National Traditions of Democratic Thought

Summary

The object of the workshop is to explore differences in national traditions of democracy and democratic theory which might be expected to bar the way to a common European conceptualisation of democracy and to prevent the emergence of a mutual understanding about the necessity, possibility and the plausible way to render European governance more democratic. Discussions will centre around the question whether or not common criteria for the democratic assessment of European governance can be found. Papers are expected to concentrate on the essentials of democracy, on the criteria for ‘democratic quality’ characterising the respective national democratic tradition, and on implications for efforts at democratising the European Union.

1. Outline of the topic

The European ‘democratic deficit’ is not equally considered a serious problem in all member countries. Assessments of the democratic or not-so-democratic character of European governance vary with national democratic achievement as interpreted by the national ‘mainstream’ of democratic thought. This, in its turn, seems to be less influenced by different schools of democratic theory (e.g. ‘empirical’; ‘deliberative’; ‘participatory’) than by national academic contexts. Hence, we are looking for cognitive barriers on the path to the further democratisation of the European polity and try to find out whether or not these can be overcome: where is the ‘common denominator’? Are there ‘universalist’ principles of democracy which are ‘universally accepted’? And which common criteria for democratic assessment can be derived from them?

The object of the workshop is threefold:
- identify barriers on the way to a common conception of European democracy;
- heighten mutual understanding among academics belonging to different political cultures and democratic traditions;
- pave the way to the development of common criteria for the assessment of democratic quality.

2. Relation to existing research

Within the last decade or so research on the question of democracy has concentrated (a) on the argument between ‘schools’ of democratic thought (empirical vs. deliberative), (b) on the ‘practical’ value of deliberative democracy, (c) on the applicability of existing conceptions of democracy to ‘new’ modes of governance (including the supranational ones), and (d) the development of ‘democracy indices’. Our focus differs therefrom in that we assume that national differences of democratic thought crosscut the cleavage between the afore-mentioned ‘schools’ and pose a problem of their own if we are to assess the democratic quality of those new modes of governance.

3. Participants

In order to achieve the objects listed above it is essential that workshop participants represent a sufficiently wide variety of democratic traditions. That is why we invite scholars
- both from North and South European countries;
- from old (‘continuous’) and from new (and/or ‘discontinuous’) democracies;
- from parliamentary and from non-parliamentary systems;
- from unitary and federal democracies.

Paper-givers should be sufficiently well-versed in democratic theory and the history of political thought. Some knowledge in comparative politics would come in useful, as well as expertise in constitutional law.

4. Type of papers
Paper-givers are requested
- to give an impression of the political philosophy that was formative for their democratic tradition;
- to inform briefly on the national ‘mainstream’ of democratic theory;
- to outline key concepts of national democratic thought;
- to specify the criteria for democratic assessment as characteristic for their tradition;
- to characterise the national stance on matters of European democracy.

Thus papers are expected to open up a broad tableau for the workshop discussions which to our intent should concentrate both on the key concepts and on the criteria: How much do they in fact differ? In what way are they related to ‘universalist’ principles – and to which? Where are incompatibilities – and by what means can they be overcome? What would be, in the light of ‘accepted differences’, the minimum requirements for European democracy?

5. Bibliographical Notes

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Recent Publications:


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