



Öffentlicher Vortrag

Schlüsselkonzepte der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften | GSH | Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies

Guest: Prof. Dr. Christian Emden, Rice University

Moderation: Prof. Dr. Anna Goppel, Universität Bern

Date/Room: Public Lecture: March 15, 2018, 6.15 – 7.30 pm in F013, Unitobler, Lerchenweg 36

Populist Nationalism and the Paradox of Democracy

Populist nationalism is often seen as an external threat to constitutional democracy—as a form of political discourse that stands outside the normal procedures and normative commitments of modern democratic societies. Political parties and movements that, in recent times, have explicitly adopted the banner of populist nationalism are obviously, and without exception, anti-democratic in their orientation and internal structure. Moreover, such parties and movements rely on appeals to direct democracy and popular sovereignty in order to undermine those practices and institutions that safeguard modern constitutional democracies, from public deliberation and voting to legislative procedures and constitutional courts.

Instead of simply understanding populist nationalism as the “other” of liberal democracy, or as a phenomenon that a “militant democracy” can guard itself against through specific laws, this lecture will focus on the question why democracy itself is able to give rise to populist nationalism in the first place. As such, the recent emergence of populist nationalism on both sides of the Atlantic is one of the consequences of a historically unresolved, and philosophically unresolvable, paradox that stands at the heart of constitutional democracy: the legitimacy of democracy depends on an enactment of popular sovereignty that limits popular sovereignty. Democracy always entails a democracy deficit, and it is the experience of such a deficit among citizens that a) cannot be resolved and that b) allows for the success of appeals to populist nationalism as appeals to popular sovereignty.

This paradox of democracy becomes particularly manifest as soon as visions of popular sovereignty become linked with the “nation” as an “imagined community” in the course of the eighteenth century: nation and nationalism are means to overcome the paradox of democracy through an exclusionary conception of citizenship that is emotionally charged, raises questions of identity and belonging, and thus stands in conflict with the universalist claims that are in the background of popular sovereignty. Since any democracy necessarily relies on practices of citizenship, this raises the question of what citizenship can, or should, be under the conditions of pluralism: while republican notions of citizenship foreground self-government and thus seek to reactivate the potential of popular sovereignty, liberal notions of citizenship are focused on the protection and justification of constitutionally guaranteed rights that limit popular sovereignty. Neither, I will argue, are able to resolve the paradox of democracy, albeit for different reasons. Moreover, any attempt to resolve the paradox of democracy—including the idea of constitutional patriotism as an attempt to make affect safe for democracy—invariably prepares the ground for the rise to populist nationalism. The strength of democracy, thus, depends on whether constitutional democracies can live with this paradox.



Christian J. Emden is Professor of German Intellectual History and Political Thought at Rice University, where he is also one of the founding directors of the Program in Politics, Law & Social Thought. Educated at the universities of Konstanz and Cambridge (MPhil, 1997; PhD 2000), he was a Fellow at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, before joining Rice in 2003. In political thought, his main interest lies in the historically tense relationship between the normative ideals of democratic and republican citizenship, on the one hand, and the constitutional demands of the modern state, on

the other hand. Currently, Emden is working on a book about political theory and empire in the work of Hannah Arendt; a second book is concerned with the history of philosophical nihilism in modern European political thought. Relevant recent publications: “Normativity Matters: Philosophical Naturalism and Political Theory,” in Sarah Ellenzweig and John H. Zammito (eds.), *The New Politics of Materialism: History, Philosophy, Science* (London, 2017); “Constitutionalizing the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Modern State,” in Bernd Fischer and May Mergenthaler (eds.), *Cultural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (Oxford, 2015).