

Antonin Dubois, Organiser les étudiants. Socio-histoire d'un groupe social (Allemagne et France, 1880–1914), Vulaines-sur-Seine (Éditions du Croquant) 2021, 368 p. (Sociologie historique), ISBN 978-2-36512-263-4, EUR 18,96.

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Attending university, being acquainted with academic life and receiving a degree very much characterized the life of an increasing number of people during the nineteenth century. This was definitively the case in Europe where more and more people identified as students, a condition that opened new spaces of participation in social and political life. Being a student meant more than just attending classes and taking exams; it also came hand in hand with major needs of activism and education in general; it represented a way to be a modern citizen, although it is important to remember that the number of students remained still proportionally low in the European societies. On the basis of an extensive research carried out for his PhD thesis, Antonin Dubois has delivered an interesting book on the student associations in France and Germany between 1880 and 1914, that adds to a rich tradition of studies on this subject and pairs well – also because of their different approaches – with the recent book by Sabrina Lausen on student associations in Poland and Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth century¹.

The two countries appear to be a fitting object for this comparison due to the fact that, on a European scale, they accounted for the most numerous student populations in the time frame of the investigation, although, compared to other countries, it was not the highest in proportion to the number of inhabitants (p. 15). Moreover, especially the question of the political role of students is of particular relevance in these two countries that had previously been at war with each other in 1870 and had to face the consequences that this very war had on the respective political system and discourse. However, the comparative analysis also unfolds along a major difference between the two countries, that lies in the fact that France had a centralized republic with a (in the long run) more democratic and liberal attitude while Germany was a federalist empire with a constitutional monarchy, characterized by rather widespread authoritarianism. Given this frame, the author inquires the role students played in the political process and the question where they placed themselves in the two political contexts: how does research on students and student activism help to understand the two countries in the period of transition



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¹ Sabrina Lausen, Hüter ihrer Nationen. Studentische Verbindungen in Deutschland und Polen im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert, Cologne 2020.

from one century to another? The book addresses these questions by looking at how students coordinated themselves and became a social group. This – the definition of a social group made of a set of people sharing the same bureaucratic status – is in fact a central point of this work that is published not by chance in a series devoted to historical sociology.

A major difference when comparing student sociability in the two countries is their starting point. In the German countries before unification, student associations already had profound relevance and social impact. Old university cities traditionally had students animating social, cultural, and political life. As it is well known, student associations along with choirs and gymnastic clubs constituted the pillars of the national movement since its very first steps and George L. Mosse made it clear how they helped to nationalize masses in Germany. But the popularity of associations in itself is explained by the need of creating more places for civic activism and interpersonal exchange in the public space. A *Verein* helped to secure freedom of association and participation, and for this reason their foundation and activities were quite often hindered or supervised by state authorities. In the first half of the nineteenth century and beyond, students accompanied and influenced political events in Germany as members of circles and associations.

In France a ban of associations left little space for this kind of *sociabilité*; only exceptionally isolated, small circles of students existed; the fear that students could ignite a revolution was at stake. In both countries things changed in the 1880s: student associations in Germany received a more formalized organization through the foundation of the federal Kyffhäuser-Verband der Vereine Deutscher Studenten, a major player in the national and international debate; in France, in 1877 the members of a circle of students in Nancy were able to transform this union into a proper association: the Association générale des étudiants. Its goal was clearly and openly corporative and aimed at group representation (p. 68). After the association in Nancy, and thanks to the revocation of the ban for student associations, several similar associations were established across the country. This period marks the birth of French student associationism.

One more significant difference when looking at the history of student sociability in France and Germany emerges from the role played by antisemitism. In German associations discriminatory exclusion of Jewish students was a standard practice and sometimes overlapped with a xenophobic stance against immigrants from Eastern Europe who attended German universities. But antisemitism was also – and foremost – a true ideological keystone of German student associationism. In France by contrast, antisemitism was not missing (for example at the time of the Dreyfus affair), but never had the paramount meaning it had in Germany. The fact however that Jewish students had their own student associations in German universities – as Miriam Rürup



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shows in the beautiful book briefly quoted on page 18 – is not an issue that raises the attention of the author.

Life in the associations didn't differ much in the two countries. Students met in and around the universities, organized and attended cultural events, had magazines and reviews or just enjoyed themselves in pubs and bars. Similarly, the associative life unfolded in the local context although political and cultural debates had a national rather than international projection. In both countries, associations gave room to foster and cultivate a certain image of masculinity with clear rituals and values. Paradigmatic in the German case is the centrality of the dueling. Yet, the book's goal is not to overtly discuss questions regarding representation, imagination, and identity around the student associations. The author rather looks at the relationship between socialization and politicization within the framework of associations – and comes to convincing conclusions. At the end, the comparison reveals a more democratic socialization in France and a less egalitarian one in Germany. When it comes to the politicization of the students it is possible to infer that student associations in Germany – despite their differences, divisions, and new modernizing and reformative tendencies – were more eager to support the existing political and social order while the associations in France represented a democratic counterpoise in the public arena: they made claims, challenged political powers and represented a very social body with its own interests. This intelligent and thorough book is therefore an important contribution to the understanding of modern Europe and the politicization of European societies before the First World War.

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