**Plan of activities**

Title of the research project “Political planning in European liberal democracies from the 1920s to the 2020s”

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In the context of the PRIN project: “ReFuture - The Return of the Future: democracy and political planning in the age of COVID-19 and climate change”

**Overview**

The objective of the research project is to build solid historical knowledge on the centrality of political planning in 20th century liberal democracies, analysing the transnational debate around planning that originated in Europe starting from the 1920s. This will enable a larger reflection on the meaning and usefulness of this concept/practice in contemporary liberal democracies facing multiple crisis of legitimacy and trust.

One of the objectives of the research is also to account for the ambiguity and richness of the debate around political planning in its various conceptual meanings and political forms, contesting the equivalence between planning and authoritarianism and accounting for the historical and often successful intertwine between liberal democracies and political planning.

**Context**

In order to answer the question “What does liberalism mean in the 21st century?” it is vital to understand what liberalism has meant in Europe in the course of the last century. Only by reconstructing its conceptual premises, its historical configurations, its economic and social implementations, its challenges and failures, its potential and limits is it possible to develop recommendations, toolkits, narratives, methodologies to reinstate its legitimacy and effectiveness.

European liberalism – both as a concept and as an historical manifestation, and as a set of policies – at least since the 19th century has always been shaped by two main different approaches: one directed at planning, programming, steering, shaping economy and society and the other one inspired by *laissez-faire*, by a confident trust in the spontaneity of individual interactions and in the virtues of private initiative (van Laak 2006). These two different faces of liberalism are both at the heart of European Treaties and pillars, some of which show a more social dimension (which, in a certain way, entail a form of economic steering), and others which are underpinned by a more neoliberal or ordoliberal dimension (like the Maastricht Treaty) (Biebricher 2020).

Moreover these two approaches to liberalism reveal two different time perceptions (van Laak 2008) that depend upon two different epistemological backgrounds. “*Laissez-faire* liberalism”, which traditionally limits its scope to individualism, is based on the idea of the unknowability of the complexity of the economic world and of its outcomes. In fact, by placing the individual at the centre of its reflection, it doesn’t offer a planned vision of the future (Hayek 2007; Hayek 1935; Mises 1922). On the other hand, what we can call “social liberalism” nurtures the opposite conviction: that society and economy can be shaped, that they are a result of a common political design and that they can be directed toward a certain scope (Keynes 1960).

This fundamental tension between these two approaches to liberalism is also informing our present time and the future of European liberal democracies will be strongly influenced by their virtuous relationship. That is why it is decisive to analyse liberalism’s philosophical, sociological, legal, economic, historical and political configurations in order to fully grasp its foundations. In fact, whereas the most prosperous periods of European history (like the The Glorious Thirty) were characterised by a balance between the realisation of freedom (both economic and political) and the implementation of public planning, and by an equilibrium between individual rights and collective action, at least since the 1980s, and in a disruptive way after the economic and social crisis of 2009, this virtuous relationship has been deeply damaged by a strong neoliberal turn both in economics and in politics.

The imbalance between freedom and political planning in the last decade contributed to the delegitimization of liberal democracies and to the rising of populist projects. An imbalance that is not reducible to the economic field alone, to a dialectic between free enterprise and state intervention, but which also concerns values, institutional systems, individual and collective rights, and the very way of understanding society. The dialectic, even the conflict between the “liberal” and the “democratic” aspects of our liberal democracies is the basis of the European project of freedom and participation.

Securing the future of liberal democracies in Europe isn’t a matter of deciding which economic and social order to choose (either a pure free market society or a completely planned one). Rather, the chances of successfully addressing the biggest issues of our time (from climate change to the digital transition, from the question of migration to the problem of gender inequality) lie in the capacity of decision makers 1. to recognize liberalism’s twofold nature and to understand that these two approaches, however different, can virtuously coexist; 2. to identify which economic and social conjunctures, such as crises, necessarily require political decisions capable of offering long-sighted, effective solutions based on political planning.

In fact, the history of the last century shows that certain historical conjunctures produced a necessary shift in the balance of the abovementioned approaches to liberalism. When confronted with urgent and unprecedented crisis, European governments have always opted for political planning in order to trigger a systemwide reorganization and effective solutions within a short period of time, as was the case in several European States after World War II, which, in many respects, followed the example offered ten years before by Roosevelt’s New Deal (Patel 2017). While initially favoured by left-wing political forces, the decisions to implement political planning were often universally shared and based on pragmatic considerations, rather than on ideological convictions (van Laak 2008).

The relentlessness of climate change coupled with the economic and social crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed the urgent need to find wide ranging and rapid solutions for a vast reconstruction programme through huge investments in Europe. To face these unprecedented challenges the question of the relation between individual freedom and collective efforts in the history of liberal democracies, political participation and government effectiveness, is preliminary and crucial to the production of theoretically and empirically robust visions for the future of liberal democracy.

Furthermore, one of the most tangible crises that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic is the crisis of care along with gender inequality: on the one hand a large number of women lost their jobs due to job insecurity, on the other it has become clear that care work mainly rests on women’s shoulders, often with a migrant background, and is generally unpaid. This social and reproductive crisis has once more revealed the pivotal value of the care economy in liberal societies as a whole. One of the challenges of the future is a political planning capable of deconstructing stereotyped gender roles and of creating appropriate welfare systems that take into account the centrality of care work (e.g.: childcare, eldercare).

**Research plan**

* Reconstructing the conceptual history of the contraposition between the advocates of free market and the defenders of economic planning by analysing some of the major academic texts and ouvres of the 19th century, with a special look on the Twenties and Thirties, when this debate began.
* Showing that this “intellectual contraposition” didn’t necessarily create a concrete “historical contraposition” within European liberal democracies, which, since the end of WWII, adopted a mixed economic order based both economic on planning and on free market.
* Analysing the forms that liberalism took in Europe during the 20th Century and showing its capacity to reinvent itself and to assume different, historically changing shapes.
* Addressing long term trends in the relation between liberal democracies and political planning, in order to understand how liberal democracies faced major political and economic challenges of the past decades such as the Great Recession and the New Deal, the Cold War and the birth of the Welfare State in Europe.
* Analysing the historical conjunctures that suggested the implementation of economic planning in Europe and determining their effectiveness and limits.
* Identifying what they had in common and if they guaranteed fundamental human rights (freedom of expression, of assembly, of non-discrimination).
* Reconstructing the scale and effects of previous responses to such challenges in terms of: subjects and actors of the plan, quantity and type of citizen participation in its elaboration, narratives and public discourse surrounding and sustaining it, critics and ideological battles around planned politics.
* Analysing some European welfare systems of the 20th Century in order to understand which social and economic role was assigned to women and how care work was organised, planned and conceptualised.
* Assessing the social and economic consequences of the organization of care work in European societies in the 20th Century.

**List of possible research questions**

Did political planning historically foster or undermine citizen participation in the decision-making process? Did planned politics constrict or enable individual freedom and self-realization? Which is the relation between long-term political goals, long-term investments, long-term institutional projects and the key tenets of liberal democracy like the protection of the rule of law, the separation of powers, women’s and minorities’ rights? Who were the actual planners (politicians, bureaucracy officials, academic professors, local communities)? Which were the democratic procedures and political proposals that planned politics went through? Did such proposals develop through central or peripheral planning? Which was the relation between state centralism and civil society? Was it top down or bottom up? How did these two spheres interact? Which was the narrative and the public discourse sustaining these proposals and how did they influence public views on individual rights and freedom? Did the planning have any effect on citizens' trust in institutions? How was care work organized and planned in European welfare systems of the 20th Century? Was it appropriately considered as an important economic sector? Which consequences did it have on the inclusion of women in society?