

Call for Papers:

Reimagining Civil Society in (a/the) Neoliberal Crisis: Mining the Past and Present for Future Alternatives

Abstract:

In hindsight, we may now view the 2008 Financial Collapse as the starting-point of a set of perceived intersecting crises of and in the Western societal fabric of liberal democracy that continue to unfold at an increasing pace: a crisis of the economy (lacking growth), followed by a crisis of welfare state retrenchment (growing debt), a crisis of representative democracy (diminishing trust), and a refugee crisis (polarized debates). Most recently, a wave of right-wing populism throws the very future of an open and democratic civil society into doubt.

Although it is too soon for autopsies, social scientists are beginning to seriously discuss whether we may be witnessing the breakdown of the neoliberal compact of globalized capitalism and/or the collapse of liberal democracy. However, less attention is given to the question of what comes after (neo)liberalism, and whether principles such as democracy and civility may survive the onslaught. Hence, this seminar is dedicated to contributions that look to past or presently marginalized concepts and understandings of civil society, social experiences and experiments that can serve as timely and pertinent elements in prefigurative visions for an alternative to both neoliberalism, authoritarianism and, especially, the looming combination of the two.

We welcome contributions that point to notions or practices of ‘civil society’ understood as a key source of political organization – whether in the form of never realized utopias, past institutions, or seeds of new organizational figurations in society today. Also, contributions discussing the inertia of existing democratic institutions, in times of their apparent decay, are welcome. How may we grasp the possibility of reorganizing political power in the future? And what visions of civil society may inspire us in this respect?

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Papers:

A. Bayer. *Transforming functions and relations in the agglomeration of Budapest 1980-1997.*

The collapse of the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union brought changes in the society in Eastern-Europe. In my paper, I will present the social alternation in a group of municipalities in the agglomeration of Hungarian capital, Budapest, focusing on their functions and relationship. The biggest actor in this area is Budapest, the second largest one is Pilisvorosvar, a town of 11 thousand inhabitant, around 10 kilometres away from the capitol. I will concentrate on the four villages in-between. This area had to struggle with two major issues. This was a German-speaking region until the end of the 1940s, when 200 thousands of them were forced to leave Hungary. During the Communist era it was a taboo, just like every ethnic-related topic. In 1990 the formation of Minority Councils and the possibility to talk about ethnic traditions and identity was a totally new situation. The second issue is the social transformation in the whole agglomeration. In the early 1990s many jobs were terminated especially in the industrial sector, which was the most important employer

in this area. In the same time, more and more families moved out of the city, the suburbanization has begun. Right now, the former "most problematic area of the country" became a vivid suburb. The time frames of the paper are 1980, when a huge social survey was made and 1997. The end date connects to the dilatation of the agglomeration, and another survey. I used statistical sources to draw up the social structure, especially to draw the network of the municipalities. I also use the approach of human geography to analyse the local people's relationship to their environment, especially to the neighbouring municipalities. The sources to understand them are mainly interviews and the local press.

M. Hein Jessen. *Civil Society in the Shadow of the Neoliberal State: On the Depoliticization of Civil Society, 1992-present.*

Even though the beginning of the 1990s and the triumph of liberal democracy as the supreme governmental form signaled a bright future for the role of civil society in securing participation, democracy, alternatives, critique and contestation to state power, the reality has been somewhat different. With globalization and neoliberal policies and the dismantling of the Western welfare states, civil society has increasingly been mobilized for securing governmental and social aims that the states could or would no longer provide, and now the freedom, autonomy and critical role of civil society organizations and actors is becoming increasingly precarious, especially in the US. This paper argues that despite the political and democratic promises of civil society, we have to a large degree witnessed the political content of civil society being emptied, and civil society becoming increasingly marketized and/or neutralized with regards to political critique and contestation. This paper examines this process, especially focusing on the civil society policies of social democratic parties in the Western hemisphere, focusing on Bill Clinton's Democratic Party, Tony Blair's Labour, Gerhard Schröder's SPD as well as the Danish Social Democratic Party under Poul Nyrup Rasmussen. The paper argues that while at the same time heralding the democratic forces of civil society, in effect these governments depoliticized civil society, paving the way for a general lack of civil society alternatives to the crisis both at present and in the future.

C. Mossin. *Struggling ideals of legal and political pluralism around the beginning of the 20th Century: a challenge to present amalgamations of state centralism, populism and liberalism?.*

This paper combines perspectives of conceptual history, philosophy of history, and democratic theory. It is argued that the conceptual horizon of western politics and political theory today is characterized by a particular closure, an inability to reach beyond established democratic ideals and institutions. Although hardly coherent and certainly ambiguous, these ideals and institutions, stemming from liberal, republican and state-absolutist sources, do not presently appear to inspire alternative political visions. Theorists as well as social movements seem stuck between, on the one hand, reformist agendas the purpose of which is to strengthen existing institutions and compensate for structural gaps, and, on the other, hopes for political events that will radically change society and politics as we know it, but in ways that cannot be predicted in advance. The aim of the paper is to point to an overlooked thread within the political tradition of the west: civil society as an organized democratic pluralistic structure. From around 1880 to 1925, in particular, this thread thrived within political and legal discourses. It was haunted by a suspicion of 'anachronism' as it idealized lost communities (guilds, local forms of self-government). Simultaneously, it reflected specifically modern social structures - modes of production, secularism, nationalism. The paper will critically analyze some of the theoretical visions in question - while hinting at significant practical developments of the period (primarily in Denmark, Germany, Britain and France) - and discuss to what extent they may expand and challenge our present political horizon.

A. Mulvad. *Civil Society as Statehood: A New (Old) Democratic Vision.*

As the crisis of liberalism deepens and a wave of populist authoritarianism spreads across the world, historically oriented sociologists are urgently tasked with rediscovering forgotten conceptual resources for retaining hope and organising democratic resistance. Hence, this article introduces the neglected work of the Spanish political philosopher and intellectual

historian Antoni Domènech and the 'Barcelona School' of Popular Republicanism of which he forms part. The purpose is to evaluate the Barcelona School's work as a theoretical reservoir for literally re-thinking politics in the context of 21st century social structures. I first situate the Barcelona School as part of the anti-aristocratic left-wing of the on-going republican revival in political theory and cognate disciplines. I then argue that the Barcelona School's foundational social theoretical move is to reconceptualize 'civil society' not as a separate social sphere of private initiative that exists in perennial tension with 'the state', but rather as a form of democratic, citizen-controlled statehood, in accordance with the radical republican tradition from Pericles to Robespierre. The final sections discuss the implications of this conceptual break when it comes to a) producing a macro-sociological diagnosis of contemporary society, and b) articulating a post-liberal but anti-authoritarian political praxis to go along with it.