

The politics and history of European democratisation (PHED)

an ESF Scientific Network

The rise and growing acceptance of democracy constituted one of the major political and cultural changes during the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe. The received view of both citizens and scholars tended to regard this change from the perspective of its results, by neglecting the language and the political agents. The politics of democratisation was subordinated to philosophy of history, to “progress”.

New approaches to political theory have emerged, embracing recent conceptual and intellectual history, constitutional law, women’s studies, and cultural studies along with other related fields. Previously neglected and unanticipated consequences of democratisation are also being explored, leading to crucial revisions of both political theory and the contemporary political situations.

The purpose of this Network is to coordinate the various studies now taking place and with a view of improving our insight into the subtle differences between countries in the dating and rhythm of democratisation. This will help answer a number of important questions concerning rate and timing of change, such as why franchise reforms occurred either suddenly through extraordinary measures or in a series of steps, but with little in between the two extremes.

Democracy may now be the established political regime throughout Europe, but an understanding of why it prevailed and how it was introduced through political struggles in different countries during the 20th century has remained superficial. All political concepts are controversial, and competing theories of democracy form both academic and political enrichment. This Network aims to render the competition of perspectives fruitful to the European discussion, in turn inspiring new comparative, thematic or national projects around the topics under consideration. For example, did late-comers to a political change simply take advantage of the experience of others in legitimising a radical change? The Network is also exploring regional and cultural differences, such as between old and new democracies, between central Europe and the peripheries, and between the Atlantic and continental traditions. The current challenges to representative democracy invite a rewriting the politics and history of democratisation and the ongoing revisions of this history also allow us to see the challenges from new perspectives.

The Network is focusing on five workshops to discuss the main themes of democratisation. These are:

- **The formation of “representative democracy”.** The concept of a representative democracy was introduced in the late 18th century but was more widely accepted only after 1830. Within this workshop the differences between representative democracy, based ultimately on universal suffrage, and competing constitutional systems such as direct democracy will be discussed, similarly its relationship with parliamentarism. The machinery of representative democracy, such as the principles and practices of voting will also be considered, along with the need for rethinking the process of government and exercise of power.

- **Democratisation and rhetoric.** Rhetoric offers a new perspective on the study of democratisation. The rhetorical culture of speaking for and against has served as a paradigm for parliamentary politics. Democratisation has extended this model to the world of campaigns and party meetings, and eventually to the radio and TV. How far does all this alter the agenda, the styles and the conditions of political agency? How far did these changes diminish the role or the rhetorical culture of controversy in democratic politics? Which new forms of democratic political rhetoric do new audiences, new media and new types of political agency offer?

- **Representative democracy and the politics of gender.** In the 19th century, the question of women’s vote was marginalised in the debates over “universal” suffrage. The enfranchisement processes in European democracies differed, and in some cases women’s vote did not rise to the top of the political agenda. Do the political cultures with militant suffragists still differ from those in which the vote for women was granted smoothly? The contemporary theories of democracy increasingly identify gender as a significant challenge regarding the universalistic assumptions of political agency. Is the rhetoric, professional performance and representation in politics gendered and gendering? Does gender matter, and to what extent does it matters, in representative democracy?

- **Temporalisation and professionalisation of politics.** Representative democracy is a temporal regime and its main actors are professional politicians. The limited time span of office, as well as the ‘calendar’ of parliamentary and partisan politics offer instruments for political action. All this is also related to professionalisation politics. Democracy itself has created the professional politician, partly by making it impossible to thrive in politics without devoting a full life to it, although the recognition of this has been subject to fierce debates. Questions to be discussed include how politicians are recruited and controlled, about funding in politics and the way individuals juggle professional careers with periods in political life.

- **Challenges to representative democracy.** Today representative democracy is subjected to various challenges from above, below and within. Such phenomena as the European unification and the globalisation process both subvert national democracies and offer new chances for democratisation. The relevance of parliamentary democracy to the daily lives and activities of citizens as reshaped for example by the new media and new technologies is also in question. The relationships between the state and the citizens, the government and the parliament, the elections and other forms of political participation also similarly subject to change. Which kind of political innovations, technologies and procedures could be constructed to face such challenges?

A selection of contributions from the five conferences will be published in the ESF series in two volumes.

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