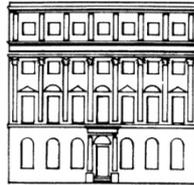


German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Hannes Ziegler:

*European Democracies: Origins, Evolutions, Challenges. A Workshop in
Memory of Peter Blickle*

Conference Report

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 40, No. 2
(November 2018), pp140-146

CONFERENCE REPORTS

European Democracies: Origins, Evolutions, Challenges. A Workshop in Memory of Peter Blickle, held at the German Historical Institute London, 23–24 March 2018. Conveners: Beat Kümin (University of Warwick), Andreas Gestrich (GHIL), and Wolfgang Behringer (Universität des Saarlandes).

Peter Blickle, former Professor of History at Saarbrücken (1972–80) and Berne (1980–2004), was one of the leading specialists on early modern European history, and his research on the political agency of the common people has fundamentally transformed our understanding of politics in pre-modern Europe. His monographs *The Revolution of the Common Man* (original edition 1975) and *The Communal Reformation* (1987) have inspired research well beyond Germany and Switzerland, especially in the anglophone world. This workshop, held to commemorate Blickle's work following his death in 2017, sought to honour his achievements with a close focus on one particularly influential strand of his research, namely, popular participation in decision-making processes. This theme, prominent in Blickle's studies on petitions, popular involvement in representative institutions, and early modern forms of resistance, was combined with another important concern of his work, most fully developed in his conceptual survey *Kommunalismus* (2003). In this line of research Blickle stressed the importance of communal self-government for the development of modern democracy alongside other factors such as the intellectual traditions of Renaissance and Enlightenment political thought. This workshop was thus intended to provide a forum for discussions on the foundations of modern democracy at a time when

First published as 'Tagungsbericht: European Democracies: Origins, Evolutions, Challenges. A Workshop in Memory of Peter Blickle, 23.03.2018–24.03.2018 London', H-Soz-Kult, 04.05.2018 <www.hsozkult.de/conference-report/id/tagungsberichte-7682>. Copyright © 2018 by H-NET, Clío-online, H-Soz-Kult, and the author, all rights reserved.

The full conference programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

democracy faces new challenges in Europe and elsewhere. Attended by former colleagues, pupils, and researchers working on similar themes, the workshop was supported by the German History Society and the University of Warwick's European History Research Centre.

Andreas Gestrich (London) opened the workshop by welcoming participants, with a special welcome extended to Renate Blickle, the event's guest of honour. Beat Kümin (Warwick) introduced the theme of the conference, combining this with personal memories of academic life in Berne, Blickle's *Doktorandenkolloquium*, and a memorable field trip to the former GDR. Supported by clips from a 2014 interview recorded in Gersau, a 'peasant republic' in medieval and early modern times, Kümin noted some important features. Besides interests in communal organization, local politics, constitutional autonomy, and political agency 'from below', Blickle was committed to working 'at all levels' of social organization. Both in his own work and in the research he encouraged, Blickle's view always encompassed micro-historical settings at village level as well as major structural ruptures and changes at the macro-historical level of constitutional history. It is not least in this approach, Kümin argued, that the significance of Blickle's explanation of the emergence of modern democracy and the influence of his work on other scholars can be found.

This train of thought was neatly taken up by Wim Blockmans (Leiden) in his keynote lecture on political participation in Europe before 1800. Very much in line with Blickle's conviction that the writing of history must pay attention to present problems in order to contribute to their explanation, Blockmans started by correlating declining approval rates for democratic institutions in contemporary Europe with factors such as income levels and the perception of political corruption. Observing that trust in democracy and the rule of law was considerably higher in western European countries, he asked why, historically, this should be the case. Blockmans argued that firm democratic convictions were based on stronger traditions of political participation in some western European political regimes, which manifested themselves in factors such as the existence of free communes and strong countervailing powers, the existence of institutions of civil society, and a highly integrated territory. Blockmans then set out to develop a framework of analysis for the study of such traditions. Attempting to link local, regional, and higher forms of

political organization and to account for mobility beyond borders as well as socio-economic influences, he proposed that we study geographical context, the formation of political communities, social/economic characteristics, and the composition of elite groups. In these forms of political participation—tending towards oligarchization in cases of economic decline and institutional innovation in cases of growth—Blockmans identified a gradual ritualization of participation ultimately accounting for differences in attitudes to participation in modern democracies.

Engaging with Blickle's ideas by taking them one step further proved to be the unofficial theme of the first session of the conference. This session focused on his concept of communalism, put into context by Claudia Ulbrich (Berlin). In delineating how this concept developed in Blickle's work, Ulbrich stressed its originality by pointing to the academic context prevailing at the time when he first came up with the idea of communalism. His contemporaries tended especially to focus on feudalism as an interpretative model for political organization in pre-modern Europe. This focus, in turn, tended to marginalize influences from below. Ulbrich, however, also addressed criticisms levelled at Blickle's concept, for example, that it entailed a process of modernization that was too linear, and that it was too homogenous to account for conflict and mechanisms of exclusion within communities. She also expressed personal views on how the concept might be developed further, for example, by focusing on family units below the level of communities to allow for a broader view of social practices.

A different direction was proposed by Daniel Schläppi (Berne), whose paper looked at political participation at the level of communities in early modern Switzerland. By taking up Blickle's notion of the common good as the central idea for the legitimation of community government and action, Schläppi argued that this was not simply an abstract idea but referred to a variety of economic practices. With examples from the early modern Swiss Confederation, he argued that these practices organized the distribution and redistribution of wealth within the community as a means of pooling resources among full burghers (especially common lands such as pastures), avoiding conflict, and securing government action co-operatively. In showing that the legitimation of power itself rested on the redistribution of wealth and the rotation of office-holding, he ultimately argued

that communities 'co-produced' states rather than seeing them as antagonists to the formation of the modern state.

Finally, Wolfgang Behringer (Saarbrücken) also took a critical stance on Blickle's concept of communalism by arguing that it portrayed a too harmonious picture of early modern local relations. With examples from modern Africa and India (where other, unrelated concepts of 'communalism' are discussed), he showed that community action can also have a darker side, especially when it comes to apparently irrational/violent behaviours. Illustrating this with a case study of witch-hunting in Bavaria and Switzerland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Behringer showed that communities could justify the hunting of witches with such normative ideas as the *bonum commune* and that communal persecutions were especially high in regions with high levels of political participation. The question, therefore, he argued, was whether the concept of communalism painted too idealized a picture of communes and their resistance to authorities.

The second session opened with a paper by Johannes Dillinger (Oxford), who concentrated on rural communities in seventeenth-century Massachusetts with a particular focus on the political representations of the communes in the governing apparatus of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In view of the fact that all towns and villages in the colony enjoyed equal rights of representation and were able to defend the right to choose their own deputies as representatives, Dillinger argued that despite its Puritan tendency and allusions to divine right in the royal charter of 1629, the colony tended towards representative government over the century with a notable propensity to secularism. Rather than being a direct predecessor of republican forms of government, however, these developments, in Dillinger's view, contributed to the growth of an administrative apparatus and the emergence of an 'expertocracy'.

Peasant communities were also prominent in Henry Cohn's (Warwick) paper. In an attempt to re-evaluate the dynamics of mobilization and revolt in the German Peasants' War, Cohn argued that in line with the beliefs of E. P. Thompson and Blickle, the peasants were not, in fact, a mindless mob. Using the example of various episodes from the 1525 rising, Cohn showed that the crowds possessed their own moral economy and frequently based their actions and decisions on inherited patterns of village life, traditional forms of justice, and experiences of regular military organization. The peasants, he argued,

were thus appropriating traditional forms of justice in a ritualized way for the enactment of what they saw as natural justice.

The second day started with a session on urban politics. Daniel Hinchey (Edinburgh) analysed the proceedings of the Bristol Town Council during the crucial early years of the Civil War. In a close reading of council minutes, he showed how the town council adapted to the wartime situation and its limitations in coping with the demands of the two opposing parties. The councillors were, Hinchey argued, most interested in maintaining elements of normality during the upheaval and in stabilizing economic activities and trade. For this reason they attempted to pursue a neutral course and tried to enlist popular participation, which resulted in a remarkable ability to exercise civic duties even in wartime. But the strategy ultimately failed when the city was captured.

Mary O'Connor (Oxford) moved the focus two and a half centuries forward and looked at the activities of the Shoreditch parish vestry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. She illustrated how the parish vestry gradually gained in influence at the beginning of the century, started to engage with parliament on matters of legislation, and was thus able to intervene on the parish's behalf in crucial political matters at the level of national politics. While other parishes were dominated by oligarchic elites at the time, Shoreditch parish vestry successfully claimed to represent all parishioners and defended the policy of open parish meetings and participatory ideals in highly inclusive language, even against parliamentary opposition.

The last session was opened by Charlie Chih-Hao Lee (Cambridge) with a paper on the Workers' Educational Association, which originated at Oxford University in the early twentieth century. He showed that idealistic and democratic ideas were at the core of this movement, which was set up to educate young workers in order to empower the working-class movement and spread the ideals of participatory government. Over the course of its existence, however, the movement encountered problems. Increasingly, students were denied the right to choose their own tutors, and teachers dismissed ideas of teaching empowerment as propaganda, preferring an educational standard of impartiality instead. At the same time, academic classes were increasingly out of touch with the grassroots nature of local political organization, ultimately reflecting strong tension between democratic movements and university culture.

Finally, in the last paper of the conference, Harm Kaal (Nijmegen) proposed a re-examination of democratic culture in the post-Second World War period. Instead of looking at collective action such as party politics and political movements to measure participatory cultures in western democracies, he suggested examining individual actions instead. In an attempt to map the repertoire of such forms of participation, Kaal proposed various lines of research, such as, for example, personal letters to politicians as platforms for communication, interviews of 'ordinary' people on popular opinion, and opinion polls as creators of new expectations regarding politicians' behaviour. A new understanding of the features that guided political participation in this period was needed, he argued, in order to allow us to comprehend interactions between politicians and the people.

The sessions were followed by a final panel discussion with Wolfgang Behringer, Andreas Gestrich, Tom Scott (St Andrews), and Claudia Ulbrich, moderated by Beat Kümin. The individual comments and the ensuing discussion were particularly helpful in connecting the individual themes of the papers to larger questions pertaining to Blickle's work and legacy. Beyond apparent gaps in his works relating to family structures and economic practices underpinning the inner life of communities, or the necessity of incorporating a global dimension to encourage wider comparisons, it was also clear to many participants that although Blickle's ideas have something very important to offer in addressing the emergence of modern forms of democracy and political participation, the nature of the transition from early modernity to modernity needs to be understood in a more differentiated fashion. Nationalism was one factor that, according to Scott, needs to be addressed more systematically and Behringer stressed that the ambivalence of participatory regimes needs to be faced more openly. Ultimately, however, it seems that the real challenge to Blickle's work is not so much a particular thematic or methodical gap or deficiency, but the course of history itself. As Ulbrich pointed out, Blickle's historical work was always informed by the present; and yet the present, as several comments regarding the rise of nationalism, the ambivalence of democracies, and the impact of global crises illustrated, is not only different from what it was in the 1960s or 1970s, but is also constantly changing. A highly topical challenge to Blickle's work thus seems to be that the premisses for his research, informed by a different present, have changed. That may,

CONFERENCE REPORTS

however, be something that Blickle himself would have easily acknowledged. The value of his ideas and his work may then lie, as could be observed from many papers and comments, in the way that these can still help us to get those new questions right.

HANNES ZIEGLER (German Historical Institute London)