Recent historical research has rediscovered the common man and the community as political agents in early modern Germany. Simplistic notions of an omnipotent and omnipresent absolutism are clearly inappropriate to an understanding of the diversified political systems of the German principalities that in many instances were not only threatened by peasant revolts but also positively accepted the participation of village communities in the territorial administration. Communalism—the political activity of rural communities—has to be regarded as one factor in state formation. As Johannes Dillinger pointed out in his introductory lecture, communalist structures and even formal political representation of peasant villages existed in a variety of political systems in early modern western Europe. Swedish tings sent peasant delegates to the Riksdag (parliament) since 1527. A number of principalities in southern Germany and Friesland admitted representatives of villages and village corporations to the regional estates. However, the strongest communalist political system of the early modern period developed in colonial New England.

Drawing weighty conclusions from very slim source materials, nineteenth-century historians claimed that local self-government in New England towns and Anglo-Saxon republican traditions had their roots in Germanic antiquity. Of course, these theses, with their speculations about age-old continuities, no longer can be taken seriously. However, a closer look at the political order of communities in Germany and New England during the early modern and revolutionary periods between 1500 and 1850
reveals similarities and differences that help us understand the civic and administrative life of rural communities as a part of the political culture of the time. In order to examine the role communalism played in state formation the workshop’s participants tried a comparative approach. A synchronic comparison of the forms and aims of early modern community politics in New England and Germany might deepen our understanding of both systems. In recent years American and German historians alike have suggested this type of approach. However, this workshop was the first symposium to address this particular problem of the historiography of state building.

The workshop was organized into four panels. Each panel consisted of two lectures that addressed the same specific problem of communal politics in German and American history, respectively. The first panel dealt with communal theology and the significance of religion for early modern communalism. The theology of the covenant and the reformation’s emphasis on the community of the Holy Ghost have been regarded as driving forces behind communalism as a political movement.

Helga Schnabel-Schüle pointed to the political realities behind the doctrines of covenant and community theology. By suspending Episcopal jurisdiction and confiscating church property the Protestant Reformation put the princes in charge of the church. The dichotomy of church and state was overcome. Therefore, the Reformation strengthened not the rural communities but the territorial states. Even if a part of the peasantry thought of Luther’s teachings as a theology of liberation, the reformer himself had always regarded the German nobility as his political partner. In contrast, the comparatively weak structure of Catholicism enabled peasants to exercise limited control over the parish church. Thus, ecclesiastical communalism should not be regarded as a feature of the Reformation but rather as a characteristic of traditional Catholicism.

Louise Breen examined the social and communal implications of the Antinomian controversy of 1636–8. The followers of Anne Hutchinson, the Antinomians, were considered seditious because they had raised questions about whether the colony’s ministers were properly preaching the covenant of grace. Hutchinson had suggested that the ministers’ emphasis on sanctification—or moral behavior rather than justification—constituted works-righteousness. Several members of the colony’s merchant elite, among them the magistrate Israel Stoughton, sided with Hutchinson. They regarded Antinomianism as a way to distance themselves from the governing orthodox clique of Governor Winthrop, who claimed for themselves divine election as rulers. The Antinomian doctrine itself had a political undercurrent. It stressed the importance of the individual and thereby questioned the orthodox emphases on the congregation of God’s elected. Thus, the covenant theology that was at the core of Puritan communalism was threatened by a new ideal of society. The Antinomian vision looked toward the
modern, “liberal” conceptualization of individual rights and liberties. This concept appealed to urban merchant elites. The orthodox Puritan vision, which prevailed for most of the seventeenth century and was subscribed to by the majority of the colonists, conceived of liberty, or rights, as the property of the entire community, to be enjoyed collectively. Hutchinson's defeat and exile spelled the victory of a Puritan orthodoxy that combined communalism and the doctrine of divine right.

The second panel focused on the interaction between villages and territorial states. André Holenstein questioned the prevailing view that regards the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries as characterized by a constant decline of communalism. Even if peasant communities were marginalized in legal and constitutional theory, in administrative practice they remained a force to be reckoned with.

In order to work effectively state administrations needed a detailed knowledge of rural communities. The principalities developed sophisticated systems of information gathering that integrated the villages into the state apparatus. Administration and law enforcement depended on the cooperation of local institutions. Thus, early modern state formation is best understood as a communicative process in which rural communities learned to use state institutions to express their needs and achieve their ends. The rapid increase of administrative communication from the sixteenth century onward is evidence not only of the aristocratic rulers' attempts to gain control over the countryside but also of the growing interest of the peasant communities in the services provided by the princely states. What seemed to be the breakdown of communalism really was the self-integration of communities into the territorial order.

Elizabeth Mancke pointed to the dichotomy of the British Empire and the American communities in colonial New England. The development of New England communalism was facilitated by the Crown's lack of interest in this economically unattractive region. The conflict between London and New England concentrated on the interpretation of the charter on which the new settlements were based. The monarchy and its ministers used chartered concerns to claim English dominium in the Americas. The Puritans, in turn, stressed that the colony as a chartered corporation, and the towns as quasi-corporations, were immune to intrusions by the imperial state. The Crown's decision to revoke the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1684 was finally justified by the fact that the company had founded towns although no corporation was legally allowed to create other corporations. The seventeenth-century constitutional conflict informed the eighteenth-century tensions between the expanding British governance and the American communities.

The third panel looked inside the peasant communities. The villages themselves were described as political bodies of their own. As Werner Troßbach pointed out, in German territories local self-government was based
on grassroots decision making that regulated agricultural work in the open-field system. In the course of the early modern period feudal lordship east of the Elbe River gained an overwhelming position even in this sphere, virtually ending political activity “from below.” West of the Elbe communities preserved and in some areas even enlarged their competencies. Communities in several areas could dispose of large properties and were used to appointing shepherds and determining innkeepers’ conditions of lease. Many people’s and families’ fates depended on the communities’ decisions. These decisions were officially made during the town meeting.

In the second half of the sixteenth century the “well-ordered police state” became increasingly interested in ordinary people’s lives. Rules concerning gambling, swearing, drinking, wedding feasts, and so on had to be administered by communal institutions. However, the state grew ever more concerned with community decisions because the growing wealth of the townspeople could be regarded as a competing source of power. With the growing complexity of these interrelations the aristocratic state tried to gain greater influence on the appointment of the village officeholders.

The wide variety of informal public practices, whereby women and sometimes village youths played more important roles than they did in the constitutional bodies, was part of communal life, too. This sphere of grassroots politics—with kinship and patronage relations, gossip and rumor—was essential to communal decision making. Although most communities accepted the ideal of “civic unity,” social inequality was a common feature of village life. Inequality was mitigated by certain rules of social redistribution or moral economy. Village factionalism related to informal alliances. Clientelism and competing kinship and friendship groups were grassroots phenomena as well. Communities were seldom able to solve their conflicts using their own political and legal structures. They increasingly relied on the lordship as a guarantor of peace and order.

German communalism seemingly lacked a political vision of its own and had no distinct egalitarian trait. Michael Zuckerman maintained that in spite of all social diversification New England’s political culture was founded on a basic assumption of equality. Zuckerman specifically addressed communal conceptions of authority and local leadership. Despite annual elections the New England colonies produced a stable political elite. This fact has been explained in terms of “deference”: Out of habitual respect for their “betters” the rank-and-file colonists granted political power to a small group of leaders. Zuckerman rejected this interpretation as irreconcilable with the fact that colonial New England was a society in transition. Social control played so prominent a role in New England communal life not because a rigorous order had been established but because the new society and the emerging state were still trying to create this order. With the whole social system in flux authority
could be based only on personal performance. Thus, the communities could choose as representatives persons whose achievements recommended them for leadership positions. However, early modern New England was no democracy. Its very struggle for structure spelled mutual control as well as self-repression that limited individualism and did not allow for pluralism.

The last panel focused on the role rural communities played in the revolutionary period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Lutz Raphael dealt with the dramatic shifts taking place in Rhineland communities between the Napoleonic conquest and the revolution of 1848–9. Until the end of the ancien régime most Rhenish villages had property rights with respect to forests and open land, and they enjoyed local self-government based on town meetings. After the occupation by the French revolutionary army a new administration was established that did away with all intermediary powers and communal privileges. Under Prussian and Bavarian governance this bureaucratic regime, with its elite of professional officials, was further consolidated and centralized. After 1830 conflicts between village communities, their representatives, and state officials grew more intense, especially when the administration tightened its control over communal property. Communalist protest used the ideological languages of liberalism and political Catholicism. After the reactionary monarchies ended the 1848–9 revolution with military force they tried to calm the countryside with economic concessions and more liberal administrative practices. Whereas the rural elite finally came to terms with the state administration, the village poor were unable to profit from the transformation of the countryside. The commercialization of the village economy robbed the villeins of their livelihood.

Christopher M. Duncan discussed communalism as an element of the political philosophy of the opponents of the U.S. Constitution. Duncan argued that Antifederalist communalism in America’s revolutionary period is best understood as an institutional or constitutional projection designed to foster and protect a particular sort of individualism. Antifederalists were not hostile to republicanism. Their communalism represented an attempt to maintain a social and political context in which republican individuals, the citizens of the new state, could flourish. The rationale for their choice was based on the Antifederalists’ sense that strong communities were more likely to produce strong individuals and that strong individuals, in turn, were more likely to be successful in the “pursuit of happiness” that was fitting and appropriate for all human beings. It was taken for granted that those “happy” individuals would, in turn, attempt to preserve and extend such communities over time, out of a properly construed self-interest, through political institutions.

In their concluding remarks Ulinka Rublack and Joel F. Harrington stressed that communities and the modern state in Germany as well as in America were not opponents. Both even seemed to share the same political
ideals of order and peace. The decline of the communities must not be exaggerated: There not only were no dramatic shifts in their relationship to the state; in some respects they even seem to have become more active and more influential by means of cooperation with the territorial administration. In New England and also in Germany state government was not a bureaucratic institution but rather a process based on a pluralism of powers that was organized in terms of cooperation and communication. A real change was brought about by the revolutions that strengthened the state administrations in both America and Germany. In colonial American as well as in German communities social relationships were unstable. Factionalism and individualism always existed. However, villages in both countries exerted considerable pressure to conform. This pressure forced the communities to create a semblance of unity and equality. Further avenues of research were then outlined. The participation of rural towns in large-scale communicative and learning processes, such as the emergence of the modern media, will throw additional light on the cultural significance of communities. The role that denominational churches and popular confessionalization played in community building and communal politics must be investigated. The concept of community and communalism itself has to be put into historical context. Different ideas of community have to be distinguished from one another: The community as regarded from within; the community as conceived of from without by contemporary government organizations thinking in terms of commonwealth, patria, nation, or republic; and finally communalism and the community as interpretative models of historiography.

Johannes Dillinger

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PRESENT: PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERHARD FALLER-WALZER

Workshop at the GHI, March 14, 2001. Conveners: Cordula Grewe (GHI), Christine von Oertzen (Technical University of Berlin), Werner Ott (Goethe Institute/Inter Nationes, Washington, D.C.). Participants: Marion Deshmukh (George Mason University), Wendy Grossman (University of Maryland at College Park).

For the last several years the Goethe Institute/Inter Nationes in Washington, D.C., has fostered the growing cultural dialog between Washington and Berlin through a series of artist and scholar exchanges, exhibitions, and film series. This