

## 4.5. Social movements and popular political participation in rural societies. Part II: XXth century

Panel organiser: Guzzi-Heeb, Sandro, University of Lausanne, Switzerland; Brassart, Laurent, University of Lille, France



Since the 1950s, great attention has been paid in Europe to the history of social conflicts, as crucial keys for understanding mechanisms of popular politics and culture. The problem of earlier studies was that violent conflicts were often seen as the main expression of popular politics, underestimating the complexity of the backgrounds of such spectacular outbreaks. Moreover, actors were mostly vaguely described as “crowds” or “mobs”, thus simplifying the articulation of different political interests in local life. Recent historiography has provided impulses to approach these crucial items. Still, several problems have to be resolved: on the one hand the question about the actors in popular movements, on the other hand the problem of the forms, places and instruments of popular political articulation, not only in special situations like revolts or elections, but in everyday life and in the long term. The aim of our panel is precisely to go in depth into some of these aspects, unravelling mechanism of popular participation in pre-modern states. To understand the logics of state-building and social conflicts, we need to take into account the involvement of working-class men and women in the political traditions, for example in communal councils and assemblies or parochial institutions. In fact, we observe that in many European regions working-class people largely participated in local politics, mainly in communal institutions, or in the religious life of their parish. Communities and district

institutions were in this sense crucial elements of regional “States” – although frictions with larger territorial institutions can often be observed – as parishes are constitutive elements of the “Church”. When communities revolted against “the State”, it often meant a conflict within the State, rather than between “popular” and “elite” groups. In this sense we prefer speaking of “popular political participation” rather than of “popular politics”, since the interaction of popular and non-popular elements in local traditions is crucial to understand the articulation of political interests and the dynamics of protest movements. From a theoretical point of view, a better understanding of popular involvement at local level of early modern States appears to be an important key to interpret social movements and political evolutions. Our panel’s aim is to go deeper into this topic with contributions from different European countries.

Chair: Brassart, Laurent, University of Lille, France

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 // 1030 – 1200 // Session 4 – Room A 027

### 4.5.1. „Individualizing” social research. Conflicts, kinship and sexuality in the Swiss Alps at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century

Guzzi-Heeb, Sandro, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

In 1900 a small group of radical families founded a Free School in Villette, a mountain village in the Swiss Canton of Valais. This ‘Ecole libre’ was a private school supported by the local radical faction, dedicated to secularist teaching and free-thinking. It was the first school of this kind in Western Switzerland.

This event, however, happened in the wake of earlier sharp conflicts between a radical minority and the Catholic-conservative majority in this region. Several sources allow us to identify the protagonists of the struggles, and systematic genealogies make it possible to reconstruct their families and their wider kin groups. This way it becomes possible to ‘individualize’ the research about the conflict or, more precisely, to focus on individuals, their families and kin-groups as the basic social networks involved in the conflict.

Studies on political conflicts often adopt – more or less explicitly – a hierarchic interpretation scheme, wherein ideas and political views are passed down from top to bottom: conflicts thus appear as struggles between elite individuals, each of them supported by their respective political clientele. An ‘individualized’ analysis, based on the agency of individuals and kin groups, sheds light on a more complex reality: the radical faction, for example, was rooted in specific professional networks of mountain guides, tourism operators and small tradesmen. Moreover, the opposition between radicals and conservatives took place against the background of diverse sexual and family-related behaviour patterns, shaping diverging identities and different attitudes towards the Church, towards education and also towards democracy. Illicit sexual relations and contraceptive practices gain in this perspective an eminent political significance. This was also the ground on which free-thinking, atheism and early socialism could spread in the region in the early 20th century.

### 4.5.2. Bauern, Bonzen, und Bomben: Peasant protest in northwest Germany, 1927-1930

Vascik, George S., Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, USA

German peasants, particularly meat and dairy producers in northwest Germany, were “winners” of the 1921-1923 hyperinflation. By the winter of 1927, a true crisis situation was already in place for many producers, exacerbated by heavy flooding and hail damage. The winter disasters of 1927-28 pushed northwest German farmers over the edge, as the number of foreclosures and forced sales grew monthly. These were met with spontaneous peasant disruptions and boycotts. Starting in Schleswig-Holstein autonomous peasant groups calling themselves Landvolk began a bombing campaign against banks and government offices. The established political parties and agrarian interest groups were desperate to contain the unbounded peasant fury and hoped to channel it to their own political ends. Huge demonstrations were organized in January in the major county towns of northwest Germany where all rural interests and parties (except Social Democrats and Communists) participated. This “containment” policy led to the founding of the Christian Nationalist Peasants and Rural Peoples party (CNBLP). In this paper, I will examine the dynamics of peasant protest (through an extended examination of autogenerated peasant self-defense measures including the Landvolk) and through a spatial analysis of the national parliamentary elections of May 1928, which resulted in a splintering of the rural vote and Social Democratic pluralities in many communes.

### 4.5.3. Political Organization of the Peasantry in Communist Romania: the Case of Ploughmen’s Front (1945-1953)

Radu, Sorin, University “Lucian Blaga” of Sibiu, Romania

Ever since its establishment (1933), the Ploughmen’s Front was a political organization of the most obedient to the Communist Party in Romania, this fact being prominent in the post-war period. Led by Dr. Petru Groza, the Ploughmen’s Front was an artificially developed post-war organization, with the specific purpose of countering the influence of the National Peasant Party in rural areas, as well as to mediate the Communist influence among the peasants. Since 1945 until its “self-dissolution” in March 1953, its actions were thoroughly supervised by the Communist Party of Romania. The aim of this formation was to: “to organize the immense energies of the country’s huge agricultural sector”. Officially, the Communist Party tried to stress the independence in action of the Ploughmen’s Front due to the lack of adherence of Communist ideas among the peasants; uncovering the relation between the Communists and the Ploughmen’s Front was assessed as “a tactless mistake that would turn against us”.

#### Participants

##### Brassart, Laurent

Laurent Brassart is Associate Professor at the Université de Lille 3. He works about the history of the french state and countryside during the French Revolution. He has published: *Gouverner le local en Révolution. Etat, pouvoirs et mouvements collectifs en Picardie, 1790-1795.* (Paris, SER, 2013) and has edited with Jean-Pierre Jessenne and Nadine Vivier, *Clochermerle ou république villageoise ? La conduite municipale des affaires villageoises en Europe, XVIII-XXe siècle* (Lille, Septentrion, 2012). He has been involved in numerous research projects which focus on rural popular politization, agricultural policies in Europa.

##### Guzzi-Heeb, Sandro

Sandro Guzzi-Heeb is professor at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. He works about peasants mobilization, sexual behavior and social changes, kinship and networks in rural societies of the Swiss Alps in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Since 2000, he has written 3 books and 14 articles on these subjects.

##### Radu, Sorin

Sorin Radu is Associate Professor Ph.D. at the University of Sibiu. His research interest are the history of electoral systems and the history of communism in Romania. He is the author of many volumes written on these themes: *Romanian Electorate during Parliamentary Democracy (1919-1937)*, European Institute Publishing House, 2004; *Modernization of the Electoral System in Romania (1866-1937)*, European Institute Publishing House, 2005; *Ploughmen’s Front. Documents, vol I (1944-1947), vol II (1948-1951)*, Romanian Academy, Bucharest, 2011, 2012 (in collaboration with V. Ciobanu and N. Georgescu).

##### Vascik, George S.

George S. Vascik, a graduate of the University of Michigan, teaches history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. His teaching and research focus is Modern German History, with special reference to the subjects of agrarian politics and economy. The author of numerous articles, reviews, and papers, Vascik’s current research focuses on rural politics and anti-Semitism in northwest Germany in the period 1893-1933, for which he has developed a GIS linking village election returns with census and other data.