

Michel e.V.

They say the typical German is a “club junkie”—but who actually claimed that? We look around and wonder where he is: the typical German. It’s not me, it’s not him, and it’s not him either... and is this supposed to be a phenomenon that occurs predominantly among German men?

The history of the language confirms it: While “Vereine” was still a feminine noun (feminine stem) in Late Middle High German, it has been a masculine noun (masculine part of the body) since the 18th century.

“When three Germans get together, they start a club.” The originator of this widely held belief is just as unknown as the statement is false: the minimum number of members required to register a club is set at seven.

Fixed? Of course there are regulations in Germany defining what a “Verein” is. There’s order there. After all, that’s the very purpose of its founding: order. Anyone can trade stamps with anyone else, and anyone can grab a soccer ball and play soccer with other people—but that’s all just for fun. It only gets really serious when these amateurs found a “Verein” for their activities and, by doing so, become professionals.

“That’s a professional”—and every man knows that what is actually natural fun and doesn’t cost him anything among amateurs is something he has to pay for with a professional. The transition from non-club-based enjoyment of the activity thus becomes, in the form of a club, a matter in which money plays a role—and, as is well known, that’s where the fun ends.

An association that set itself the goal of causing disorder and wanted to register under the name “Chaos Association” wouldn’t stand a chance. It would have to settle for the form of a “Chaos Club,” which, however, is typical—after all, since when does chaos arise from organizing it?

A club, however, is a relatively unregulated space where, unlike in an association, behaviours that are otherwise not tolerated in public are permitted. In a society modelled on the British way of life, a “club” used to be something more refined: the working class had their sports clubs, the middle class their hockey or tennis clubs. It was only with the rise of mass sports that ordinary tennis clubs began to form, and the term “club” has shifted into the realm of organized sexuality—into sauna clubs, dating clubs, and so on—which, however, share a common feature with associations in that interested individuals must pay a membership fee and these clubs are exclusive: Members only!

In large clubs, you can even display this membership on your clothing—on your lapel or blouse—after all, you want to publicly proclaim that you belong to the club.

Political parties, after all, are also associations. They're just not called "associations" because, in the tradition of an authoritarian state, an association was once prohibited from pursuing political, sociopolitical, or religious purposes. If it did so anyway, it lacked legal standing. So, order was brought to the "association scene" by calling political associations "parties," sociopolitical associations "unions," and religious associations "churches."

Let's remember that the word "association" comes from the phrase "to unite," which was commonly used in the past but is now used only in a poetic sense. And the word is still used today where it finds its happiest application: in love. The legal form of this union is called marriage. Like all legal entities that are not associations and are governed by their own laws, it cannot, of course, be an association, since membership typically does not reach seven people, nor is that usually the purpose of forming such an association. So, it is not an association either. However, this partnership exists within a broader context, which is denoted by the word "family." In the narrower sense of father, mother, and child(ren), the minimum membership required for an association is usually no longer met these days; in the broader sense of family as kinship, however, it certainly is. Why doesn't this clan have the legal form of an association? That would bring more order and clarity to what is only sparsely regulated by family law. The very question of who would serve as president of this association would be a discussion that could shed light on relationships that are sometimes murky. Do you know everyone you're related to? You'd be surprised!

Just as the German nobility has become an association, there are, on the other hand—and as everyone knows—associations that aren't associations (anymore) at all. Take, for example, the HSV, the Hamburg Sports Club. It is, in fact, a medium-sized business enterprise and, since no one really wants to take responsibility for it, a limited liability company (GmbH) that manages the club's operations. After all, the club's purpose—taking the soccer division as an example—is no longer for Hamburg residents to meet as members for athletic activities, that is, to play soccer themselves, but has evolved into a situation where contractually paid athletic staff generate revenue.

If even the soccer clubs are no longer what they once were, then let's retreat to the clubs where German cheerfulness still reigns, and a true club spirit is cultivated: the Rhineland carnival clubs.

It's a lot of fun there, and—for historical reasons—the tradition of "teasing" the Prussian military, who were once occupying forces in the Rhineland, is one of

its wonderful elements: the Prince's Guard with the delightful "Funkenmariechen", the portly carnival soldiers rubbing their butts—that brings joy, because it used to be a delightful mockery of the Prussian military. But something must have gone wrong. Was it because the image of the enemy had faded away, as the Prussian military—with its notorious drill—had been consigned to history, or was it perhaps because things are taken very seriously and by the book in a German club?

Celebrating Carnival seriously is a contradiction in terms—or do you know anyone who's ever seriously come up with a joke?

Of course, Carnival can't "just be there" or come out of "nowhere." Venues have to be rented, music booked, garlands hung, and all other necessary arrangements made so that the merriment has the right setting.

Have you ever experienced the seriousness with which Carnival is celebrated? The rigorous drill of the Prince's Guard, which would have led even the Prussians to desert—but the Carnival revellers seem to adhere more to the principle: "If you want to be happy, you have to suffer." But you can't just leave all this to chance. If only three days are set aside for the merriment, then it must be perfectly organized. Just as on a package tour to Rome, not every participant can visit the Vatican whenever they want, but only when it's "their turn" and when everyone — at the same time! — does so, so too, during this tightly scheduled merriment, no one is allowed to step out of line. To ensure that everyone shouts "Helau" or "Alaaf"—at the same time! — and that everyone knows when to be merry, a fanfare is played beforehand as a signal for merriment. And then everyone—at the same time! — sways in unison.

To be fair, however, it must be noted that this isn't inherent to the nature of the club. Rest assured, there are also "opposition" carnival clubs where you can laugh at the wrong moments with impunity and where people don't sway under the table. But those are the clubs that are looked down upon—where everything is far too casual.

Speaking of "informal." If any woman, upon seeing the Funkenmariechen's slender, toned thighs and the way she twirls until her lace panties flutter, cries out "sexism"—she's mistaken. However, it's different than you might think. The Funkenmariechen used to be a man, too. It was only the Nazis who deemed it unbecoming for a "German man" to prance around in women's clothing, and only since then has the "Mariechen" actually been a woman. And that's how it's stayed. Even in Cologne's "Dreigestirn"—Prince, Peasant, and Virgin—there have actually been two women cast as the Virgin. But this nonsense was quickly reversed. In Cologne, only (wealthy) men are Virgins!

Just as no revolution takes place at train stations in Germany because (according to V. I. Lenin) "the German" would first have to buy a platform ticket,

cheerfulness without a jester's cap is somewhat suspicious. Only the jester's cap, with its various club colours and ranks of jesters—yes, there are also “chief jesters,” who have the least to laugh about—gives the barracks-style festive gatherings that special sense of “happiness in unity.”

So, the uninitiated person wonders: if this organization achieves the opposite of what (perhaps) was once the club's purpose, what does “club” mean?

Let's start “at the very top”: The freedom to form an association is enshrined in the Constitution and is one of the fundamental rights of every German (Basic Law, Art. 9, Para. 1: “All Germans have the right to form associations and societies.”).

However, not all associations are created equal. Among “legal entities,” a distinction is made between associations and corporations (we'll leave foundations aside for the sake of clarity). The fact that registered associations are somewhat “better” than societies—did you notice the magic word “registered”?—is made clear by the fact that associations that do not meet the requirements to be designated “e.V.” are automatically classified as societies.

It is, therefore, a kind of two-tier system based on the principle used by dog breeders, who classify dogs as “purebred” and “mongrel.” To stay with this terminology, the “purebred” associations—which then carry the designation “e.V.” in their name—are those whose “purpose is not directed toward commercial business operations.” Period. So, money does stink after all!

A distinctive feature of these associations is that the people who join them are transformed into “members.” Whereas in earlier times “German men, German women” were called upon, this has shifted to a neuter form: the member. However, it's impossible to conclusively determine whether it's “progressive” to neutralize the terms “man” and “woman”—in the sense of equality—or whether this reflects a form of infantilization—analogous to “the” child. When one considers the bickering in some associations, there's much to suggest the latter possibility.

“Club life” has its own rules. As a living organism, the club accordingly has a head (called the “board of directors”), a body (the members), a systematic structure (the bylaws), a voice (the newsletter), a heart (the treasurer), a circulatory system (the meetings and gatherings), consumes solid food (membership dues) and liquids (provided by the members), and, most importantly: it possesses something that individual people sometimes lack—it has an existential purpose (the club's mission or goal).

Consequently, there are young and old clubs, fun and boring ones, conservative and extravagant ones, poor and rich ones... in short, everything that makes life so colourful... and even more.

By law, the clubs are organized “democratically”—in other words, republican. But how does that square with the fact that, during the highlights of certain clubs’ annual cycles, there are “princes” and “kings”? The “princes” are the carnival princes (in this context, it’s acceptable to write it without quotation marks—otherwise the Adel e.V. would protest), and the “kings” are the shooting kings.

What makes this democratic is, first, that their royal status is qualified by the prefix “pre-,” and second, that they hold these titles for only one year. Nor should the fact that they choose a “princess” or “queen”—who should not be his wife—confuse us. That is the bourgeois character of this “monarchy”: for God forbid that the “king” should get involved with his “queen.” It’s just for show! It’s all about keeping up appearances.

When social disparities are greater, the social acceptance of the more affluent lies in allowing others to drink at their expense. That is the convivial purpose of the “kingship.” Consequently, they scout out in advance who will be “king” this year, and accordingly, everyone else aims wide of the “king’s target.”

But there’s a catch: skillfully missing the target isn’t as easy as aiming, and the club is left thoroughly flabbergasted when someone of modest means accidentally shoots down the crown. In a year like that, everyone has to chip in.

But such embarrassments later become anecdotes from the club’s history that are always fondly recounted, the “Do you remember...” stories. And if there’s also a historic club flag—passed down through generations and preserved through all the turmoil of world history — “Oh, German heart, blossom!” Of course, not just anyone can sing that—but—as we’re all in complete agreement—only a German choral society: “Where there is singing, settle down! Evil people have no songs!”

But: Have you ever managed to get past the first two or three lines of well-known German folk songs without resorting to a wordless hum?

You can only get past the humming by mustering all your strength, and... that’s just the way it is. And since the art of singing for a German person only begins with singing correctly, cheerful singing in the bathroom isn’t cultured—that is, it doesn’t meet the standards of a choir. However, this isn’t just because it’s cheerful but off-key; it’s also because, with the best will in the world, the minimum number of members required for a choir simply won’t fit under a shower or in a bathtub.

Whereas it used to be “German song from a man’s chest,” singing has now become the domain of women. Things are conducted with appropriate decorum there, and the number of men is on the decline.

From this, we can generally infer that in club activities, there is a correlation between idealistic goals and the proportion of women: the more idealistic the cause, the more women there are. In this respect, a high proportion of women—and the more, the better—indicates that the club is indeed what it claims to be.

So much for the idea that clubs are male dominated!