

**Research Workshop on  
“The nature and transformation of contemporary political regimes:  
Sino-European perspectives”**

*Organized by the Centre for Political Thought, University of Exeter  
Exeter, 13-14 February 2020*

## **Programme**

**Day One: Thursday 13 February (Forum Training Suite, Exeter Main Campus)**  
***The Chinese Political Regime: Authoritarian and popular characters***

*13.45 Arrival and Tea/Coffee*

**14.00 – 15.45: Session 1**

***Representation and Democratic Innovation in a One-Party State***

Speakers: Emilie Frenkiel (Paris Créteil), Demin Duan (Peking)

Chair/Discussant: Dario Castiglione (Exeter)

*This panel focuses on the way in which the language of representation and practices of “citizens’ orderly participation” signal a shift in Chinese governance. The contributions try to assess the way in which discourses of political representation and some limited forms of participatory budgeting at local level either question or mitigate some authoritarian aspects of the Chinese regime, and in particular the vanguard conception of the Communist Party within the post-revolutionary Chinese state.*

Background texts:

Emilie Frenkiel, “Participatory budgeting and political representation in China”

Duan Demin, “On authoritarian political representation in contemporary China”

*15.45 – 16.15 Tea/Coffee*

**16.15 – 18.00: Session 2**

***Participation, Authoritarianism and Nation Building***

Speakers Catherine Owen (Exeter), Zhiguang Yin (Exeter)

Chair/Discussant: Tim Niblock (Exeter and Tsinghua)

*Partly following on the previous session, this panel focuses on the way in which participation and citizens’ activism is also related to broader international conditions and developments affecting state governance and nation building in regimes whose central institutions are not based on the principles of pluralist electoral democracy. The contributions assess, on the one hand, the way in which a form of controlled participation has become functional to market-oriented reforms of state governance in post-communist societies; and on the other, the way in which internationalist and anti-colonial ideals have historically been expedient for reconciling ethnic and religious differences within a nation-building process.*

Background texts:

Catherine Owen, “Participatory authoritarianism: From bureaucratic transformation to civic participation in Russia and China”

Zhiguang Yin, ““The people are god’ Third world internationalism and Chinese muslims in the making of the national identity in the 1950s”

**Day Two: Friday 14 February (Knightley Building, Exeter Main Campus)**  
***The state of European constitutional democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century***

**9.00 – 10.45: Session 3**

***Constitutional Backsliding?***

Speakers: Alessandro Ferrara (Rome Tor Vergata), Stephen Skinner (Exeter)

Chair/Discussant: Lise Herman (Exeter)

*This panel focuses on the symptoms and mechanisms of contemporary democratic erosion under the influence of populist political forces in Europe. The contributions assess from various angles whether political values or constitutional law can safeguard democratic institutions from backsliding, and if so under which conditions.*

Background texts:

Alessandro Ferrara, “Legitimacy and reasonability: Reflections on judicial review”

Stephen Skinner, “Identifying dangers to democracy: Fascism, the rule of law and the relevance of history”

Lise Herman and Russell Muirhead, “Making electoral procedures work: The role of pluralist partisanship”

***10.45 – 11.15 Tea/Coffee***

**11.15 – 13.00: Session 4**

***State, Capitalism and Democracy: Failures, Adaptation, and New Models***

Speakers: Alfio Mastropaolo (Turin), Yves Sintomer (Paris 8),

Chair/Discussant: Dario Castiglione (Exeter)

*This panel focuses on recent debates about the state of the democratic system: its transformation, its failures, and even its end. The contributions consider democracy and its representative institutions in Europe and the Western world within the more general context of the transformation of the state’s capacity to govern and to guarantee participation and social welfare in the face of a neo-liberal restructuring of the capitalist economy, on the one hand; and in relation to a more global framework, which is attentive to developments and the formation of new models of democratic governance and new imaginaries of politics in the Global North as well as in the Global South.*

Background texts:

Alfio Mastropaolo, “On government”

Yves Sintomer, “New political imaginaries and models in the 21st century”

***13.00 – 14.00 Lunch***

**14.00 – 16.00: Session 5**

***Political Communication in the Post-Truth Age***

Speakers: Sandra Kröger (Exeter) and Richard Bellamy (University College London),  
Giovanni Navarra (Exeter)

Chair/Discussant: Andrew Schaap (Exeter)

*This panel focuses on how changes in communication are affecting democratic politics. The contributions address the way in which political agency is transformed by the digital revolution, which provides opportunities for empowerment as well as it increases the dangers of manipulation. This is particularly evident in relation to truthfulness in political communication and to its importance in maintaining trust between citizens and in the democratic system.*

Background texts:

Richard Bellamy and Sandra Kröger, “On representative democracy, truthfulness and the challenge of populism and technocracy”

Giovanni Navarra, “The Networked Citizen”

## ***Organization of the Workshop***

For each session, we are pre-circulating a number of papers written on specific and relevant issues by the main speakers. Each session will have two presenters, who will speak for 15 minutes each. They will offer some brief reflections on the general theme of the session, based in part on their own pre-circulated papers. After their intervention, the chair/discussant will offer his/her own reflections and comments so to give some direction to the general discussion amongst all participants. For each session, there will be at least an hour for open discussion.

## ***Brief Rationale of the Workshop***

This research workshop is meant to start a conversation between scholars working from different perspectives on the nature and development of contemporary political regimes. We shall concentrate on two main cases, the European and the Chinese political regimes; which can also be regarded as both emblematic and paradigmatic of the rather simplified dichotomy between authoritarian and democratic regimes that often dominates political analysis and political discourse. This slight Manichean categorization of political regimes has long maintained a stronghold on the political imagination—perhaps with some reason, in terms of the underlying conviction that modern political authority needs to rest on some form of popular legitimacy and unforced acceptance. Arguably, such simplification was at its most popular and pervasive during the last decade of the last century, after the collapse of the Soviet regime, which seemed to signal the unchallenged dominance of the liberal democratic model in politics, and the consolidation of a set of neo-liberal type of institutions, arrangements and policies in the economy across the globe.

For good or bad, the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has produced the fall of many certainties in global politics. The sudden end of what had seemed the irresistible march of democratization, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, dented the optimistic view of the unimpeded progress of political democracy and the conviction of the inevitable spread of economic globalization. Perhaps as the byproduct of a more pessimistic look at recent political and social developments, the dichotomy between authoritarian and democratic regimes has also appeared increasingly inadequate to understand the empirical and normative complexities that characterize political societies and constitutional arrangements, whether these are considered either in more abstract terms, as models of political regimes, or in more concrete and historical terms, as a complex set of functioning institutions, socio-cultural practices and traditions. One can detect the willingness to look at the nature of political regimes in a more nuanced and critical way, allowing for more shades of greys in such analysis, rather than the stark contrast between black and white. In the current context, it appears necessary to finetune one's normative judgements to the complexities of social, institutional and historical concreteness, but still holding firm on important principles and values. Broadly speaking, the blanket use of the democratic-authoritarian dichotomy in describing political regimes seems to have lost its attractiveness because of both its analytical poverty and its normative bluntness.

On the authoritarian side, the dichotomy hardly captures the varieties of arrangements that characterizes the many different societies that are labelled authoritarian; the complex ways in which some of these political regimes maintain a modicum of legal order and state-legitimacy; the mixture in the use of force, manipulation, and social integration and

participation through which they organize consensus and socio-political leadership, while assuring some level of social acceptance. Moreover, some of these societies have become more integrated in the global economy, and more open to external models, influence, and communication. Understanding the nature and ways of working of specific regimes that are considered broadly “authoritarian” in character is important in order to assess their normative standing in relation to both their own people and the international community at large, and the way in which they may develop internally or interact internationally.

On the democratic side, the simple virtues of free electoral competition, political pluralism and constitutionally entrenched liberal rights have increasingly looked insufficient to guarantee the effective working of political democracy. Different debates have recently emerged questioning not only issues of democratic deficit, traditionally linked to the international scaling up of governance, or the kind of socio-economic dominance still possible within formal systems of democracy; but also suggesting a hollowing out of democracy, its failing capacity to provide meaningful forms of self-government, or indeed its very capacity to survive in an age of heightened technical complexity, instantaneous social communication, and increasing forms of power control and manipulation.

The research workshop aims to discuss these issues by building on the particular expertise of some of the participants, using their contributions as the starting point for a more general and free-wheeling conversation intended to raise fresh questions and explore new possible lines of enquire. Its aim is more brainstorming than discussing particular theories and papers, although these may be a useful way of getting the conversation going. Our hope is that the workshop, or at least some of the sessions, will lead to other initiatives of common discussion and possibly of collaborative research and publication.