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Cultures of Compromise and Liberal Democracy after World War II

Conference at the German Historical Institute, London, July 4-6, 2024



On their way to the paintings on display, most visitors to the National Gallery in London tend to nonchalantly walk across the floor mosaic 'Modern Virtues' created by Russian-born artist Boris Anrep in 1952. Among these virtues one finds a depiction of 'Compromise', in which the American film actress Loretta Young, wearing both a crown and the Phrygian cap of the French Jacobins, pours red and white wine into a bowl, thus combining the political and private aspects of compromise. The mosaic, which also includes virtues such as 'Curiosity', 'Defiance' (showing Sir Winston Churchill defying a Nazi beast) and 'Compassion', serves as a reminder that liberal democracy is not only a political institution but also a way of life.

The mythical representation of compromise in the mosaic above is the point of departure for a conference on the cultures of compromise and liberal democracy after World War II to be held at the German Historical Institute, London, on July 4-6, 2024. The image refers to the utopia of liberal democracy that emerged after 1945 and was closely associated with the idea of the 'West'. For some time now, this liberal utopia has been challenged – if not

replaced – by a dystopian vision of the future of liberal democracy. Increasing political polarisation in many Western societies, particularly in Europe, has fuelled fears that liberal democracy is dysfunctional and that authoritarian alternatives are becoming more attractive. A recurring argument in this debate is that growing social and political polarisation is undermining the capacity for compromise, thereby threatening a key condition for the functioning of liberal democracies in Europe and elsewhere.

Proceeding from these observations, the conference will discuss the cultures of compromise and their significance for liberal democracies after 1945. The normative premise that liberal democracy is tied to functioning compromises will be examined through a historicising perspective. Using an international comparative framework that includes not only Europe and the United States, but also Israel and Japan, the conference will discuss the causes and reasons for the varying functions and the relevance of compromise as a model of political and social conflict resolution. The aim is to analyse compromise in the tension between the political and the private. To this end, we will ask how compromise has been institutionalised, how it has been reflected in discourses, and what practices it has been associated with. At the same time, we will demonstrate how liberal democratic institutions are embedded in social and private norms and practices.