Proposal: The future of political community

Proposed workshop directors: Gideon Baker and Jens Bartelson

Outline of the topic

In a globalising world, many are looking beyond traditional, nation-state based, expressions of political community, in the process challenging territorial sovereignty as the exclusive basis for political community itself. In particular, a key challenge to dominant notions of political community is arising ‘from below’, as advocates of civil society celebrate the potential of trans-national forms of civic self-organisation to reconstitute political community in less ‘exclusive’, ‘chauvinist’ terms. Whether in terms of the democratisation of global governance, the global spread of human rights, or the emergence of a global citizenry in a world-wide public sphere, civil society, organising across borders, is increasingly seen to provide the agency necessary for political transformation.

This workshop intends to build on this now extensive debate about trans-national civil society by addressing a relatively neglected, but vital, question that arises from it: namely, what do non-state-based forms of political action mean for the theory and practice of political community itself? Addressing this question involves asking a host of sub-questions, such as: Why is political community important? What are the boundaries of political community? Can, or should, the nation-state continue to be the primary vehicle for political community in the future? What new forms of political community are on offer at local, regional and global levels? Can these be legitimate and effective? How might these new forms of political community be constituted and what are the barriers to their constitution? What comparisons and contrasts can we draw between ‘old’ and ‘new’ visions of political community? And what is the relationship between ‘old’ and ‘new’ expressions of political community likely to involve?

The need for a workshop on the future of political community is that, while this topic is as relevant to European studies specialists as to political theorists, to country specialists as much as International Relations theorists, there have been few opportunities within the discipline for these different viewpoints to challenge and enrich each other. As all political science is directly or indirectly concerned with political community, this workshop hopes to make some small contribution to what is at present a worrying lack of communication across sub-disciplines concerning their approach to the political.

Type of paper

The future of political community is, by its very nature, a topic within which normative and institutional questions come together; neither can be dealt with adequately in isolation. Thus the range of papers sought is wide. Case study and comparative papers will be as welcome as purely
theoretical papers. Indeed, the aim is to find a good balance across the whole spectrum of methodological approaches.

**Relation to existing research**

The workshop intends to build on existing research that predicts or prescribes the transformation of political community in specific, concrete ways but which doesn’t explicitly tackle the question of just how we should conceive of political community per se, i.e. in terms of its boundaries, legitimation and effectiveness.

This existing research on political community that the workshop intends to draw from and build upon is contained in the literatures on: civil society as a new model of political community (for example Vaclav Havel, Mary Kaldor, Richard Falk); ‘post-statist’ or cosmopolitan visions of political community (for example Ulrich Beck, Andrew Linklater, Danielle Archibugi, David Held); the European community as a new model of political community (for example, Klaus Eder, Bernhard Giesen, Richard Bellamy; Jeremy Rifkin); sub-national expressions of political community (Will Kymlicka, Paul Hirst, Bhikhu Parekh, Iris Marion Young).

**Participants**

A broad range of participants is sought. The future of political community is as relevant to European studies specialists as to political theorists, to country specialists as much as International Relations theorists. The opportunity provided by this workshop, then, is to enable these different viewpoints to come together under one discussion where this has so far been lacking.

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**Funding**

Every attempt will be made to secure funding for this workshop from outside ECPR funds. If successful in this application, we will initially approach The Economic and Social Research Council, UK, who have an annual research seminars competition. The ESRC has a track-record of funding research seminars or workshops in this area, for example a seminar series on *The Role of Civil Society in a National Security State: an interdisciplinary inquiry* at the LSE in the last round.

**Biographical notes**
Gideon Baker is a Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Salford, UK. His research interests are in democratic theory, particularly civil society and democracy. He is the author of Civil Society and Democratic Theory: Alternative Voices (Routledge, 2002) and co-editor and chapter contributor to Global Civil Society: Contested Futures (Routledge, 2005). His recent journal articles include the widely cited ‘Problems in the Theorisation of Global Civil Society’ (Political Studies, 2002).

Jens Bartelson is Professor of International Relations at the University of Copenhagen. His current research focuses on the interconnections between the ethical foundations of cosmopolitan communities, the practices of those communities, and the habits of their cosmopolitan members. Some of his recent publications include: ‘Is Globalization a Threat to Democracy?’, Distinktion, No. 8, 2004; The Critique of the State, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001/Tokyo: Iwami Shoten 2004); ‘Interview. The End of Sovereignty?’, Distinktion, No. 2, 2001, pp.115-122 (Danish) and ‘Unpacking the Concept of Civil Society, Shiso, No. 924, 2001, pp. 35-55. (Japanese).