiting solidarity action. Finally, there is the fact that market developments lead to outcomes for which nobody in particular seems responsible. As aggregate results of many individual decisions, they have an impersonal character, one not easily amenable to intentional political modification. Where the market rules, "nature" seems to rule; and nature is impervious to political modification.

Even if this appearance of market functioning as "natural" is not counted as a powerful factor, modifying market outcomes through political action is a difficult undertaking. This brings us back to the generic obstacles of collective action. Difficult targets make collective organization particularly hard. The decision to join and become active is often based on an overestimation of what can be achieved. If this overestimation is modest, it may do little harm. If it is substantial, it soon leads to disillusioned inactivity. The hopes East Germans put into the ability of the unions based in West Germany to avert unemployment and to defend workers’ interests after 1989 are a case in point. At first, the rate of unionization in East Germany zoomed to a level higher than in West Germany; trust in the unions was virtually unlimited, only to decline later and to contribute to a more general souring of views on social and political participation.

These considerations point to a simple yet very powerful determinant of participation—the apparent success of collective action and collective interest representation. This is one major reason why generally, across societies, the better-off people participate more in social and political life. To be sure, it is one reason among others; nobody will deny the empowering quality of social, economic, and cultural resources that tend to be associated with socioeconomic status.

In the different social and political outcomes attributed to organized representation of broad-based interests we may also find an important explanation for the contrasts between participation in the welfare states of Northwestern Europe and the United States of America. The developed welfare states do better because the success of collective interest representation encourages continued participation. This effect is likely to be strongest if there are institutional linkages that associate interest organizations with the dispensation of benefits (as illustrated by Bo Rothstein, Chapter 7 in this volume).
This hypothesis claims the precise opposite of the neoliberal tenet that popular participation and state action are inversely related, be it because state provision of services makes self-help and the representation of interests superfluous or because state action displaces and overwhelms the self-organization of society. Empirically, there is little question that in northwestern Europe and even in the United States the expansion of state activities has gone hand in hand with a growth in “third sector” activities (See Rothstein as well as Selle in this volume; on the United States, see Salamon 1995).

The quality of state-society relations may make a decisive difference for social and political participation. There is not only the fact that associational life in general and interest representation in particular depend—much as markets do—on a legal framework that allows, regulates, and/or encourages civic association and interest representation. Beyond that, state-society relations and their development over time are of great importance for the character and the density of social and political participation. States that have the strength and capacity to deliver policies sought by social interests and that are at the same time neither so strongly beholden to social forces with vested interests in the status quo nor so autonomous from society at large that they can and will ignore broad-based demands are most likely to encourage a politically strong civil society. Bo Rothstein (Chapter 7 in this volume) argues, following Birnbaum (1982, 1988), that the Swedish state was such a state even before the rise of the welfare state and that subsequent developments consolidated a strongly corporatist pattern of state-society relations.

How does gender affect social and political participation? Women’s participation in the public sphere has been an intensely contested issue in modern societies, as is shown by the struggles over women’s suffrage. In principle, that is not any more the case in the countries under discussion, although different political groups still stand for different premises and inclinations on the role of women in public and political life. Per Selle (Chapter 8 in this volume) seeks to trace changes in women’s social participation as indications of underlying social patterns and transformations. He argues that in Norway (as perhaps in other countries as well) the impact of women’s social participation has been underestimated because in the past analysts have focused on the disabilities imposed on women and have looked primarily at women’s representation at the highest political levels (which is actually quite high in Norway by comparison to other countries) and at influence in the most visible policy fields, neglecting areas where state and third-sector activities intertwine (i.e., focusing on defense and public works, rather than on education and social services). Selle’s analysis suggests that in Norway an earlier pattern of participation characterized by strong gender segregation is being replaced with one in which gender segregation rapidly declines.

In Eastern Europe, women’s participation declined after the fall of the past regimes. Among the likely causes are increased unemployment, the reduction of public provisions making labor force participation possible, and the demands of making ends meet in the new economic order. The fall of communism also encouraged social and political forces with more traditional views of the role of women in society. While these may not be without effect, there is little doubt that the vast majority of women are unwilling to return to traditional roles. The declining political authority of the Polish church must be seen in this light (see Rueschemeyer 1994).

In the long run, women’s social and political participation is—other things being equal—likely to increase, to become more similar in character to men’s participation, and to be more equally represented in leadership positions. Three conditions in combination make this very likely: first, the objective circumstances underlying a subordinate position of women (such as families with many children that concentrate women’s work around reproduction and upbringing, physical requirements for occupational work and success that are hard to meet for women, exclusion from educational opportunities, and corresponding traditional values) are vanishing in modern societies or have disappeared already; at the same time, however, gender roles are peculiarly resistant to change; the slow progress toward greater equality and the fact that often political intervention seems required to secure such progress encourage participatory action (Rueschemeyer and Rueschemeyer 1990).

Many observers will be inclined to see culture, perhaps more specifically political culture, as playing a major role in shaping of social and political participation. It is evidently reasonable to pay close attention to norms and values, as well as to people’s understandings and expectations, when analyzing the conditions under which people participate in collective action or succumb to the temptation of “free riding.” Feelings of obligation, expectations about the success of participation, a strong, weak, or absent sense of solidarity—these things evidently shape the likelihood of any particular form of civic engagement. And they may well be referred to with the global concept of “culture.” Yet it seems useful to consider three caveats: First, opinions and ideals alone—whether expressed in ephemeral interview situations or espoused by eminent thinkers—are not decisive; rather, they become important to the extent that they are grounded in organizations and institutions and in the codes of everyday life. The second caveat is a corollary of the first: ideas and ideals tend to be intertwined with interests and
consequently are often more conflictual than is assumed in consensus-ori­enced theories of a shared culture. Third, ideas and ideals tend to change as the organizations, institutions, and patterns of everyday life in which they are grounded change. Too often it is assumed that political culture constitutes an inherently stable reference point for political life. 

Several of the chapters in this volume, especially those by Selle and Rothstein, trace change and continuity over time. Wessels’s picture of (western) German civil and political society will surprise many readers of forty to fifty years. Michal IlIner and Marilyn Rueschemeyer refer to continuities and breaks with the past as they seek to account for their observations. And, of course, all the chapters dealing with Eastern Europe discuss patterns of participation as they emerge from and develop during one of the most dramatic transformations of social and economic life in history. In this conclusion we have sought to relate these discussions of change and continuous transformation to a broader theoretical framework in which participation can be understood. Yet the inquiry into the conditions under which patterns of participation and their proximate causes are reproduced, reconstructed, transformed in character, or undermined is only in its beginnings. It remains a major task for the future.

III. Different Levels of Participation:

What Is Their Impact on Democracy?

A final set of questions that emerges from these chapters concern the consequences of different levels of participation. Is the future of democracy really contingent on strong participation in a dense network of organizations? In a narrow sense the reasonable answer is probably negative. The prevailing view, which we actually share, is that in all the countries studied the future of democracy as conventionally defined is not really in question.

This holds not only for the United States but also for the Eastern European countries studied; and it is not a trivial assertion. In spite of relatively sparse participation and a frequently passive character of that participation, there after all did emerge parties, unions, and associations in the Eastern European countries that offered alternative options of social and political choice. Women’s groups articulated women’s interests, even if participation in them was less than broad-based. The resurgence of the left vote in recent Eastern European elections surely cannot be interpreted simply as a “backsliding,” even if in several cases former communist parties benefited from it. Instead, this development may well be seen as the assertion of an electorate that seeks to weigh the social and political costs of market-oriented economic transformations and to do so against the background of its own historical experience. It may be wise to view this “turn to the left” at least hypothetically as an indication of quite mature political reflection: both the past and the models offered for the future are to be critically assessed.

There are also important features in the history of East-Central European countries that lend support to democratic governance. It is not only that capitalist development, creating sizable working and middle classes as well as a rich urban life, had already before World War II led to incipient or even mature forms of democracy. Equally important is that the negative memory of a state socialism imposed in the war’s aftermath now strengthens among many a commitment to democracy even in the face of disappointments and frustrations.

It seems indeed possible, then, that democracy in a narrow sense of the term can function without broad-based participation. Small groups of activists, as well as parties and interest organizations with only a small base in civil society, can offer contrasting policy orientations, as well as alternative leadership teams from which the electorate chooses. Both slate making and policy formulation are then confined to a narrow range of participants who are not accountable to complex arrays of parties and related associations.

This elitist model of democracy can, however, easily produce policy options that do not accommodate the interests of large parts of the population or even of the supporters of the dominant parties if the policymaking elites are largely autonomous from their constituency. In particular, the interests of subordinate classes are likely to be neglected unless they have a strong and responsive organizational representation. Postcommunist Poland may be a case in point. The policymaking elite of the movement Solidarity engaged in radical market reforms, neglecting the interests of those who saw Solidarity as their union and thus trusted Solidarity’s political leadership.

In the extreme, the divergence between the pursuits of insulated democratic elites and the interests of broad parts of the electorate, however inchoate and unarticulated these may be, may create openings for a breakdown of democracy. The elite version of democracy may undercut the conditions of its own reproduction, and it is more likely to do so than more participatory forms. Still, a breakdown of the democratic form of government is not the most likely outcome. What is put into question by a weak grounding of the political process in the self-organization of society are more subtle, but quite important, issues concerning the quality of democracy. The options offered by narrowly based parties and small groups of activists are responses to problems identified by the elites. They may find the approval of outside experts. But they may be rather poor ways of articulating and pressing the collective interests of broad constituencies.
In Eastern Europe, important issues arise from the fact that the current period is without doubt one in which political and economic decisions have far-reaching consequences for the future. Thus, if some collective interests find organizational expression faster and more effectively than others, a narrowed set of forces has the field to itself in setting the cast for future structures and developments. This may well marginalize the interests of women and sideline more generally those of subordinate groups and other osers in the process of wealth redistribution.

However, the actual patterns are quite complex and vary from country to country. The proportionately large membership in trade unions and the resurgence of left parties in recent elections may be interpreted as potentially effective defensive reactions of broad subordinate constituencies, and some segments of the working class and the peasantry seem to have quite powerful leverage (as Andrzej Rychard, for instance, claims for workers in large state-owned enterprises).

What are the implications of the decline of participation in the United States? On the one hand, one might speculate about an increasing individualization of political consciousness formation and raise questions about new nodes of communication, but also about possible weaknesses of more individualized forms of political participation. In a less speculative way we should perhaps focus on the decline of participation among subordinate groups, in particular on the virtual demise of labor unions in the United States and on the weakening of organized participation among African Americans. These developments indirectly aggravate a fundamental imbalance of the American political system. This system gives a very strong influence to moneyed interests; to these, organized representation of subordinate interests has been a certain countervailing element that is now seriously weakening. Similarly, if political parties were membership organizations with significant influence on policy development they could exert a counteralancing influence to the power of moneyed interests. Their continuing decay as effective membership organizations thus has a similar effect.

V. Conclusion: Participation and Democracy

We have examined dramatic differences in the level of social participation across different countries, as well as significant changes in participation over time. This allowed us to take a fresh look at an old idea, the claim of Alexis de Tocqueville that participation in a rich set of intermediary associations and organizations is an important underpinning of democracy.

The strong contrasts between countries and over time suggest answers to questions about the conditions favoring and inhibiting social participation as well as about the consequences of social participation for democratic governance. Yet we are aware that the evidence we have assembled from eight countries and their histories does not constitute a sufficient basis for final and unambiguous conclusions about these questions. It is strongly suggestive for some conclusions, while on other issues even the authors brought together in this volume continue to differ. Some inferences about the conditions shaping participation stand perhaps on firmer ground than claims and hypotheses about the impact of different levels and forms of participation on democracy. This is partly due to the fact that not enough time has elapsed since the fall of European communism in order to come to firm conclusions about the quality and stability of democratic rule in East-Central Europe; in addition, judgments about the quality of democracy are inherently more contested than judgments about the level of social participation. Such caveats notwithstanding, our comparative inquiries have described significant differences across countries and yielded fresh explanations and interpretations.

Among the contrasts between countries, two stand out most dramatically: First, participation levels in postcommunist Eastern Europe are far lower than in the Western European countries. Second, the decline of civic engagement in the United States contrasts with a picture of participation in the three West European welfare states, where qualitative change combines with continued high levels of social and political participation.

Examining these differences suggested a number of insights into the conditions shaping participation. Among these, we again single out a few that seem most striking: Radical social, political, and economic transformations make the self-organization of society more difficult. In contrast to widely held ideas about the interrelations between capitalist market economies and democracy, this applies with particular force to market-oriented economic change. While democratization in Eastern Europe opens up new possibilities and meaningful targets of social and political participation, marketization tends to undercut collective organization, at least in the short run. A conclusion of similar importance is suggested by the contrast between the United States and the Northwestern European countries examined: comprehensive welfare state policies seem to protect, rather than destroy, the conditions underlying vigorous social and political participation.

The consequences of different patterns of participation for democracy are harder to assess from the evidence assembled in these chapters. Yet the East-Central European countries seem to be engaged in vigorous political contestation, even though this political life has a fairly narrow base in social and political participation. Similarly, the decline of social and political participation in the United States does not spell the pending demise of Ameri-
an democracy as we have known it. What does seem to be at stake, however, in both cases is the quality of democratic governance, at least in the longer run. It is our contention that active and broad-based political participation, especially participation of people who have few power resources other than organized participation, is critical for giving substance to the formal arrangements of democracy.

How one assesses the impact of low or declining levels of participation in democracy depends, of course, to a large extent on the normative conception of democracy that is used, implicitly or explicitly, as a reference point. In certain conceptions of democracy—that of John Stuart Mill, for instance—active participation is not just a means or a condition of effective democracy; it is part of the very essence of democracy. Thus, low and uneven levels of participation represent in themselves a major deficit in democracy. At the other extreme, there are elitist conceptions that see democracy realized when the citizenry has the opportunity of accepting or rejecting leaders and policies at regular intervals; low levels of participation may then be viewed as silent consent and—even more positively—as conducive to stable and effective government. Any greater approximation to the ideal of equalizing political power than such an elitist conception envisages, however, requires substantial and broad-based social and political participation, even if such participation is not in itself seen as part of the essence of democracy.

Notes
1. Thus, Bernhard Wessels reports for Germany considerably more than double this figure, even excluding union and party membership (Wessels, Chapter 9 in this volume). Participation in Scandinavia is even higher (Rothstein and Selle, Chapters 7 and 8 in this volume).
2. Burda (1993, 15–16), offers the following estimates for the early 1990s:
   - Czechoslovakia, 65–70 percent
   - Poland, 40–45 percent
   - Hungary, 50–60 percent

   These rates have declined since then. Orenstein (1996) cites opinion polls in the Czech Republic that suggest a 50 percent unionization rate, with much lower levels in private industry contrasting to correspondingly higher ones in public enterprises. In Poland, the postcommunist OPZZ has about 4.5 million members, Solidarity about half as many; even taking generous account of many smaller unions, this would amount to an organization rate of about 40 percent (Orenstein, 1996, 151, 174). The figure cited by Miszlivetz and Jensen for Hungary suggests a radical decline of unionization to perhaps few as one in four or five members of the labor force.

   That private industry has lower unionization rates is not astonishing: private owners will be more hostile to unions; there is no continuity of organization in newly created firms; and—last but not least—most private enterprises (whether newly founded or recently privatized) are small, and small companies are an unfavorable environment for unionization.

   It would lead too far afield to discuss here the different character of the unions in each of the four countries. Competition between unions with different political orientations is characteristic of Poland and Hungary, while the Czech Republic and eastern Germany have a more unified union structure.

   Rothstein quotes one study as showing that while about nine out of ten Swedish adults were members of associations, 41 percent of Swedish adults were either passive or not members at all. This finding must not only be read side by side, as Rothstein does, with the amazing fact that four out of ten people belong to study groups of different kinds; it should also be seen in the international context: in Germany, 60 percent belong to associations and clubs excluding parties and unions, not to mention the far lower figures we saw characteristic of Eastern European countries. Similarly, Per Selle focuses on increasing levels of self-reportedly passive memberships but does not emphasize the rather high level of active engagement in some kinds of organizations and mentions just in passing that membership itself has not declined.

   4. Seventeen years after the famous volume on The Civic Culture (Almond and Verba 1963) portrayed the United States as the paradigmatic case of a democratic political system trusted and supported by a thriving civil society dense with associations of all kinds, the sequel publication (Almond and Verba, 1980/1989) referred to the United States as a “Political Culture under Stress.”

   5. It is also possible (though intuitively more doubtful) that the content of television is quite different as well. Norris (1996) shows that while the overall length of TV viewing correlates negatively with social participation in the United States, watching news and similar programs is positively related to civic engagement, much like newspaper reading.

   6. Note that both these factors, the free-rider problem and the problem of developing collective interests in an appealing way, may vary a great deal across different segments of society, depending, among other things, on organizational resources already present, on preexisting solidarities and aversions in different parts of the population, and on the complexity of preference structures and the attendant difficulty of formulating collective goals that appeal to broad groups.

   7. Here again it is instructive to note the fairly rapid changes registered in the political cultures of the United States, Britain, and Germany in the two volumes on civic culture (Almond and Verba 1963, 1980/1989). What intervened, one might hypothesize, were—among other things perhaps, and played out against different historical backdrops—the upheavals of “the 1960s.”

   8. Among the social and political costs of market-oriented reform that are not easily visible to the Western eye are the effects of unemployment. If Ferenc Miszlivetz and Jody Jensen speak of an “unprecedented dependency in the workplace,” they point to a loss of relative power due to the fear of unemployment that in one major dimension of life represents the opposite of the gain in self-determination many expected from democracy.

   9. David Held (1996) shows in his review of different “models of democracy” that the conceptions of Weber and Schumpeter come close to this impoverished version. For a discussion of the conditions underlying formal, participatory, and social forms of democracy in the contemporary world, see Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens (1997).

   10. For a detailed comparative analysis of postcommunist policies in Poland and the Czech Republic, see Orenstein (1996).
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