

Call for Papers

## Forgotten Institutions. Utopian Archives and Democratic Futures

International Conference  
University of Vienna, Department of Political Science  
November 28-30, 2024

Organized by Sara Gebh | ERC Research Project *Prefiguring Democratic Futures*

### Rationale

What is the future of democratic institutions? The current crisis of political imagination makes it increasingly difficult to envision democratic futures that are more than mere extensions of the status quo or a backlash into parochial and ethnocentric hierarchies. The discussion of radical alternatives often focuses on practices of resistance or exit and sidesteps the question of how to perpetuate and deepen the democratic impulse. However, we have also witnessed a renewed interest in *radical institutional alternatives* to the current set-up, think of the debates on sortition, councils and the tribunate. This conference aims to bring into dialogue, confront and further develop a broad variety of institutional proposals that aim to widen the democratic imaginary.

To this end, we suggest turning to '*forgotten institutions*', i.e. institutional configurations – past and present, utopian and realized – that are 'forgotten' in the sense of being neglected in current debates on the crisis and future of democracy. Our goal is to investigate institutions that challenge and decenter supposed self-evident beliefs about what democracy might look like. To envision alternative futures, however, one might need to explore *alternative sources*. More concretely: alternative *places*, turning to global political thought beyond the confines of the Western canon; alternative *times*, diversifying the traditional focus on ancient and modern proposals; as well as alternative *voices* and *forms of expression*, acknowledging the production of political theory outside the genre of 'big books', including manifestos, speeches, declarations and storytelling.

*Examples* for the types of 'forgotten' institutions that could be productive include the *council of mothers*, an institution of the Nigerian Igbo people, representing the interests of women in the Onitsha society until the end of the 19th century; the *transcontinental democratic federation*, a proposal by Césaire and Senghor; or the *asylum* as it was understood from antiquity to the Middle Ages, that is as a place of safety to challenge authority, not one that is granted by it.

Each talk will take one specific institution as a starting point and discuss in what way debates on the future of democracy can be enriched by it. Among others, contributions might explore the following kinds of institutions:

- *Lost institutions*: historical institutions that have effectively disappeared.
- *Utopian institutions*: institutional proposals that were not realized.
- *Reversed institutions*: existing institutions whose meaning has significantly changed since their establishment.
- *Counter-institutions*: institutions, procedures and durable practices that enact alternative visions of democracy in the present.

*Confirmed speakers* include Mariana Mora Bayo, John McCormick, Anthoula Malkopoulou, Marcus Llanque and Massimiliano Tomba.

### Format

We strive towards creating a conference atmosphere that allows for serious, productive, and collaborative engagement with each other's work. Each talk will take one specific institution as a starting point and explore its contribution to envisioning democratic futures. We thereby hope to arrive at a diverse and provocative portfolio of institutions that are 'forgotten' in contemporary discussions on democratic futures and that, by taking their emancipatory potential seriously, contribute to widening our political imaginary.

### Venue and Travel

The workshop will take place in person at the University of Vienna. Online participation is not possible. There is no participation fee. Unfortunately, we do not have funds to help with travel costs, but we are happy to give recommendations regarding travel arrangements.

### Publication

We are planning an open-access publication of a *Handbook of Forgotten Institutions* with a renowned publisher for 2026. The goal is to create a living archive of institutions that can reinvigorate, reorient and shape the debate on the crisis of democracy. We thereby hope to (re)activate the institutional memory of global political thought and the history of ideas and offer novel and innovate ways on how to envision and build democratic futures.

### Submission Guidelines

Please submit an abstract of max. 500 words and a brief biographical note to Sara Gebh ([sara.gebh@univie.ac.at](mailto:sara.gebh@univie.ac.at)) with the subject line "Forgotten Institutions" by June 30, 2024. We will communicate the decision by July 15, 2024. For any questions regarding the call or the conference, please contact Sara Gebh ([sara.gebh@univie.ac.at](mailto:sara.gebh@univie.ac.at)). For more information on PREDEF and its subprojects, please visit <https://predef.univie.ac.at>.