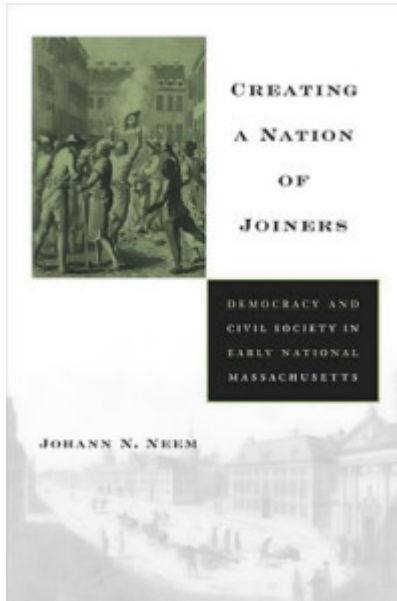


# The Unwanted Rise of America's Voluntary Tradition



Johann N. Neem, *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008. 259 pp., hardcover, \$49.95.

In 1800, John Coakley Lettsom, leader of a host of London's learned and charitable societies, counseled an American correspondent that "it would be the most beneficial, that all literary [i.e., learned] Societies should be conducted by private individuals." "[F]or," he thought, "where they become State institutions, numbers are often introduced from favour rather than from abilities." Three decades later, another observer of the American scene, Alexis de Tocqueville, commented that "'Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups.'" Yet Tocqueville—and many in the scholarly tradition he helped create—overlooked the fact that citizens of the early republic had not automatically embraced voluntary organizations as beneficial to the polity. Rather, they had battled over just the issue that Lettsom had identified: what is the correct relationship between the state and civil society?

In the colonial era, middling and (especially) elite urban Americans had belonged to a larger British Atlantic associational world. Had the American Revolution never taken place, Americans would nevertheless have set up many of the voluntary organizations that were founded in the early republic, if perhaps not in such great numbers. The Revolution, however, did take place, and it changed the political context of associating.

The post-Revolutionary Federalist leaders of Massachusetts, like their

counterparts in other states, did not anticipate (much less hope for) a vibrant sphere of voluntary associations separate from the state. Rather, as Johann Neem explains in his excellent study *Creating a Nation of Joiners*, they expected that “civil society was to be created and managed by the state in the service of the people” (11).

Based on a vision of a republican commonwealth where governors pursued a unitary good, Massachusetts’s 1780 constitution sought to foster morality and social bonds through its support for religion, namely the Congregational church, and education. In addition, it permitted the organization of only those groups that were deemed to promote the public welfare. Citizens had the communal freedom of assembly (to protest government abuses) but not the individual right of association. Through its power to grant charters of incorporation enabling groups to hold property, sue and be sued, and otherwise act in law, the legislature controlled which institutions gained legal standing. In the Federalist view, “self-created” associations—that is, those operating without charters and government sanction—were illegitimate because they divided the community instead of uniting it, as the agencies of civil society should do.

The Federalist conception of the polity did not go unchallenged. During the 1780s, 1790s, and 1800s, political leaders from Western Massachusetts, Republicans, minority religious groups, and others contested state oversight of the public sphere. As they defended their political activities or fought the established religious system, they began making the case for a civil society based on the freedom of association. But what led Massachusetts Federalists and Republicans to countenance that novel idea, Neem reveals, was the rise of partisan politics. In 1810, Republicans won both houses of the legislature and the governor’s office and broke the Federalists’ control over the state’s government and civil society. The Republicans’ power over the direction of the Federalists’ favored public institutions—most of all, Harvard—worried the now-minority party, and Federalist thinking began to evolve. In the emerging view, corporations were understood to be private entities that should be free from political meddling rather than public bodies subject to close government supervision; the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1819 *Dartmouth* decision on the inviolability of corporate charters hurried that notion along. Meanwhile Republicans, long concerned that mighty corporations would undermine the public good, responded to their shifting political fortunes and to *Dartmouth* with a developing preference for a proliferation of voluntary associations in the belief that competition would prevent concentrations of power.

Critical to the rising acceptance of an independent civil society were battles over the established religious system that left orthodox Congregational ministers wary of state authority over their churches. At the same time, these ministers rued the way society was changing and sought to reform it morally. Realizing that voluntary associations offered a means of guiding public opinion, they spearheaded the founding of the first wave of grassroots groups. Moreover, they taught everyday Americans how to organize, and they spread that

“technology” (to use Neem’s apt term) through societies’ annual reports.

In spite of the clergy’s crucial role in the proliferation of voluntary associations, it is these organizations’ average members who are the heroes of this story. “The men and women who joined voluntary associations,” Neem writes in the book’s central claim, “defined new roles for citizens in a democracy. In learning how to volunteer, ordinary people learned to think and act as citizens” (82). Moreover, this “social transformation of civil society dramatically altered America’s political culture” (82).

At the end of an especially smart chapter on grassroots organizing, Neem takes up historians’ longtime preoccupation with reform associations as vehicles for the middle and upper classes to discipline the lower classes. He rightly comments that these groups *did* aim to control society: “They were openly and loudly seeking to shape American culture and politics” (113). In his telling, what others have viewed as baneful social control endeavors become commendable forms of civic activism, the right and responsibility of citizens in a democracy. Yet, as Neem shows in his discussion of the Antimasonic movement of the late 1820s and 1830s, activists’ efforts to repair society not only might target elites but also could threaten minorities’ freedoms—for instance, when Antimasons used state power to harass the Boston Masonic Grand Lodge. (It is worth noting that Freemasons also occasionally upset Antimasonic gatherings; the nascent freedom of association was indeed fragile.)

As movements such as Antimasonry and Sabbatarianism revealed the political power of mass organizing, elites, especially Whigs, worried that public opinion endangered their conception of the common good. The Whigs’ Federalist forebears had envisioned a state-managed civil society, but “Whigs now desired to sever those ties [between state and civil society] in order to protect the autonomy of their own institutions” (116). Over the decades, well-placed citizens of Massachusetts built an “elite public sphere” with institutions such as the Boston Athenaeum, Harvard (progressively more independent of the state), professional associations, and state-appointed, expert-run regulatory boards. Because they were immune from popular influence, these institutions were free (in their proponents’ minds) to pursue the public good. Democrats, however, disputed the idea behind this elite public sphere. They feared the undemocratic power of corporations and voluntary associations, preferring instead “limit[ed] state power and weaken[ed] civil society” as part of an effort to put power in the hands of the many (142).

Neem illuminates Democrats’ views and allows that they focused attention on “the cost of permitting well-organized minorities disproportionate influence” (171). His sympathies, nevertheless, lie more with the Whigs’ anxiety about the tyranny of political or religious majorities over minorities (such as well-heeled Whigs) than with the Democrats’ concern for an egalitarian society (for white men). He acknowledges the exclusive nature of elite institutions and the self-interested nature of Whig reformers’ claims to serve the common good. Those claims warrant greater skepticism than Neem shows. As he notes, Harvard’s

“tuition and other regulations effectively priced out poorer persons” (121), and the Boston Athenaeum’s early nineteenth-century membership fee was three hundred dollars, “well more than most citizens could afford—even today” (119). Whigs may have “sustained the worthy idea that citizenship is premised on devotion to the common good,” but it is not hard to understand some of the Democratic animus to the Whigs’ vision of civil society and the common good (138).

While not in the slightest presentist, *Creating a Nation of Joiners* is imbued with a moral urgency because of what Neem sees as being at stake. He cares about the state of the American democracy and, through his nuanced analysis of the contested evolution of civil society in the early republic, he makes a compelling case that well-functioning democracies depend on more than mere voting by citizens. Ironically, as Neem shows, it was Whigs with their anxieties about the power of the people, not the Jeffersonians with their more democratic bent, that lay the groundwork for civil society. In his conclusion, he sketches out the long-term ramifications of the United States having become a nation of joiners, finding both positives and negatives. Activist citizens have in recent decades shaped politics through the civil rights movement and through popular conservatism. But, he points out, interest group lobbying—which, thanks to the money involved, benefits the powerful much more than the powerless—rests on the same organizational tradition. Neem has written not only an essential study about a key development in the early republic but also a thoughtful book that anyone concerned about the workings of democracies will want to read.

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