

Program for the Study of Germany and Europe
Working Paper Series #7.8

**Beyond the Union of Social Unions:
Civil Society, Political Society, and Liberal Individuality
in Wilhelm von Humboldt & John Stewart Mill**

by Steven M. Young

Lecturer in Social Studies, Harvard University

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the vibrancy of civic life and the cultivation of individuality in the works of two nineteenth-century liberal thinkers, John Stuart Mill and Wilhelm von Humboldt. In much of the liberal tradition, it is assumed that individual development and civic engagement are mutually contradictory. In the tradition of civic republicanism, there is a strong emphasis on the relationship between political participation and character development. But civic republicans stress the development of civic virtues, not the development of unique individuals. The two theorists examined in this paper focus on the role that participation in public affairs plays in shaping unique self-standing individuals. For both thinkers, the development of a flourishing associational life is crucial for the cultivation of individuality. However, Mill and the later Humboldt also demonstrate the limitations of civil society as a means for the cultivation of democratic individuals. through a critique of Humboldt's earlier libertarian model of civil society, and an analysis of his later work on representative institutions, the paper demonstrates the advantages of supplementing associational life in civil society with institutions that allow for direct participation in the political system per se.

This paper has two major goals. First, it aims to serve as a general introduction to Wilhelm von Humboldt's evolving theory of associational life. Among nineteenth century European liberal theorists, only Alexis De Tocqueville rivals Humboldt in his account of the manner in which secondary associations shape the intellectual and moral capacities of the modern citizen. More so than any other political theorist of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Humboldt explored the manner in which a rich, varied and unfettered associational life could contribute to the cultivation of unique self-standing individuals. Humboldt's account of the relationship between social union and *Bildung* should make his work required reading for contemporary political theorists investigating the relationship between the democratization of civil society and the cultivation of autonomous subjects.

However, Humboldt's work is also important in what it reveals to us about the limitations of participation in civic associations as a vehicle for character development. The second goal of this paper is to examine some of the limitations of civil society as a means for the cultivation of democratic citizens. Through a critique of Humboldt's earlier libertarian model of civil society, and an analysis of his later work on representative institutions, I aim to demonstrate the advantages of supplementing the associational life of civil society with institutions that allow for direct participation in the political system per se. In the final section of this paper I will argue that this move from civil society to political society is an essential component of John Stuart Mill's paradigm of self-cultivation. I will conclude by arguing that for Mill, ensuring opportunities for participation in political institutions per se is the best means of by which a society can promote the development of those moral capacities necessary for a fully realized democratic individuality; and, thus, that the institutions of civil society are not in and of themselves adequate for producing fully realized individualities.

Over the course of his long career as a scholar, diplomat and state official, Wilhelm von

Humboldt established himself as one of the two or three pre-eminent theorists of *Bildung* in the Western political philosophy tradition. Humboldt's model of *Bildung* exemplified a German conception of self-cultivation that emphasized, on the one hand, struggle with other individuals, one's environment and one's self, and, on the other hand, the need to transcend the pursuit of mere self-interest and adopt a set of culturally venerated pursuits and values. In *The Limits of State Action*, Humboldt's assertion of the need to engage the individual in struggle culminates in a defense of the practice of war and a critique of any state intervention designed to further the welfare of the populace. Humboldt's paean to the virtues engendered by martial activity may have contributed to his long-standing neglect in Anglo-American accounts of the development of European liberalism. However, his critique of state intervention in the economic realm has long made him a favorite of economic liberals and libertarians.¹ Yet this admiration for Humboldt on the part of disciples of Milton Friedman may be seriously misplaced. In *The Limits of State Action*, and in his other writings on *Bildung*, Humboldt exhibits a Prussian aristocrat's and German Romantic's disdain for economic pursuits. Humboldt does not resist state paternalism on the grounds that this interferes with the development of a vibrant market economy. (Humboldt appears somewhat ambivalent on the effects of state intervention on economic well-being.) Humboldt opposes state paternalism on the grounds that public support for an individual's welfare will likely make that individual soft, complacent and materialistic. Although such a position would hardly be acceptable to friends of the welfare state, such a position is also far from presenting the self-interested utility maximizing individual as the exemplar of humanity. Humboldt, like Hegel and John Stuart Mill, argues that the cultured individual who is the goal of *Bildung* can only be attained through cultivating talents, abilities and sensibilities that cannot be acquired in the pursuit

¹ See, for example, Ralph Raico, "Wilhelm von Humboldt," *New Individualist Review* 1, (1961): 18-27.

of profit.

For the young Humboldt, those talents, abilities and sensibilities that are constitutive of the cultured individual are best attained by a wide-ranging social intercourse in the realm which Hegel labelled "civil society." *The Limits of State Action* remains one of the great documents in the development of the political theory of civil society. Humboldt portrays an inherently social humanity that, if left to their own devices by state authorities, naturally form the type of social unions that are most conducive to *Bildung*. The young Humboldt argues that individual concern with a broader common good naturally emerges from a society which provides its members with ample opportunity to form and participate in social unions of all varieties.

As Humboldt's political and diplomatic experience grew, and as he adopted the cause of nascent German nationalism, Humboldt came to recognize that widespread participation in associational life was not in and of itself sufficient to engender a concern with the common good for the majority of the citizenry or to promote the development of fully realized cultured individuals. The mature Humboldt acknowledged the importance of popular participation in the political realm to engender a widespread concern with the good of the nation as a whole. Thus, in his later writings, Humboldt came to argue that a vibrant civil society must be supplemented by institutions that provide for widespread political participation if the conditions for the promulgation of *Bildung* among the populace are to be met. Yet Humboldt's concern for the creation of German states that could withstand the pressures of the international system, combined with his desire to protect many of the vested interests of restoration Europe, led Humboldt to eschew institutions that would provide for direct democracy or radical republicanism. Instead, Humboldt came to advocate representative institutions as those best suited to promote a concern with the common good among the populace while securing the privileges of the German elite from which he hailed. However, Humboldt recognized that representative institutions which provided little opportunity for real

participation would not provide the desired concern for the common good. Thus, Humboldt proposed linking a system of representative assemblies with intermediate bodies on the local and municipal level (corporations), in an effort to engender a concern with national affairs through widespread participation in local self-government. For Humboldt, a representative system supplemented by intermediate bodies was a means of ensuring that self-cultivation would produce citizens and not merely well-developed dilettantes with no concern for the common good.

Bildung and Politics in the 1790's

Although Humboldt's model for the ideal of *Bildung* was the citizen of the Greek *polis*, Humboldt recognized that the political and social organization of the *polis* could not be re-created in contemporary Europe. The type of intense political education and communal control over the inner life of the individual that characterized the *polis* would be neither viable nor advantageous for modern citizens. The inhabitants of contemporary Europe have "reached a pitch of civilization beyond which it seems they cannot ascend except through the development of individuals; and hence all institutions which act in any way to obstruct or thwart this development, and press men together into uniform masses, are now far more harmful than in earlier ages of the world."² By the early 1790's Humboldt had concluded that modern states could only produce the type of well-rounded virtuous citizens characteristic of the ancient polis by refraining from any activity save that of protecting the rights of citizens from internal or external trespass. The state could foster *Bildung* only by granting citizens the freedom to undertake the project of self-development in the manner they saw as best suited to their personal needs and abilities. Any action on the part of the state to promote the welfare of its citizens could only serve to stifle the creativity and initiative of the populace. This section will examine Humboldt's libertarian philosophy of the 1790's and, by

² Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, translated by J.W. Burrow (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993), p.48.

showing the inherent difficulties with this philosophy, explain the immanent logic of Humboldt's turn both toward a more expansive concept of the legitimate realm of state action and to a greater concern with popular participation in the political process.

The basic argument of *The Limits of State Action* is quite familiar to anyone conversant with libertarianism as a political doctrine and has been alluded to at several points above. Humboldt argues that "the entire efforts of the state to raise the positive welfare (*Wohlstand*) of the nation" have negative consequences vis-a-vis *Bildung*³, and therefore the state must limit its activities to those which secure the rights of citizens against would-be transgressors, foreign or domestic. Humboldt's arguments against state paternalism are quite similar to those later offered by Mill in *On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government*: citizens' reliance on the state provides little incentive for them to develop their own understanding and ingenuity⁴; citizens are less likely to offer each other mutual assistance as the state takes on a greater role⁵; any form of national education (purely academic or moral) induces uniformity whereas *Bildung* requires and produces diversity⁶; complete freedom of inquiry is necessary to foster spontaneity and autonomy⁷; citizens left to develop on their own will develop more consistent and coherent sets of beliefs⁸; and, more generally, "whatever does not spring from a man's free choice, or is only the

³ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p.17 ("dem ganzen Bemühen des Staats, den positiven Wohlstand der Nation zu erhöhen").

⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵ Ibid., p.21.

⁶ Ibid., p.48.

⁷ Ibid., p.66.

⁸ Ibid., p.68.

result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but still remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies but merely with mechanical exactness."⁹ As can be easily ascertained from this list of the detrimental effects of the paternalist state, Humboldt objects both to efforts to promote the material well-being of the populace, and to attempts to improve the moral or spiritual condition of the citizenry through control over the intellectual and religious life of the nation. It is this latter strain that Mill picks up on in *On Liberty*.

However, a strain in Humboldt's thought that is somewhat muted in Mill's work is the importance of social union for self-development, and the manner in which limits upon state intervention promote the self-organization of society.¹⁰ One of Humboldt's primary criticisms of paternalistic government is that it inhibits the spontaneous formation of social unions that is essential to *Bildung*:

Instead of men grouping themselves into communities in order to discipline and develop their powers, even though to secure these benefits they may have to forgo a part of their exclusive possessions and enjoyments, they actually sacrifice their powers to their possessions. The very variety arising from the union of numbers of individuals is the highest good which social life can confer, and this variety is undoubtedly lost in proportion to the degree of state interference.¹¹

For Humboldt, the aim of a liberal polity is to create "as many new social bonds as possible," for

⁹ Ibid., pp.22-23.

¹⁰ In his arguments concerning the necessary conditions for and the salutary effects of social unions Humboldt anticipates many of the critical elements of Tocqueville's social theory over forty years prior to the publication of *Democracy in America*. Humboldt's arguments concerning the disastrous effects of the French Revolutionaries' attempts to create a political system on the basis of abstract rational principles anticipates Tocqueville's arguments in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. Humboldt must be seen as one of the critical precursors to Tocqueville in developing a theory of modern associational life that attempts to connect the mode of state intervention in society with the type of human sociability prevalent in that society.

¹¹ Ibid., p.18.

"the isolated man is no more able to develop than the one who is fettered."¹² Small-scale and moderate sized social unions are essential to *Bildung* for a number of reasons. First, these unions provide the best check on the one-sidedness that plagues the lives of individuals with particular talents and abilities and threatens to severely limit the exposure to a wide range of ideas and experiences necessary for *Bildung*:

What is achieved, in the case of the individual by the union of the past and future with the present is produced in society by the mutual cooperation of its different members; for, in all the stages of his life, each individual can achieve only one of those perfections, which represent the possible features of human character. It is through a social union, therefore, based on the internal wants and capacities of its members, that each is enabled to participate in the rich collective resources of all the others.¹³

Second, this type of social union allows the individual to determine which of her traits and abilities are compatible with the needs and goals of others, and thus determine which elements of character must be further developed and which must be eliminated or transformed in the process of self-development.

Finally, Humboldt stresses the importance of smaller associations because in larger organizations the individual is "too prone to become merely an instrument." In smaller associations individuals are more likely to act on their own, and thus more likely to actively contribute to their own development.¹⁴ In addition, smaller associations are more likely to have a certain intimacy which Humboldt views as essential to promoting *Bildung*. In many ways, Humboldt takes the union of the sexes as the model of the manner in which a small social

¹² Ibid., p.100.

¹³ Ibid., p.11.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.36.

association can enrich its members through providing an intense encounter with individuals with significantly different characteristics and experiences.

Humboldt's modeling of associational life on gender relations was not merely a case of argument by analogy, but a direct consequence of the organization of intellectual life in the *Aufklärung* Berlin to which Humboldt came as a young man. Much of the intellectual discourse in Berlin in the 1780's and 1790's centered around salons presided over by enlightened Jewish hostesses. Humboldt became especially attached to one of these hostesses, Henriette Herz, the young wife of "the leading Berlin doctor."¹⁵ With Henriette Herz, Humboldt founded the "Tugendbund", a secret virtue society "of three women and three men dedicated to mutual moral improvement."¹⁶ Humboldt described the aims of this association in a draft of the rules sent to Henriette Herz as follows:

Since the aim of our lodge is happiness through love, and the degree of happiness in true love is always exactly proportionate to the degree of moral perfection in the lovers, it follows that moral cultivation is what every association most ardently seeks. The associates have abolished amongst themselves all barriers of merely conventional propriety. They enjoy every pleasure which is not purchased through loss of higher pleasures.¹⁷

Humboldt grew tired of the Tugendbund by the early years of the 1790's; however, it is clear that this organization serves as an ideal-type of the sort of association that Humboldt considers most conducive to *Bildung* in *The Limits of State Action*.

Viewing the Tugendbund as the epitome of the type of small-scale voluntary association

¹⁵ Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.3.

¹⁶ David Sorkin, "Wilhelm von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-formation (*Bildung*), 1791-1810" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, (1983): 55-73, p.57.

¹⁷ Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, p.5.

that promotes *Bildung* through intimacy and exposure to difference, it is easy to determine both the advantages and the defects in Humboldt's model. On the positive side, the Tugendbund was a voluntary organization that broke down many of the traditional social barriers and conventions of a highly inegalitarian, hierarchically organized Prussian society. The association viewed free choice as a more important principle than social caste, and the equality between the sexes in the association demonstrates that Humboldt's ideal of *Bildung* was not simply an attempt to re-create the ancient ideal of the (male) citizen-warrior under modern conditions. *Bildung* was not only available to men and women alike, but could only reach its summit if men and women were encouraged to develop their powers to the fullest in equal measure, for only in that case would society derive the full benefit of the variety in personalities and capacities to which gender difference contributed. In this regard, Humboldt's notion of associational life captures much of what is progressive in the liberal notion of freedom of association, which holds that an individual's right to develop a distinct unique personality is dependent upon the freedom to form precisely those social bonds which will best aid in the cultivation of that individual's particularity.

Yet the ideal of free associational life described in *The Limits of State Action* and epitomized in the Tugendbund was far removed from the actual life experience of the vast majority of the Prussian population in 1792. Intellectual discourse in salons and the formation of voluntary societies for mutual self-improvement were not really options for those who lacked the resources, education, and free time of a Wilhelm von Humboldt or a Henriette Herz. Since Humboldt's model of state action excluded the establishment of national schools, the provision of a minimum standard of living that might support each individual's efforts at self-improvement, or sufficient state regulation of the wage labour contract to guarantee workers adequate leisure time, it did not provide the majority of citizens with the conditions necessary to partake in an active free

associational life for the purposes of *Bildung*.¹⁸ Furthermore, by failing to provide any mechanism for popular participation in the process of governing, Humboldt neglects what is perhaps the most important means by which individuals gain the habits of associating to attain common ends. It is certainly true that paternalist government reduces the need and the will for the citizenry to accomplish necessary tasks without help from above. But simply removing such a government will not necessarily teach people to act spontaneously and in concert. Communal action requires a certain amount of familiarity, trust and practical organizational experience; and nothing does a better job of instilling these qualities in members of a community than the practice of collective self-government. Tocqueville viewed this as a key factor in maintaining the active associational life of the Americans; Humboldt would come to recognize the importance of representative institutions in maintaining the associational life necessary for *Bildung* in his writings from 1813 forward.

Equally important with regard to *Bildung*, Humboldt's model of voluntary associational life does not have any strong mechanism to direct citizens toward the pursuit of the common good of society as a whole. In associations like the Tugendbund, individuals concerned with their mutual self-improvement may encourage each other to pursue higher rather than lower pleasures, and even to pursue broader moral goals as a means of self-cultivation. But there is no overriding imperative in such associations to address the needs of the broader society, and the Tugendbund itself was not intended to direct its members toward matters of political and social concern.

Humboldt rejects the notion that the system he outlines in *The Limits of State Action* would "weaken the public interest." By limiting the public interest to the protection of individuals' right to pursue their own development in the manner they see fit, this system "weaves the two [the private

¹⁸ Fredrick Beiser claims that in a letter dated February 8, 1793 Humboldt expressed serious doubts as to whether his minimal state could provide citizens with the necessary means for *Bildung*. *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.136-137.

interests of citizens and the public interest] so closely together that the latter seems rather to be based on the former; and especially so to the citizen who wishes to be at once secure and free... Thus then, with such a system, that love for the constitution which it is so often vainly sought to cultivate in the hearts of citizens by artificial means will best be maintained."¹⁹ Humboldt also argues that citizens who have been allowed to fully cultivate their intellectual, creative and moral powers will ultimately attach themselves to the state and its end as a matter of course. However, without some institutional mechanism which engages citizens in ~~debate and discussion~~ over the nature of the public good and the means by which the state should promote or protect that good, it is not entirely clear why individuals pursuing self-cultivation should attend to issues of the public good. If citizens have no opportunity to become involved in the political process, it is far from certain that the aims of this process would become essential to individuals pursuing the project of *Bildung*.

Leonard Krieger has gone so far as to argue that the Humboldt of *The Limits of State Action* "measured up fully to the classic picture of the unpolitical German intellectual." Krieger argues that Humboldt "adhered emphatically to the cult of the spiritual sovereignty of the individual who realizes his highest values through intellectual and aesthetic contemplation..."²⁰ This cult of "the spiritual sovereignty of the individual" allowed German intellectuals to embrace modern individualism without offering any serious opposition to German absolutism. Krieger claims that *The Limits of State Action* is not really a work "in the political mold of classic Western liberalism," because "his [Humboldt's] main concern was not to liberalize the political life of men but to accept the existing political system as the highest embodiment of the state and then to

¹⁹ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p.136.

²⁰ Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p.167.

exclude it from all possible spheres of human activity, on the grounds that politics was pernicious to the development of the human spirit."²¹ Krieger undoubtedly overstates his case; Humboldt offered legitimate opposition to some of the more despotic forms of intervention on the part of the Prussian absolutist state. Nevertheless, Krieger's critique points to a crucial deficiency in the form of liberalism prescribed by *The Limits of State Action*-- this mode of liberalism denies that the political realm itself is a major forum for the cultivation and perfection of modern individuals, but it views the state simply as a means of guaranteeing the security of those cultural and social realms in which *Bildung* is located. Thus, for the Humboldt of *The Limits of State Action* the political realm must be viewed in purely instrumental terms-- it has no value in itself as a realm of human flourishing, but only serves to protect those realms in which human flourishing transpires. Politics is contrasted to *Bildung* and the former is only acceptable when it is absolutely necessary for the protection of the latter.

Most contemporary Neo-Tocquevillean theories of civil society do not suffer from this type of instrumentalization of the political. The literature on civic disengagement usually portrays declining rates of voter participation and party membership as *prima facie* evidence of the disintegration of civic culture. Thus, one can hardly accuse a scholar such as Robert Putnam of denigrating political participation as a valuable realm of human flourishing.²² Nevertheless, recent Neo-Tocquevillean theories often share with the early Humboldt the notion that public-spiritedness flows naturally from participation in small face-to-face of associations, regardless of whether such associations address questions of public import in their day-to-day functioning. Although

²¹ Ibid., p.168.

²² Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone," *Journal of Democracy*, January 1995; "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS*, Volume XXVIII, Number 4, December 1995 (664-683)

participation in bowling leagues, bird-watching societies or singing clubs may increase individuals' capacities to act in concert with others (and thus increase social capital to some degree)²³, it is unlikely that such participation will increase members overall sense of public-spiritedness or concern for the common good unless these institutions are more concretely linked to opportunities for direct political participation. The Neo-Tocquevillean arguments become weaker still when participation in secondary associations is presented as a primary means of inculcating patriotism. Ultimately, non-political secondary associations may serve to cultivate certain capacities and character traits essential for democratic citizens; but the realm of non-political associations will never be adequate in and of itself to direct individuals to a deep-seated concern with the common weal.

Humboldt Discovers the Nation-State: Politics and Bildung after Jena.

In *The Limits of State Action*, Humboldt argued against the notion that national sentiment is necessarily tied to the state, and proposed that national unity of purpose "might as easily proceed from national as from merely governmental arrangements. It is only necessary to extend to the nation and its parts the freedom of association."²⁴ This dissociation of national sentiment from the state and from popular political mobilization might have appeared plausible in the Europe of 1791, but such a notion could no longer appear feasible following the defeat of the German states by Napoleon's army of mobilized French citizens, and the subsequent revival of German national spirit and national consciousness. It is highly unlikely that a German intellectual could have written a work like *The Limits of State Action* after Jena. In fact, as Meinecke has argued, Humboldt's

²³ See Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), for the standard Neo-Tocquevillean account of the relationship between secondary associations and the creation of social capital.

²⁴ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p.35.

discovery of the importance of the national state in the last years of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth century profoundly changed his notion of the proper role of the state and the proper relationship between the state and the citizenry.²⁵ In the years after Jena Humboldt would achieve greatness as a statesman and institutional reformer, especially in his reshaping of the Prussian educational system and his establishment of the University of Berlin. He would also become a champion of popular participation in the political process.²⁶ Ultimately, through his recognition of the role played by participation in the political process in fostering national spirit, and his realization that the direction of individuals toward broader national goals is an essential element in the process of *Bildung*, Humboldt came to assert the importance of representative institutions for the process of character development. After 1813, Humboldt championed local, provincial and national representative bodies as precisely the form of associational activity best designed to elicit national sentiment and develop popular concern with the common good. Humboldt also viewed such institutions as a means of maintaining institutional continuity, preserving political and cultural diversity, fostering social stability and promoting good governance.

Humboldt's most sustained discussion of the potential role of representative institutions as instruments of *Bildung* appears in a memorandum composed as part of an exchange of ideas with Stein on the subject of constitutional reform in 1819. At the time of the composition of this essay ("Denkschrift über ständische Verfassung"²⁷) Humboldt served as Minister for Estates Affairs

²⁵ Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), chapter 3.

²⁶ Krieger provides a strong discussion of Humboldt's newfound confidence in "the people" as a political force. See *The German Idea of Freedom*, p.208f..

²⁷ In *W. von Humboldt: Studienausgabe 2*, Kurt Müller-Vollmer, ed. (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1971), pp.196-258.

and was a member of a royal commission on constitutional reform chaired by Hardenberg. The final version of this text was completed in October, 1819 following the first meeting of this commission in which Hardenberg laid down basic principles of constitutional design. This document may be seen as one of the best examples of the liberal reformist impulse in restoration Prussia. Soon after the second meeting of Hardenberg's commission, Humboldt was to resign from the Prussian government for the final time in protest over its adoption of the Karlsbad Decrees. Humboldt's proposals for constitutional reform were too liberal for the period of reaction that commenced in 1819 in central Europe.

As did Mill forty years later in *Considerations on Representative Government*, Humboldt discusses both the educative and efficient functions of representative institutions.²⁸ Humboldt considered the role of representative institutions in increasing government efficiency particularly important in selling his proposals to the Prussian crown. Humboldt places strong emphasis on the role that a system of local, provincial and national Estates can play as a conduit of information about the real conditions of the nation to the crown and the bureaucracy. Humboldt stresses the tendency of a national bureaucracy to operate in accordance with abstract theoretical principles which have only a tenuous relationship to the actual conditions in the country.²⁹ By filtering information about local conditions up to the bureaucracy, the estates should improve the efficiency of administration. Furthermore, by leaving a significant portion of the business of local administration to local *ständisch* authorities, efficiency will be improved by allowing those with the greatest knowledge of local conditions to take care of local matters.

²⁸ See Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) for a discussion of the educative and efficient functions of political participation.

²⁹ Here Humboldt is reiterating a longstanding theme of his political writings that first surfaced in "Ideen über Staatsverfassung, durch die neue französische Constitution veranlaßt." (*Wilhelm von Humboldt: Studienausgabe 2.*)

Humboldt also contends that representative institutions should serve to make much governing superfluous through raising the civic sense of the public, and thus encouraging the citizenry to undertake many of the tasks that would be left to the government in a more authoritarian regime.³⁰ In his discussion of this educative function of representative institutions, Humboldt draws the connection between political participation and an active citizenry that would be a fundamental premise of the more celebrated democratic theories of Tocqueville and Mill. Humboldt argues that a decline in civic participation in the years prior to the French Revolution can be attributed to a loosening of the hold of intermediate associations such as guilds and corporations upon the populace. The French Revolution served to shake individuals out of their lethargy, but it produced a type of political participation that skipped over intermediate associations and tried to focus participation directly on the most general political bodies, with disastrous results. Humboldt argues that the people must be cultivated to political understanding through participation in representative institutions, especially local and provincial institutions. Participation in the administration of public business on the local level ultimately "lays the ground for the receptivity for the love of the common [good.]"³¹ Thus, "the first seeds of love of the fatherland develop out of attachment to the dwelling place..."³²

For Humboldt, instilling a concern with the common good is not simply a necessary means of preserving public order or promoting the material well-being of the populace, but a fundamental component of the *Bildung* of each individual. As the individual raises his level of

³⁰ "Denkschrift über ständische Verfassung", p.203.

³¹ "... die ihn aber zuerst dahin führen die Angelegenheit seiner Gemeinde zu verwalten, und solden *Grund legen zur Empfänglichkeit für die Liebe zum Allgemeinen.*" [italics mine] Ibid., p.204.

³² "Die ersten Keime der Vaterlandsliebe entwickeln sich aus der Anhänglichkeit an den Wohnort..." Ibid.

public spiritedness through participation in the administration of local affairs, he will "dispose himself to be more serious, and give his profession and individual life, both of which he will tie closer to the well-being of his fellow citizen, a higher value."³³ Thus, in his later years Humboldt clearly believed that a concern for public affairs aided individuals in developing a wide range of capacities and abilities, and, perhaps, that such a concern might serve as a unifying principle that would enable the individual to develop her powers to a "complete and consistent whole."

The Interplay of Public and Private in J.S. Mill's Model of Self-Development

John Stuart Mill's celebrated critique of state paternalism in *On Liberty*, and his account of the development of individuality in chapter 3 of this work were strongly influenced by Humboldt's *Limits of State Action*. Yet Mill's overall conception of the institutional conditions most conducive to individual self-development are more consistent with the institutional prescriptions of the later Humboldt. Not only does Mill reject the young Humboldt's extreme economic libertarianism, but he stresses the importance of participation in representative institutions for the development of the intellectual and moral capacities of a democratic citizenry. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to fully elucidate the relationship between civil society and the political system per se in Mill's political thought. However, in the concluding section of this essay I hope to provide a general framework for evaluating the function of political participation in Mill's political thought, and indicate that the primary locus for political participation for Mill is not the realm of autonomous secondary associations, but the political system itself.

For Mill the pursuit of individual self-development and the pursuit of the common good in the public sphere are not only compatible, but ultimately mutually reinforcing. Mill is able to make

³³ "Diese selbst gewinnt durch eine auf diese Weise geordnete Theilnahme an der Gesetzgebung, Beaufsichtigung und Verwaltung mehr Bürgersinn und mehr Bürgerschick; jeder wird dadurch fürsich selbst ernster gestimmt, und giebt seinem Gewerbe und individuellen Leben, indem er beide näher an das Wohl seiner Mitbürger knüpft, eine höher Geltung." Ibid., p.203.

this argument because he has a complex notion of *Bildung* which entails the cultivation of different elements of the human personality in different spheres of action. Furthermore, like Hegel, he believes that certain skills and habits developed in the pursuit of private interests are crucial in enabling the individual to ascertain and pursue the common good, and that certain values and ends attained through participation in the public sphere greatly enrich the individual's private life. This line of argument is developed by Nancy Rosenblum in her account of the rapprochement of Romanticism and liberalism, *Another Liberalism*. Rosenblum argues that Mill succeeds in reconciling the demands of utilitarian rationalism and Romantic expressivism and emotionalism by proposing an ideal of shifting involvements, in which an individual's activities in the public and private sphere are "mutually compensatory. Each sphere provides a corrective for the excesses and deficiencies of the other."³⁴ Activity in public life provides "a corrective to an all-consuming private life" in which the dominance of the pursuit of economic self-interests fails to develop "sympathy and fellow feeling, largeness of sentiment."³⁵ By compelling citizens to take into account the larger national interest, public life both expands the citizen's range of interests and concerns (thus fostering the development of "a many-sided self") and cultivates his or her affective life by "nurturing sentiments of sympathy."³⁶ Yet Mill prevents these sentiments of sympathy from becoming attached to inappropriate objects or connected with unrealistic goals by placing them in "institutional settings designed to attach them to liberty and utility."³⁷ In addition, Mill prevents the demands of public life from becoming all-consuming for the individual by advocating

³⁴ Nancy Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.125.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.130.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.131.

representative institutions (rather than institutions of direct democracy) which require only a limited expenditure of time and energy from most individuals. This leaves individuals free to pursue self-interest in the realm of civil society and develop the type of instrumental rationality demanded of the Enlightenment subject of rational control.³⁸

Rosenblum argues that Mill's ideal of shifting involvements includes a third component besides "public altruism and private egoism," the possibility of "withdrawal within."³⁹ Mill sees two grave dangers for the individual undertaking self-cultivation, the danger of "excessive socialization, " and the detrimental effects of an over-reliance on rational analysis. (This over-reliance on rationality was a primary cause of Mill's mental breakdown of 1826-27.) Detachment and withdrawal must be possible to overcome an overbearing society and the dejection that may be produced by excessive analysis. Such detachment ultimately makes both political and economic rationalism viable, because it provides individuals with the emotional resources necessary to live with a healthy democratic skepticism without falling into despair.

Rosenblum's analysis has much to recommend it. Mill certainly considered activity in the political realm, the economic realm and the private realm of aesthetic sensibility as three necessary and, in themselves, insufficient moments in the self-cultivation of an individual. Similarly, Rosenblum is undoubtedly correct in arguing that Mill's advocacy of representative government rather than direct democracy in tight-knit communities was strongly influenced by his desire to provide individuals with the "space" and time necessary to develop their individual talents and abilities without the constant demands placed upon the individual by direct democracy. Rosenblum is also correct to argue that Mill viewed the political realm and the non-economic portion of the

³⁸ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chs. 8 and 9 for a superb discussion of the Enlightenment subject of rational control.

³⁹ Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, p.134.

private realm as critical spaces for the cultivation of affective sensibilities that were in danger of being overwhelmed by the increasing prevalence of the instrumental rationality dictated by the market.

Yet Rosenblum's analysis is problematic in a number of ways. Ironically, Rosenblum doesn't recognize the full power and scope of Mill's Romantic critique of contemporary British society. In Rosenblum's view, Mill's indictment of nineteenth century British society focuses on the narrowness of his contemporaries, and on the failure of this society "to provide occasions for large sentiments."⁴⁰ To combat the former, Mill advocates an ideal of self-cultivation that aims for many-sidedness rather than beauty or wholeness. To overcome the latter problem, Mill views public life as a means for cultivating those sentiments which cannot be developed in the private realm. "The public life he recommends is compensatory, not redemptive or magnificently self-expressive. Mill's judgement that individuals need to take up public business is historically contingent and based on the limitations of private life in civil society..."⁴¹

For Mill, the major problem with the emergent industrial society in nineteenth century Britain was not simply that individuals were too narrow and that they lacked certain sentiments necessary for a well-rounded character, but that the self-dependent individual was in immanent danger of being gobbled up by mass society. This self-dependent individual, the individual capable of standing up to public opinion and undertaking what he or she believes must be done, even if this is unpleasant or unpopular, is the goal of self-cultivation in Mill's writings from the essays of the early 1830's through *On Liberty*. The ideal of the self-dependent individual is not simply an ideal of many-sidedness, but an ideal of classical wholeness. This is the individual that Humboldt is

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

aiming to produce in *The Limits of State Action*. Public institutions that aim at producing such self-dependent individuals cannot merely serve to complement those characteristics produced in "private life in civil society," but must provide individuals with a means of transcending such characteristics.

Although Mill recognized the necessity of individuals pursuing their self-interest in the realm of civil society, he viewed such pursuit of self-interest as a less fully realized human activity than the pursuit of higher pleasures or the exercise of one's moral faculty of universal benevolence. Thus, citizens' participation in the public realm was not simply a matter of broadening the range of their concerns and interests, but it was a means of elevating individuals and enabling them to engage in pursuits that were qualitatively superior human activities than the mere pursuit of material well-being:

The private money-getting occupation of almost every one, is more or less a mechanical routine; it brings but a few of his faculties into action, while its exclusive pursuit tends to fasten his attention and interest exclusively upon himself, and upon his family as an appendage of himself;- making him indifferent to the public, to *the more generous objects and the nobler interests, and, in his inordinate regard for his personal comforts, selfish and cowardly.* Balance these tendencies with the contrary ones; give him something to do for the public, whether as a vestryman, a juryman or an elector; and in that degree, his ideas and feelings are taken out of this narrow circle. He becomes acquainted with more varied business, and a larger range of considerations. He is made to feel that beside the interests which separate him from his fellow-citizens, he has interests which connect him with them; that not only the common weal is his weal, but that it partly depends upon his exertions. Whatever might be the case in some other constitutions of society, the spirit of a commercial people will be, we are persuaded, essentially mean and slavish wherever public spirit is not cultivated by an extensive participation of the people in the business of government in detail.⁴²

⁴² Mill, "Tocqueville on Democracy in America, vol.II" in Himmelfarb, ed., *Essays on Politics and Culture*, (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973), pp.230-231.

Of course Mill uses the language of overcoming narrowness and gaining more varied pursuits in this passage. But in his description of the concerns of the public as "more generous objects" and "nobler interests," and in his condemnation of the spirit of commercial societies as "mean and slavish," Mill is using a language of qualitative contrast to indicate the qualitative superiority of the pursuit of some public good (or even some common public interest) to the pursuit of private gain.⁴³ This is fully consistent with the tenets of Mill's broader moral theory. Mill's account of utilitarian morality departs sharply from that of his father and Jeremy Bentham in its rejection of the notion that the mere pursuit of self-interest can serve as a foundation for moral action. For Mill, natural feelings of sympathy, which are strengthened through social ties, must serve as a foundation for morality.⁴⁴ Therefore, institutions which enable individuals to overcome self-interest and develop their sympathetic feelings and concepts of the common good are the primary vehicles of the moral improvement of humanity, and as such must be seen as privileged spheres of human action as compared to those spheres of action which merely promote the pursuit of self-interest. This search for institutions that develop sympathetic feelings and conceptions of a common good is the primary impetus behind Mill's embracing the cooperative movement. However, the primary crucible for developing sympathetic feelings and notions of the common good are public institutions which compel individuals to engage in common projects with a disparate group of fellow citizens. Mill describes this process in an especially compelling passage in *Considerations on Representative Government*:

⁴³ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, part 1 and "The Diversity of Goods", in Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), for a discussion of languages of qualitative contrast.

⁴⁴ See John Robson, *The Improvement of Mankind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968) p.133-137 and R.J. Halliday, *John Stuart Mill* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976) p.56-57 and 63 for discussions of the roles of sympathy and self-interest in Mill's moral theory.

Still more salutary is the moral part of the instruction afforded by the participation of the private citizen, if even rarely, in public functions. He is called upon, while so engaged, to weigh interests not his own; to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private particularities; to apply at every turn, the principles and maxims which have for their reason of existence the common good: and he usually finds associated with him in the same work minds more familiarised than his own with these ideas and operations whose study it will be to supply reasons to his understanding, and stimulation to his feeling of the general interest. He is made to feel himself one of the public, and whatever is for their benefit to be for his benefit. Where this school of public spirit does not exist, scarcely any sense is entertained that private persons...owe any duties to society, except to obey the laws and submit to government. There is no unselfish sentiment of identification with the public. Every thought or feeling is absorbed in the individual and in the family. The man never thinks of any collective interest, of any objects to be pursued jointly with others, but only in competition with them, and in some measure at their expense. A neighbor, not being an ally or an associate, since he is never engaged in any common undertaking for joint benefit is therefore only a rival. Thus even private morality suffers, while the public is actually extinct.⁴⁵

Thus, Mill views participation in the public realm as a necessary condition for even basic forms of social solidarity and ethical life. Without working with fellow citizens in a common effort to promote the common good, the individual is likely to consider her neighbors and compatriots as rivals or potential rivals. Suspicion will triumph over sympathy and self-love over benevolence. However, cooperation on a common project will break down the barriers between the individual and her fellow citizens because discussions that attempt to determine common ends and the best means of achieving these ends will require the individual to assume the perspective of other individuals within the group. This will be necessary because the individual will only succeed in gaining support of other individuals for her positions if she can convince others that these positions serve their long-term interests. Thus, in attempting to gain the support of others for her positions, or even in attempting to assess the proposals offered by others in the public sphere, the individual will be compelled to think with what Hannah Arendt has referred to as an "enlarged mentality," a

⁴⁵ "Considerations on Representative Government," p.217.

mentality which takes into account the standpoints of as many of the individuals effected by a particular issue as possible.⁴⁶ By taking the viewpoints of others into account, the individual attains a type of impartiality that "is not the result of some higher standpoint that would actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the melee."⁴⁷ In other words, by taking the standpoints of others, the individual can increase the impartiality and generality of her thought, and attain more "valid" political and moral conclusions⁴⁸, without the need of claiming that her particular position is somehow metaphysically privileged. Participation in the public realm does not improve the individual's morality by pointing her towards some ultimate truth which is gradually revealed to her, but by teaching the individual to take into account the interests of the largest number and widest variety of people who will be influenced by an action. In Richard Rorty's terms, the morality that is imbued by political participation is not an ascent to moral truth, but an increase in solidarity with the members of one's society and a widening conception of who is a co-member of that society.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the manner in which Rorty proposes widening solidarity and the process of cultivating sympathy and solidarity through political participation discussed by Mill. For Rorty, solidarity is expanded by taking notice of the similarities between those we identify as "us" and those we have previously identified as "they." The goal of liberals should be to "keep trying to expand our sense of 'us' as far as we can. That slogan urges us to extrapolate further in the direction set by certain events in the past- the inclusion

⁴⁶ See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp.42-44 and "Truth in Politics" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), pp.241-242.

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p.42.

⁴⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p.241.

among 'us' of the family in the next cave, then of the tribe across the river, then of the tribal confederation beyond the mountains, then of the unbelievers beyond the seas (and, perhaps last of all, of the menials who, all this time have been doing our dirty work.)"⁴⁹ Rorty is somewhat vague as to the general process by which such solidarity is to be generated, and he would undoubtedly agree that political participation is an important means of generating solidarity; nevertheless, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty places greater emphasis on reading literature written from the perspective of "marginalized people" (and others whom we characterize as 'they') as a means of recognizing their similarities with 'us.' This recognition need not include acknowledgement of common interests or participation in a common project. It only need include the acknowledgement that individuals we had previously identified as 'they' are fellow sufferers, as susceptible as 'we' are to cruelty and humiliation. For Mill, the recognition of others as fellow sufferers is not sufficient to move us beyond self-interest into the pursuit of common interests and common ends. Thus, recognition of others as fellow sufferers is not in and of itself adequate to compel individuals to make the 'moral' move from self-love to benevolence. Participation in the process of public deliberation and decision-making is far more likely to encourage individuals to transcend the standpoint of self-interest in an effort to adopt a position which will be acceptable to other deliberants. Furthermore, political participation may ultimately compel narrow-minded intolerant individuals to expand their horizons, whereas the efforts to expand solidarity described by Rorty will only compel individuals already committed to such a project.

The type of enlarged mentality envisioned by both Arendt and Mill may be produced by participation in certain types of secondary associations. But participation in the type of small insular associations envisioned by Humboldt in *The Limits of State Action* cannot expose the

⁴⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.196.

the general and the universal. Mill's account of the function of politics is not as schematic as Hegel's, but the idea that the function of politics is to transport individuals from their atomistic pursuit of self-interest to appropriate a world of shared goals and values is implicit in Mill's writings.⁵⁰ In this sense, Mill shares with the later Humboldt the insight that a flourishing civil society is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the cultivation of fully realized modern individuals.

⁵⁰ Gadamer has explained that any theory of *Bildung* requires a double movement of alienation and reconciliation in which an individual encounters a cultural world that at first appears alien to him, and which he ultimately comes to make his own.[Gadamer *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), p.15.] It is only after appropriating such a cultural world that an individual can accomplish anything in the cultural realm of art, religion and philosophy. For both Mill and Hegel, the political realm acts to bring the individual out of his initial isolation and allows the individual to begin the process of appropriating the common cultural world.

The Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies

The Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies is an interdisciplinary program organized within the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences and designed to promote the study of Europe. The Center's governing committees represent the major social science departments at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Since its establishment in 1969, the Center has tried to orient students towards questions that have been neglected both about past developments in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European societies and about the present. The Center's approach is comparative and interdisciplinary, with a strong emphasis on the historical and cultural sources which shape a country's political and economic policies and social structures. Major interests of Center members include elements common to industrial societies: the role of the state in the political economy of each country, political behavior, social movements, parties and elections, trade unions, intellectuals, labor markets and the crisis of industrialization, science policy, and the interconnections between a country's culture and politics.

For a complete list of Center publications (Working Paper Series, Program for the Study of Germany and Europe Working Paper Series, Program on Central and Eastern Europe Working Paper Series, and *French Politics and Society*, a quarterly journal) please contact the Publications Department, 27 Kirkland St, Cambridge MA 02138. Additional copies can be purchased for \$5.00 each. A monthly calendar of events at the Center is also available at no cost.