Funded by the European Union

The bodies of democracy:

Civil society bodies and popular sovereignty in Europe in the 19th and 20th century

> Par la même raison que la souveraineté est inaliénable, elle est indivisible. Car la volonté est générale, ou elle ne l'est pas ; elle est celle du corps du peuple, ou seulement d'une partie. Dans le premier cas cette volonté déclarée est un acte de souveraineté & fait loi : Dans le second, ce n'est qu'une volonté particulière, ou un acte de magistrature ; c'est un décret tout au plus.
>
> Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, Book II, chapter II.

Rousseauian injunctions like the one quoted above insisted on unity and indivisibility as essential features of popular sovereignty. In the face of this indivisibility, what to make of the empirically undeniable plurality of the people? At the turn of the 19th century, French revolutionary constitutions gave a solution to this problem through a doubling of the notion of the people, capable of being simultaneously many and one. At the level of civil society, the people were plural, constituted by different individuals endowed with inalienable rights, capable of associating and disassociating with each other on a voluntary basis. Politically, however, the people spoke as one, expressing the general will of the nation in assemblies and elections. This solution created a dual space of popular sovereignty: the plural, individualistic one of civil society, regulated by free association, and the unitary, collective one of political society, regulated by the will of the sovereign people. The intermediate level, however, was left unconceptualized, leaving a blank space above the individual and below the state. Hence the central research question: **both historically and conceptually, what role has been assigned to intermediary bodies as spaces of popular sovereignty**?

If, despite a revival of interest in the democratic forms of the 20th century (Conway 2020), the question of intermediary bodies has remained somewhat marginal, it is because most of the scientific literature on the question has tended to **obscure this democratic perspective**. Philippe Schmitter pitched corporatist arrangements as intrinsically alternative to democratic pluralism, while Charles Maier, in his writings on the corporatist reconstruction of Europe in the 20th century, spoke of it overwhelmingly in terms of disenfranchisement and as a shift of power away from the people and towards unelected and informal leaderships (Schmitter, 1974; Maier, 1975). Finally, a growing literature on corporatism reinforces its association – undeniable as a matter of historical record – with the fascist, quasi-fascist, and authoritarian regimes of the 20th century (Pasetti 2016; Costa Pinto 2017).

Though these scholarly trends contain part of the truth, they obscure another part of it. For example, a great deal of corporatist visions and ideas began as bottom-up projects of social empowerment, attempting to wrestle power away from the state and redirect it towards society, often explicitly advocating a pluralist vision (Laborde 2000). Corporatist arrangements in fascist regimes, equally, often had liberal origins and democratic posterities, pointing towards a more complex picture (Musso 2018; Cassese 2010). Even

Funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłowdowska-Curie grant agreement number 101152186, project ECOCIT, "Economic governance, democracy, and the state in the French Third Republic (1880-1914)". www.unive.it/ecocit

remaining within the realm of fascist and non-democratic regimes, the following question is seldom addressed: how did these arrangements contribute to the construction of a vision of popular (or national) sovereignty alternative to the democratic and parliamentary one?

The conference "Bodies of Democracy" seeks to explore **how, in the 19th and 20th century, the imperative of popular sovereignty was pursued by theorizing, constructing, and juridically instituting this intermediary space between individual and state**. It is interested in how actors of various kinds – business associations, trade unions, intellectuals, bureaucrats, political parties and pressure groups of various kinds – saw organized economic concerns and intermediary bodies as entities capable of **giving substance to the principle of popular sovereignty,** either as spaces of direct self-government or as units of popular representation in alternative to representation by suffrage. To what extent can these visions be seen as projects of social self-government, and to what extent, instead, do they constitute a top-down, statist organization of society? From the late 19th century until the late 20th, is there a development in one of these directions? What have been the relationships between the forms of representation implied by corporatism and representation by suffrage? What are the tensions and intersections between the economic and the more broadly political dimension?

We seek contributions that provide answers to these questions **from a variety of European contexts**, **through a variety of historical approaches** – such as intellectual, labour, cultural, and economic history. Though we focus on history as a disciplinary approach and work on a chronology that goes approximately from 1880 to 1980, we welcome contributions both from scholars in adjacent disciplines (sociology, political theory, political science) and that exceed the chronology, provided the relevance of content and materials. Topics include but are not limited to:

- Intermediary bodies as representative of economic or social constituencies, and their intersection with geographical or cultural representation
- Forms of interest or group representation in 20th century communist regimes
- Fascist and authoritarian experiments in corporatism as alternatives to parliamentarism
- The evolution of intermediary bodies under corporatist arrangements, from civil society representatives to parts of the state?
- Group representation at the supra-national level: EU, WTO, ILO, and other experiences of this kind
- Institutions of group representation and institutions of suffrage – similarities and differences
- Trade unions, business associations, and their role(s) in democratic governance
- Ideologies, political theories, and cultural movements: Catholic social thinking, *Staatsozialismus, solidarisme*, organicism, Guild Socialism, revolutionary syndicalism, etc.
- Legal and philosophical arguments for or against group representation, social self-government, or critiques of parliamentary representation.

Please send your abstracts (500 words) or any queries you might have to tommaso.giordani@unive.it before **10 of January 2027.** The conference will be held in **Venice (Italy) on the 18th and 19th of May 2027**. A special issue in a generalist history journal will be the final outcome.

Funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłowdowska-Curie grant agreement number 101152186, project ECOCIT, "Economic governance, democracy, and the state in the French Third Republic (1880-1914)". www.unive.it/ecocit

Funded by the European Union

Bibliography

Cassese, Sabino, *Lo stato fascista* (Il Mulino, 2010).

Conway, Martin, *Western Europe's Democratic Age: 1945-1968* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Costa Pinto, Antonio (ed.), *Corporatism and Fascism* (Routledge, 2017).

Laborde, Cécile, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France, 1900-25* (Macmillan, 2000).

Maier, Charles, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1975).

Musso, Stefano, "Riformismo e corporativismo nella crisi dello Stato liberale, tra Italia ed Europa", *Studi Storici* 59, no.4 (2018): 897-917

Pasetti, Matteo, *L'Europa corporativa* (Bononia University Press, 2016).

Schmitter, Philippe, "Still the century of corporatism?", *The Review of Politics* 36, no. 1 (January 1974): 85-131.

Funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłowdowska-Curie grant agreement number 101152186, project ECOCIT, "Economic governance, democracy, and the state in the French Third Republic (1880-1914)". www.unive.it/ecocit