Democratic Possibilities:
Historical, Normative and Global Perspectives

Conference at the University of Chicago Center in Paris
Tuesday, November 23, 2021

Co-Sponsored by the France Chicago Center
and the University of Chicago Center in Paris

Panel 1. 9:30—10:45am

“The Return of the Owl: The Rediscovery of Athenian Democracy in Renaissance Italy”
Gabriele Pedullà (University of Rome)

Daisy Delogu, Chair
John McCormick, Commentator

Panel 2. 11am—12:15pm

“Democracy in Selection: The Ethics of Political Appointment by Lotteries vs. Elections”
Annabelle Lever (SciencesPo, Paris)

Robert Morrissey, Chair
Chiara Cordelli, Commentator

Panel 3. 1:45—3:00pm

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Naomi Davidson, Chair
Jennifer Pitts, Commentator

Panel 4. 3:15—4:30pm

Roundtable with Conference Participants
Jon Levy, Chair
“Democratic erosion” is a topic much discussed today with authoritarian governments usurping liberal democratic ones in Hungary, Poland, Brazil and India, and right wing populist movements gaining increasing prominence in France, Germany, the UK and the United States. Countless books and opinion pieces have been published with the hope of preventing further authoritarian lurching in existing democracies and of reversing autocratic gains in previously democratic countries. The purpose of this one-day conference is to broaden the perspective on democratic erosion by drawing on the fields of intellectual history, normative philosophy and comparative political thought to think constructively, rather than merely defensively, about enhancing democratic principles and practices in the contemporary world. We have assembled a methodologically diverse trio of European scholars to discuss the aspirational quality of democracy—democratic possibilities—in different historical and regional contexts and through an ethical lens.

In the United States, the trope “we are a republic, not a democracy!” is frequently invoked to justify inegalitarian, counter-majoritarian institutions through which regional and ethnically homogenous minorities are politically over-represented compared with more populous and diverse parts of the country. Gabriele Pedullà (University of Rome) reexamines the reception of ancient democracy in the paradigmatic “republican” context of medieval and Renaissance Italy. Pedullà shows quite surprisingly that many Italian humanists exhibited a remarkable appreciation for democratic Athens, and sought to incorporate aspects of ancient democracy into their republics’ political institutions. The negative views of ancient democracy that justified anti-majoritarian institutions in many contemporary liberal democracies emerged in Europe, Pedullà demonstrates, only much later—specifically, among eighteenth century republicans. Pedullà muses over the possibility that modern advocates for democracy might imitate their Renaissance Italian forebearers in taking inspiration from Athenian democracy in attempting to make their own republics more thoroughly democratic.

Annabelle Lever (SciencesPo, Paris) explores the ethical merits of two procedures of political appointment that have separated republicans from democrats since the eighteenth century: respectively, election and lottery. Lever evaluates the moral value of each appointment device along according to the following criteria: (1) the principle that democratic citizens need no special virtues, knowledge, resources or powers in order to participate in government and to hold positions of special responsibility and public trust; and (2) the principle that democratic politics is a cooperative as well as a competitive business. In evaluating these appointment techniques, Lever draws out implications for the reform of contemporary democracies regarding the role of lay, as opposed to professional, judgment in democracies; and regarding the provision of collective goods such as security, healthcare and prosperity.

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (Goldsmiths, University of London) investigates democratic possibilities emerging from the Middle East by revisiting Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani’s role in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Drawing upon public speeches and primary source material, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi analyzes Taleqani’s anti-capitalist brand of Islamic socialism, and explores his contribution to debates around neighborhood and workers councils, thus bringing to light novel ideas concerning economic democracy and local self-government in and beyond the Global South. His paper furthermore will trace the legacy of Iran’s post-revolutionary reform movement within the modern Middle East and assesses its abiding relevance (or lack thereof) in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings of 2011. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi’s paper will inspire advocates of democratic reform to rethink how concepts such as democracy, justice and equality are taken up, operationalized and reconfigured in the contemporary context of concrete political struggles and social contestation in places such as Tehran, Cairo, Paris, Minneapolis, Seattle, Hong Kong and beyond.