

Call for papers

Conference "Past perfect: the use of historical references in contemporary discourse on democracy" (Université de Bourgogne, Dijon, October 20th-21st 2022)

For well over two decades now the conviction that we are experiencing a crisis of democracy has become widespread. Democracy's critics and its defenders have repeatedly emphasized historical references and parallels centered, in particular, on the early 1930s. In Germany, the rise of the AfD since 2015 and terrorist attacks by right-wing extremists from the assassination of Walter Lübcke in 2019 to the Halle and Hanau attacks in 2019 and 2020 have come to be compared with the last days of the Weimar republic. Meanwhile, the *Querdenker* movement oppose what they see as dictatorial public health measures by evoking the memory of Sophie Scholl who famously resisted the Nazi regime. In the United Kingdom, where politicians and the popular press are always eager to evoke the Second World War, the Brexit referendum campaign of June 2016 was illustrative of this trend. In the United States, the January 6th attack on the US capitol and the last presidential campaign have led to many an op-ed using comparisons with the Civil War. In Spain, since 1995/1996 and even more so since 2007, debates have centered on the "historical memory" - or "democratic memory" as it is currently called, i.e., the idea that the transition towards democratic rule was built on an "agreement to forget". The 1978 Constitution and its democratic regime willingly refused to come to terms with the Civil War and the years of Franco's dictatorship. Hence the calls for a Third Republic, the rejection of parliamentary monarchy and of the current political system. In Italy, where the philosopher Giorgi Agamben compared the enforcement of a vaccine mandate with Fascist laws, it is paradoxically the parties and groups in line with the Fascist legacy that are the most vocally opposed to Mario Draghi's public health policy and claim to defend individual and collective liberties.

This interdisciplinary conference aims at analyzing these phenomena in "historic" democracies such as the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as democracies still haunted by twentieth century experiments with dictatorship: Germany, Italy and Spain. Case studies of Latin American democracies are also welcome. The ambition is to add an important interdisciplinary and cross-national contribution to research¹ on the political uses of the past in the present democratic crisis. The conference's interdisciplinary and cross-national approach to this urgent question is the hallmark of the research group "Individu & Nation", which is part of the Centre Interlangues/TIL laboratoire. One of the key aspects of this conference is to forge a disciplinary dialogue between history, political science, cultural studies, film studies, literature and linguistics.

Possible topics:

¹ Cf. Labex « Les passés dans le présent : histoire, patrimoine, mémoire » - <http://passes-present.eu/>

The conference aims focus on the political and ideological uses of historical reference points. What functions do these references serve? Who (what groups, movements, etc.) use them? How are they used? What types of arguments are deployed? What discursive strategies are drawn on? What are the motives underpinning the evocation of historical events? Might they be used to denounce threats to democracy? To highlight its flaws? To explain current phenomena? To engage the public? In what contexts are these references to past events used? Is there a link with certain types of events? Do these discourses on democracy have an emotional/emotive dimension? To what extent is history revised and (often) redacted according to specific interests? What does recourse to the past reveal about conceptions of democracy, and about the construction and the evolution of collective memory in the societies under study?

Studying such phenomena within various national frameworks should also enable researchers to determine the impact of specific experiences on the choice of references and the political uses of the past, and to identify similar strategies and elements in different discourses.

Proposals may consider various types of actors and discourses on democracy:

- the discourses of institutional actors
- the discourses of political and popular movements, especially those criticizing the way in which democracy currently works (AfD in Germany, Podemos and Vox in Spain, Trump supporters in the United States, etc.)
- media discourses
- the discourses of intellectuals and experts who are often invited in the media on the subject. In Germany, for example, countless interviews with historians on the parallels with Weimar can be found
- novels, movies, radio programs, TV shows, whose plots are set in the past (including fictional pasts, as in alternate histories) but which offer reflections on the state of democracy today, or at least a discourse which can be interpreted as such – the reception of such works being an interesting phenomenon in itself. For instance, the German series *Babylon Berlin* (2017-present), which takes place during the final years of the Weimar Republic, or David Simon’s mini-series and adaptation of Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2020)², set during the Second World War.

² David Simon clearly explained that through this alternate history, which imagines an Antisemitic America teaming up with Nazi Germany under the presidency of Charles Lindbergh, instead of joining the Allied forces in 1941, he was in fact talking about Trump’s America: “Reading the novel today, the world of Trump, Brexit, misinformation, xenophobia and fear becomes crystal clear. The parallels are obvious, and they underscore the utility of the story [Roth] tells, incredibly relevant, to say something about a situation in which we are wading too deeply to get anything out of. [... I find stratagems to address Trump, because I am a political writer. If that means putting old Packards and Buicks together on the screen, and finding streets that haven't changed since 1939, then so be it.” “David Simon : ‘La bonne nouvelle est qu’on vit plutôt bien à la marge’”, interview in *Libération*, 31 January 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/images/2020/01/31/la-bonne-nouvelle-est-qu-on-vit-plutot-bien-a-la-marge_1776539/ (last visit 20 October 2021)

- Different approaches can be envisaged: an analysis of historical references inside a specific discourse, a comparative analysis of the use of the same references in different discourses within a national framework, transnational approaches, etc.

Submissions

Conference paper proposals (300-400 words) and a short CV should be sent to the organizing committee by 28 February 2022.

- for the English-speaking world: Marine Paquereau, marine.paquereau@u-bourgogne.fr
- for the German-speaking world: Nathalie Le Bouëdec, nathalie.le-bouedec@u-bourgogne.fr
- for the Spanish-speaking world: Pierre-Paul Grégorio, pierre-paul.gregorio@u-bourgogne.fr
- for the Italian-speaking world: Nicolas Bonnet, nicolas.bonnet@u-bourgogne.fr

Proposals may be written in French, German, English, Spanish and Italian. However, conference papers will need to be given in French or in English.

Young researchers are encouraged to participate.

Accommodation and meal expenses will be covered by the organizing committee.

We intend to publish a selection of papers in a peer-reviewed publication.

Organizing committee

Agnès Alexandre-Collier, Nicolas Bonnet, Pierre-Paul Grégorio, Nathalie Le Bouëdec, Alix Meyer, Marine Paquereau (Université de Bourgogne, TIL, équipe Individu & Nation)

Scientific committee

Agnès Alexandre-Collier (PR, civilisation britannique, université de Bourgogne/TIL)

Nicolas Bonnet (PR, littérature italienne, université de Bourgogne/TIL)

Pierre-Paul Grégorio (PR, civilisation espagnole contemporaine, université de Bourgogne/TIL)

Nathalie Le Bouëdec (PR, histoire et civilisation allemande, université de Bourgogne/TIL)

Alix Meyer (MCF, civilisation américaine, TIL)

Marine Paquereau (MCF, littérature américaine, TIL)

Alma-Pierre Bonnet (PRAG, civilisation britannique, Sciences Po Lyon/chercheur associé à TIL)

Michael Drolet (théorie politique, Senior Research Fellow, Worcester College, Université d'Oxford)