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 the 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 “mob”, 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 the mechanisms 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 elections. 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, unraveling the mechanisms 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 elections.

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, 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, 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, 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, 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.

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 farmer suicides grew monthly. These were met with spontaneous peasant disorders 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 against their own political endpoints. 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 (CN MPF). 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 communities.

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

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

Since 2000, he has written 3 books and 14 articles on these subjects.

Paper

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 peasants founded a Free School in Villarè, a mountain village in the Swiss Canton of Valais. This ‘École 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 ancestors as well as their wider kin groups. This way it becomes possible to “individualise” the research about the conflict 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, where 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 cliques. 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. Kinship 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. In 1900 a small group of radical peasants founded a Free School in Villarè, a mountain village in the Swiss Canton of Valais. This ‘École 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 ancestors as well as their wider kin groups. This way it becomes possible to “individualise” the research about the conflict 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, where 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 cliques. 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. Kinship 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.