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The Genesis of Democracy in Early Modern Europe

Existing long-term narratives present democracy as a necessary outcome of historical development. This project will create a long-term narrative that is not another linear success story. As such, it will also help us to better understand democracy's challenges.

The core argument is that representative democracy has its roots in two distinct, originally unrelated, and to some extent even contradictory features: a tradition of pluralistic but highly elitist political participation - and the notion that all people are equal. Their convergence was not inevitable and it is not irreversible, either.

Medieval kings assembled the powerful of their realms to enlist support. This was the beginning of Estate assemblies - parliament, États, cortes, Stände, staten etc. - institutions of political participation that existed in all pre-modern states. Their very existence, though, was predicated on inequality: noble and other elites based their right to sit on such Estates, and to take part in politics, on their supposedly special nature acquired by birth. Enlarging Estates' social basis was not remotely in their interest, as this would threaten to undermine their special status and thus also their very claim to participate.

The notion of individual equality was essentially alien to medieval and early modern societies that obeyed a strictly hierarchical and corporate logic: a person's status was derived entirely from the social group(s) he or she was born into. There were no broad claims, as yet, for equality among individuals, let alone for their political emancipation. And yet, notions of equality were gradually emerging in various contexts. Starting with the late 18th-century revolutions, they also began to be grafted onto institutions of political participation.

The project will trace the genesis of participatory institutions, the emergence of individual equality, and, finally, their convergence into representative democracy. It will do so in a broad inter- and transnational approach, arguing that the competitive and emulative world of early modern European states drove both the emergence and the convergence of participation and equality. Finally, it will argue that while representative democracy ties equality to the pluralistic logic of participation, it is by rejecting the latter that authoritarianism and populism try to reduce equality to uniformity and to a majoritarian and plebiscitary logic.

Recommended Reading

Behrisch, Lars. "Social Control and Urban Government: The Case of Goerlitz, Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries." In "Urban Governance and Petty Conflict in Early Modern Europe," edited by Joachim Eibach and Raingard Esser, special issue, Urban History 34, no. 1 (May 2007): 39-50.

-. "Statistics and Politics in the 18th Century." In "Conventions and Quantification - Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Statistics and Classifications," edited by Rainer Diaz-Bone and Emmanuel Didier, special issue, Historical Social Research 41, no. 2 (2016): 238-257. https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.41.2016.2.238 257.

-. "Empowering Comparisons? The Making of Republics in the Early Modern Period." In The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World, edited by Willibald Steinmetz, 113-136. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019.

Die Genese der Demokratie im Europa der Frühen Neuzeit

In meinem Vortrag präsentiere ich meinen Ansatz, wie die Entstehung der modernen (repräsentativen) Demokratie auf neue Weise hergeleitet werden kann: Als Produkt des Zusammenspiels zweier sehr unterschiedlicher historischer Entwicklungen, nämlich der Entstehung der Idee allgemeiner individueller Gleichheit mit einer Tradition pluralistischer politischer Teilhabe. Letztere wurzelte in den Ungleichheiten der mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen ständischen Gesellschaften: Das Zusammenspiel von Gleichheit und Partizipation ist daher auch stets prekär, was nicht zuletzt die Krise der Demokratie in unserer heutigen Welt zu erklären hilft.

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Empowering comparisons? : the making of republics in the early modern period

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