

# NEW POLITICAL IMAGINARIES AND MODELS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: A TRANSNATIONAL ANALYSIS

International Conference, Oxford, February 11-12, 2020

Conveners:

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Sponsored by the ANR/DFG research project “(New) Political Representative Claims: A Global View (France, Germany, Brazil, China, India)” (CLAIMS); the Maison Française d'Oxford (MFO); Nuffield College (University of Oxford); the Centre d'Etudes Sociologiques et Politiques de Paris (CRESPPA, CNRS/Paris 8 University/University Paris Nanterre); the Marc Bloch Center Berlin (CMB); and OxPo.

## I. State of the art and underlying thesis

**The end of history?** A few years after the fall of the Berlin wall, in one of the most successful books world-wide at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Francis Fukuyama wrote: “I argued that liberal democracies may constitute the ‘end point of mankind’s ideological evolution’ and the ‘final form of human government,’ and as such constituted the ‘end of history.’ That is, while earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was arguably free from such fundamental contradictions... While some present-day countries might fail to achieve stable liberal democracy, and others might lapse back into other, more primitive forms of rule like theocracy or military dictatorship, the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved on.” *The End of History* was not a book with philosophical depth, but its wide public success was understandable: Fukuyama had been able to grasp the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time. Less than three decades later, the theses he defended then have been increasingly under question, even by himself.

**The rise of populism and authoritarianism: Liberal democracy under threat?** In fact, both in the Global North and beyond, the mainstream narrative of liberal democracy has changed, both in the media, in the political institutions and in the academic world. The claim is now that liberal democracy is under threat. The enemy is no longer totalitarianism, fascism or communism, as for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but populism and authoritarianism. The notion of populism, however, in both right-wing and left-wing politics, is usually rather vague. The most well-known precise definition, proposed by Jan Werner Müller, considers the concept as a negative image of what liberal democracy is supposed to be: populists are intolerant, they think the people should be one homogeneous entity and therefore refuse the pluralism that

characterizes modern democratic societies. Jacques Rancière has criticized these views and rightly argued that populism is a label aiming mainly not to define a specific type of parties, ideologies or political style, but to depict a certain political dynamics where the people are motivated by their primary emotions instead of by rational reasoning, are easily manipulated by unscrupulous politicians, and are reducible to a hypnotized crowd (a thinking in the line of Gustave Le Bon). Conversely, such a negative depiction of populism also serves to reassert the ruling elites' monopoly of rationality and modernity (the same critique has led left-wing theoreticians such as Laclau and Mouffe to redefine populism positively). The notion of authoritarianism partly overlaps with populism, but applies also to the so-called Chinese model, which is increasingly supposed to represent a new alternative to liberal democracy. Again, China is most often described as a negative opposite to liberal democracy: state-controlled capitalism, an authoritarian regime, and an Orwellian society enabled by digital technologies.

**The problem with the underlying theory.** The problem with Fukuyama's *The End of History* was not simply its false diagnosis, but rather its underlying theory, its historical narrative and its normative assumptions. The history of the last three centuries was conceived as a progressive and interconnected development of democracy, human rights and capitalism. History had a unique and linear path towards progress, in which some regimes move forward and others backwards – a situation that gave the former the privilege to dominate or at least to educate the latter. Pathologies were always possible, but the “normal” development was clear, and liberal democracy was seen as one of its key dimensions (most Marxists shared this view of historical development but extended the end of it to the future socialist society). Nowadays, although the diagnosis has been replaced by the new ‘norm’ that presents liberal democracies as being under threat, and therefore that the pathologies are multiplying, the underlying theory remains very similar to Fukuyama's. Also, thanks to the democracy rankings published every year or two by the think-tank Freedom House and by *The Economist*, “liberal democracy” is taken as the model and criteria against which all countries in the world should be measured and evaluated. In their minimalist view, democracy can be reduced to the rule of law, the free market, the classical checks-and-balances, the free public sphere and competitive party elections. Democracy hence has become synonymous with what others would call “capitalist democracy”. This model is the most common reference of the media, politicians and political scientists in the Global North. It is also widely shared in the Global South by actors who hope their country will become “normal” at last. A large part of these definitions of democracy were also shared by some of the most brilliant political philosophers of the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as John Dunn, John Rawls or Jürgen Habermas, whose normative models were often idealizations of the political and socio-economic societies of the Global North after World War II. Based on such perspectives, the history and development of the political systems in Western Europe and North America represent the “normal” path to democracy and the “normal” model of democracy, against which the experiences of other countries should be evaluated.

**Transitions to “normal” democracy?** Political scientists considered the evolution of Latin America in the late seventies and eighties, and a number of African countries in the nineties, as transitions towards democracy – democracy meaning the kind of political system that had been previously established in the Global North. It turned out to be a surprise when most of these

countries did not follow the paths of either Southern Europe, South Korea or Taiwan and have not become quite as “normal” as they expected them to be. This surprise was reinforced after the Arab Spring. While Habermas had characterized the fall of communism in Eastern Europe as a “catch-up revolution”, the recent transformation of a number of former communist countries such as Hungary or Poland towards the so-called “illiberal democracies” could not be explained in this grand narrative. For decades, scholars have stressed the backward social, cultural and economic features as explanations which account for independent India’s difficulty in reaching the level of maturity of Western democracies. The paradox is that when India’s economy grew at a rapid pace, after its opening up to capitalist globalization in the 1990s, this did not lead to the upgrading of Indian democracy but to the rise of a strongly authoritarian and fundamentalist government (Jaffrelot). Similarly, scholars and politicians expected that the introduction of capitalism in China would quickly lead to the democratization of that country – democratization meaning the introduction of the main features of the US political system. Confronted with the rapid development of the Chinese economy and power, together with the fact that the regime benefits from a high level of political trust and satisfaction among its citizens (especially among the dominant Han ethnic group), hundreds of articles and books have been written aiming to understand why the expected “normal” development, i.e. democratization, has not taken place. These ‘exceptional’ cases lead us to question whether an alternative ‘norm’ to the American and European style of democracy should be considered: what if the “normal” state of democracy, empirically speaking, would rather look like what democracy has been in Latin America or in India rather than what it has been in the Global North after World War II? Or to push the limit further, should liberal democracy be considered at all as the political destination for all countries, given all the “deviant cases”?

**The rise of political distrust in capitalist democracies.** The 2010s are characterized by a paradox. On the one hand, many people who live under authoritarian regimes have risen up and rebelled in the name of democracy. At first glance, and disregarding the concrete imaginaries developed in these protests and revolutions, this seems to legitimize the norm of liberal democracy. On the other hand, the legitimacy crisis of representative governments is deepening and widening. It affects both the old and new democracies, and on all continents, from North and South America to Europe, from Africa to Asia. This trend is widely shared, although to a greater or lesser degree according to the country. It is closely related to globalization and the rise of neoliberal capitalism, which tend to reduce the relevance and sovereignty of the nation-state that democracy rests upon. It is also linked to the new challenges that the world has to face, most notably the destabilization of the ecosphere in the era of the Anthropocene. The increasingly significant, yet unchecked, role of international organizations and technocratic bodies, and of global players such as transnational corporations, has largely made obsolete the classical conceptions of checks-and-balances. Confronted with the fast-paced evolution of societies, especially due to social media and digital technologies, Western political systems seem to be running on the same spot. Their legitimacy crisis is not a simple air-pocket, it is a structural one and most probably bound to increase in the future. It seems that representative politics, relying on a competitive party system, is no more able to speak to the soul of the subaltern groups, to develop what Ravi Sinha has called the “depth politics”, or at least the political tendencies that still are capable of developing a “depth politics” which is opposed to

the liberal model of democracy. This has led scholars such as Colin Crouch or Wolfgang Streeck to diagnose the current era as post-democracy, a notion that rightly stresses the crisis of liberal democracies but tends to idealize their past by adopting the perspective of the insiders, forgetting the overwhelming majority of mankind, whose exclusion from this club for the happy few was to some extent a necessary condition of the so-called “maximal democracy.”

**A truncated universalism vs. a richer and more complex universalism.** The historical and normative model on which the mainstream conceptions of democracy rest is a “truncated universalism”; as the Indian scholars Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Nivedita Menon rightly state: “Our modernity is incomplete, our secularism impure, our democracy immature, our development arrested and our capitalism retarded... Europe is both the norm and the exception: it is what the rest of the world must try to emulate but never really can.” This truncated universalism presents a distorted vision of what the history of democracies has been: not a simple process of diffusion from the Global North to the rest of the world, not a single and linear path, but a connected, circuitous and complex history. The turn made towards a Global history on the one hand, and a new world order on the other, should induce Western political scientists and political philosophers to a more modest understanding. Part of the “Western” model has borrowed inventions made elsewhere. The paths to democracy have always been multiple and diverse, and one should learn as much about democracy from the Mexican and the Chinese revolutions, or from the experience of independent India and other post-colonial democracies, than from the British, American or French models. Last but not least, the history of modern democracy in the Global North cannot be understood without situating it in a global perspective: the “Western” model has two faces, the bright one was for the insiders, the dark one was the domination and exploitation of the rest of the world and of non-European people. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the new trends of globalization increasingly tend to “provincialize” Europe and North-America (Chakrabarty), it is not by chance that this Western model is always more under stress.

**Towards a new democratic theory.** The mainstream democratic theory looks like a birch tree, where the trunk is the European and North-American experiences and some of the branches (at most) are non-Western ones. The rise of the systemic theories of democracy has not fundamentally changed this picture. The critique of this truncated universalism has led some scholars, especially those who defended postcolonial theories or “the” Chinese model, to adopt a strong relativist perspective. However, one does not necessarily have to renounce universalist claims. One could defend a broader, less one-sided and more complex set of universal ideals, open to new experiences, paying attention to shared and different dilemmas and challenges, conscious of the fact that universal values are always “vernacularized” in the real world. A new and more adequate democratic theory should look like a Bayan tree (Gagnier), with multiple roots, trunks and connected branches. We should consider the model of the Global North after World War II as we consider classical Athens: a historical experience with some universalizable features but also with dimensions which are context-specific and non-reproducible. The same should be done with other historical experiences. Most often, in the Global South, “Western-style electoral democracy legitimizes, perpetuates, and often enhances ruthless exploitation, corruption, and crime”, leading to a “government of the elites, by the elites, and for the elites”

(Overholt). The challenge today is to better understand whether other models of democracy can deliver different, yet productive outcomes.

**Democratic innovations and new social movements.** A completely negative picture of the actual state of democracy would also be too one-sided. Counter-tendencies also develop. It is striking that the aforementioned Freedom House's and *The Economist*'s democratic rankings neglect the new wave of democratic innovations. We can observe and diagnose the rise of "real utopias" (Archon Fung, Eric O. Wright), in which actual practices indicate a horizon towards which it is possible to move forward in the present. At the national institutional level, democratic experiments are increasing. At local grassroots levels, various participatory devices, for example the participatory budgeting invented in Brazil (Leonardo Avritzer), are spreading throughout the world, including in authoritarian systems such as China. In the Global North, but also to a lesser extent in China, new forms of representation resting on randomly-selected mini-publics have begun to gain a certain degree of legitimacy. Globally, the inclusion of NGOs and civil society organizations in the decision-making process, especially when dealing with the ecological challenges, goes much beyond the classical models of liberal democracy and its checks-and-balances. Such practices do not only pose sharp critiques of representative democracies, but also (mostly implicitly) develop into new forms of representations. Simultaneously, the latest social movements have shaken various political systems. There is a clear trend towards more horizontal and decentralized forms of mobilization, based on social media rather than formal organizations, coming from civil society rather from political parties, adopting various forms of civil disobedience that lie beyond the traditional 'repertoire' of contentious politics. These forms of mobilizations share various features and techniques at the transnational level. Some of them, most notably those which focus on gender and ecological issues, are genuinely transnational movements. Both multi-party systems and one-party systems seem to be increasingly left out of step with this new reality.

**Alternative models?** The legitimacy crisis of liberal democracy has opened spaces for the rise of alternative models. In left-wing politics, some practitioners and theoreticians are proposing various ways of "radically democratizing democracy", to quote a slogan from the alter-globalization movement. In right-wing politics, "illiberal democracy" models are burgeoning. In East Asia, the rise of China has led authors such as Thomas Heberer to present the one-party communist system as a new mix of authoritarianism, developmentalism, state control capitalism, and "consultative democracy". An increasing number of scholars present the Chinese model as an alternative to capitalist liberal democracy, especially in the Global South, and some, such as Daniel Bell, have proclaimed the rise of a "Chinese model", which is based on meritocracy and experimentalism, and relying on Confucian values. Most often, such a model has only a weak link to democratic imaginaries. To be sure, the acceptance of such a model also means that the prediction of an inevitable progress towards liberal democracy and liberal capitalism has been discredited. But whatever these interpretations are, the so-called Chinese model is far from being stabilized. Its revolutionary and mass-oriented legitimacy from the Mao-era has given way to more a technocratic, pragmatic and nationalist model centered on the economy. Although this new developmentalist model also relies partly upon new forms of "consultative democracy", the increasingly authoritarian tendencies under Xi's leadership

reveal the intensity of inner contradictions and the huge debate within the upper sphere of politics. As Wang Hui has written, the crisis of party politics is not limited to multi-party systems and affects also one-party systems. One thing is therefore common to China and the Global North: it is quite difficult to predict what these countries will look like in 20 years' time, and the future is wide open for new theorization and interpretations.

## **II. The conference research questions: Past political imaginaries and models, new political imaginaries, new political models.**

**Political imaginaries.** In a situation where “all that is solid melts into air”, to paraphrase a famous Marxian formula which also gave the title of a great Marshall Berman book, what are the new political imaginaries and the new models that are emerging? We will use the notion of *imaginaries* in a quite empirical way, without relying on any particular philosophical theory. We prefer to use this notion because it does not necessarily refer to a particular political theory (we do not hold the concept of imaginaries which has been the key to Cornelius Castoriadis' philosophy in the 1970s). Imaginaries, for us, are sets of ideas that emerge in the everyday life of political actors, at the grassroots level, especially within social movements and social networks, and in the higher spheres of the state, for example among political leaders and higher civil servants. They do not have to be coherent and possess the conceptual depth of a philosophical theory; they could loosely rest upon “chains of equivalence” and “void signifiers” (Ernesto Laclau), but they enable people and groups with different interests and values to have the feeling of being part of a same political community and envision together the political future of their country.

**Political models.** To various extents, the schools of critical theory and pragmatist sociology, the history of ideas in context and the history of concepts share a similar idea: that normativity comes from the society. As the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot have written, political theorists and philosophers are part of a wider dynamic of critiques and justifications that constantly normatively challenge and destabilize the political order. Political theorists and philosophers have a specific role in this process: to clarify, conceptually improve and systematize normative claims. This process leads to philosophical theories, which are unique and propose a sophisticated architecture. Each philosopher has her own conceptual cathedral, which is partly inspired by the contemporary imaginaries and, in return, if successful, will influence them. In between imaginaries and these great philosophies lie the normative models on which most political theorists work. Compared to philosophers, they rest much less upon anthropological or ontological systems. Most often, they join in a same model different philosophical authors, and propose some kind of ideal-types (Max Weber). But contrary to imaginaries, they closely bind together elements which are loosely coupled in imaginaries and they build a coherent set of values and institutions. Books such as David Held's *Models of Democracy*, C.B. Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India*, Daniel Bell's *The Chinese Model*, or Adolfo Gilly's *El Cardenismo. Una utopía mexicana*, are examples of such attempts.

**A threefold topic: Past political imaginaries and models, new political imaginaries, new political models.** Rather than focusing on past and present developments of political systems, the conference will highlight the *discourses* that have legitimized or criticized these systems and continue to do so. The research question of the conference will be threefold: (i) Viewed *a posteriori* from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what can be said about the past political imaginaries and models? We will focus on those that are used to defend a “classical” (or what has become “classical”) view of liberal democracy, both in the Global North and in the Global South; on those that mitigated liberal democracy with some kind of social-democratic or developmentalist dimensions; and on those that advocated a radical alternative to Western democracy. (ii) What are the new imaginaries that are emerging in party politics on the one hand, in the social and grassroots movements and social media on the other hand? The focus will be placed on the developments which have taken place since the beginning of the 2010s. We aim to analyze the attempts to reshape the old imaginaries, but a special attention will be paid to the rise of new imaginaries, especially those related to emerging topics such as the ecological crisis, the impact of the new world order in domestic politics, or the societal changes, for example linked to Internet and digital technologies. (iii) What are the new political models that political scientists and public intellectuals are proposing in order to empirically interpret and normatively assess the new trends? For all these three questions, special attention will be given to the specific national contexts, but the comparison will also be at the frontstage: what are the connections, the parallels and the differences between the evolution of these trends in each national sphere?

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Conveners: Yves Sintomer (Paris 8 University), Yunyun Zhou (St Antony's College, University of Oxford), Cécile Laborde, (Nuffield College, University of Oxford)

Scientific organization: Jules Novat-Braly (Paris 8 University)

## **Program**

### **FEBRUARY 11, MAISON FRANÇAISE D'OXFORD**

#### **8: 45. Welcoming of participants**

**9:00. Opening words** by Frederic Thibault-Starzyk (Director of the Maison Française d'Oxford), and Agnès Alexandre-Collier (Maison française d'Oxford)

#### **9:15. Presentation of the conference**

Yves Sintomer (University of Paris 8), Yunyun Zhou (St Antony's College), Cécile Laborde (Nuffield College)

#### **9:30-11:15 Panel 1. Past political imaginaries and models in the present**

*Chair: Florence Faucher (Science Po Paris)*

Samuel Hayat (CNRS/Lille University), "Democracy past and present"

Emma Hunter (The University of Edinburgh), "African history, Global history"

Zoé Kergomard (German Historical Institute Paris), "'Well-ordered' or 'constrained' democracy? How current debates inform our view of Western European democracies in the first post-war decades."

Silke Mende (Marc Bloch Center), "European models of representation and democracy since the 1970s"

*Discussion*

#### **11:15 Coffee break**

#### **11:30-13:25 Panel 2. New political imaginaries and models in the 21th century — The Global North**

*Chair: Desmond King (Nuffield College)*

Laurent Jeanpierre (Paris 8 University), "The return of small scales. Contemporary social movements, radical democracy and the decentralising political imaginary"

Kalypso Nicolaïdis (St Antony's College), "The third democratic revolution: transnationalism, democracy and the horizontal turn"

Archon Fung (Harvard Kennedy School), "Wide Aperture, Low Deference Democracy: Our Interregnum"

Graham Smith (Westminster University), "Designing democracy for the long-term"

*Discussion*

#### **13:25. Lunch break**



**14:25-16:15 Panel 3. New political imaginaries in the 21th century — The Global South**

*Chair: Emilie Frenkiel (Paris Créteil University)*

Debora Rezende de Almeida (Federal University of Brasilia), “Competing political projects and the challenges for participatory governance in 21st Century Brazil”

Niraja Gopal Jayal (Jawaharlal Nehru University), “India’s Journey from Civic to Cultural Nationalism A New Political Imaginary?”

Thomas Heberer (Duisburg University), “China's Disciplining and Civilizing State: A Modernizing Model?”

*Discussion*

**16:15 Coffee break**

**16:30-18:30 Panel 4. Dissimilarities and common trends**

*Chair: Agnès Alexandre-Collier (Maison française d'Oxford)*

Daniel Bell (Shandong University), “China's Political Model: Political Meritocracy, Democracy, or Both?”

Demin Duan (Peking University), "Teaching Locke and Mill in China: Experiences and Models"

Oleg Kharkhordin (European University at St Petersburg), “Classical Republicanism and Common Gaia: Res Publica and the Challenge of the Climate Change”

Ralph Schroeder (Oxford Internet Institute), “Comparing Populisms – East and West”

*Discussion*

**19:15 Dinner**

**FEBRUARY 12, NUFFIELD COLLEGE**

**CLOSED WORKSHOP**

**8.45. Welcoming of participants.**

**9:00. Opening words** by Cécile Laborde (Nuffield College)

**9:15 Introduction of ANR-DFG project: “New political imaginaries and models in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: A global and transnational analysis (Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, United Kingdom)”** by Yves Sintomer

**9:30-11:30 Panel 1. Notions and concepts: political imaginaries, political models, democracy past and present**

*Chair: David Miller (Nuffield College),*

Nabila Abbas (Sciences Po Paris), “Political imaginaries - a useful concept for the empirical research on democracies?”

Dario Castiglione (University of Exeter), “Representative Politics: The making and unmaking of a modern paradigm”

Jean-Paul Gaudillière (INSERM/EHESS), “Between regional politics and alternative globalization: the Kerala ‘model’ and its uses”

Maxime Lepoutre (Nuffield College), “Remodelling Political Speech”

*Discussion*

**11:30 Coffee break**

**11:45-13:15 Panel 2. Methodological issues: case selection, internet research, qualitative discourse analyses**

*Chair: Mirjam Dageförde (Marc Bloch Center/ Sciences Po Paris)*

Mariana Borges Martins da Silva (Nuffield College), "Everyday talk and Political Imaginaries"

Pu Yan (Oxford Internet Institute), "Online consumption of hyper-partisan media: A transnational analysis"

*Discussion*

**13:15. Lunch break**

**14:15-16:15 Panel 3. Transnational comparisons. Combining Global studies and Area studies? Combining a minimal universalism with "prudential vernacularization"?**

*Chair: Stéphanie Tawa-Lama (CNRS/EHESS),*

Samuel Bagg (Nuffield College): "The View from Democratic Theory"

Cécile Laborde (Nuffield College), "Towards a new secularism: comparing India and the West"

Pei Wang (Fudan University), "Social Cohesion without Electoral Democracy? The Case of China"

Laurence Whitehead (Nuffield College), "Global and area studies"

*Discussion*

**16:15 Concluding remarks**

Yunyun Zhou (St Antony's College)

**16:30 End of the conference**