The rise of populist politics has stimulated fundamental controversy over what constitutes democracy in many European societies as well as all around the globe. Not only the institutions and procedures, but also the cultures of democracy have become subjects of key conflicts. At the heart of the disputes on democratic culture conflicts over citizenship norms are standing, touching upon the sensible issues what ideals and practices are legitimate in a democracy, and who is included and excluded in the political body. These controversies leave many European societies divided. Moreover, they encourage a new engagement with democracy’s contested and contingent past, calling various triumphalist narratives of continuous democratization in twentieth-century Europe into question.

These issues animated an international workshop that took place from 7 to 9 November 2019 in Halle (Germany). As the conveners TILL KÖSSLER (Halle) and PHILLIP WAGNER (Halle) explained in their opening statements, the conference used education to take a fresh look at the tensions, ambiguities and conflicts in European twentieth-century democracies, thus complicating the narratives of democratic progress that long dominated scholarship on European political and cultural history. The workshop aimed at studying how a wide range of (broadly conceived) educational institutions such as schools, youth organizations, and political parties attempted to prepare (young) people for their changing roles as citizens; how they attempt to establish, protect and reform democracies amidst multiple crises; and how these institutions and movements in turn transformed into forums in which citizenship norms were defined and challenged.

The premise of this conference was that, although citizenship education dates back to Enlightenment, as DANIEL FULDA (Halle) remarked in his opening address, it only took centre stage in the mass politics subsequent to the Great War. Panel 1 placed the diverse endeavours in citizenship training in the context of post-war social and political reform, focusing both on long-established republics in Northern and Western Europe and on the polities that arose out of the shattered empires in Central Europe. In varying degrees, the papers in the first panel tapped into discourses that question the overall fragility of interwar democracy. Rather than replicating contemporary narratives of crisis, the papers emphasized the ambiguities and open-endedness of post-war reform.

TIINA KINUNNEN (Oulu) centred on the interwar writings of Swedish social reformer Ellen Key. Reacting to the turmoil of the Great War, Key sketched the vision of an egalitarian society, aspiring to the ideals of socialism and democracy. On the other hand, her vision rested on the predominance of a cultural elite, carefully controlling society through eugenics. On the other hand, however, it remained open in what way Key’s writings influenced eugenic legislation and educational practices in Sweden. Focusing on the Weimar Republic, ANNE OTTO (Halle) argued that schools represented a space for the future of Germany’s fragile democracy. One of the most difficult conundrums for Weimar educationalists and policy-makers was how to define citizenship ideals without enforcing them in an autocratic way. Attempting to solve this dilemma, experts tried to instil a seemingly apolitical ethos that merged responsibility and efficiency into young people.

Notwithstanding the potential of its educational and political reforms, the Weimar Republic is only one example of how state-sponsored citizenship education ultimately failed in its attempt to legitimate the embattled democracies of interwar Europe. Many of the European democracies eroded during the economic crises and political upheavals of the 1930s. Ultimately, it was National Socialist Germany, which furthered political destabilization and, after 1938/9, obliterated many democracies in Europe.
However, European societies beyond Nazi Germany’s orbit remained democratic throughout the 1930s and 1940s. How these societies redefined citizenship ideals after 1945 stood at the centre of panel 2. Centring on Switzerland, ZOÉ KERGOMARD (Paris) described that politicians and educationalists invented various initiatives as remedies against decreasing turnouts in elections. In the 1960s, the state-sponsored promotion of (male) voting ran into conflicts with the growing demand of young people for political participation beyond elections. Where Kergomard portrayed education as a field of conflicting claims to citizenship, CHRIS JEPSESEN (Cambridge) analysed how the establishment of mass education resulted into new forms of citizenship in post-war Great Britain. His presentation dealt with the emergence of parental activism that addressed still-existing inequalities in the educational system. Yet, he underscored that the grass roots campaign also exposed the fissures of a multi-racial and class-based society since different groups clashed in a racially charged atmosphere, and individualist and social democratic citizenship values competed in various movements.

Panel 3 probed into the ‘multiple reeducations’ of Allies, native policy-makers and remigrating experts in Europe’s post-fascist societies. LISBETH MATZER (Köln) focused on how diverse circles in Austria’s adult education attempted to frame the nexus between gender, consumption and citizenship in the early Cold War. She demonstrated how various educational institutions championed allegiance to democracy and the Western Alliance, while defending traditional gender roles and gendered patterns of consumption at the same time. In turn, CLAUDIA GATZKA (Freiburg) compared how Italian Socialists and West German Social Democrats styled themselves as teachers of those who had fallen prey to Fascist temptations. She examined how the two parties attempted to address and educate their potential voters. Whereas the Italian Communists created the image of a citizenry suppressed by fascism in order to appeal to the wider public, West German Social Democrats were more elitist and pedagogical (and less successful) since they asserted their moral superiority over parts of population whom they held responsible for National Socialism. How West Germans came to terms with the post-1945 situation was the main concern of FLORIAN HESSDÖRFER (Leipzig). He examined in what way pedagogues imagined post-fascist democracy, and simultaneously tried to make sense of their experiences in National Socialism. He contrasted the conception of ‘self-education’ as a precondition for a plural society with the idea of ‘partnership’ to alleviate the political, social and cultural fractures in post-war society. However, it remained open how the broader public, and young people in particular, reacted to these theories. SONJA LEVSEN (Freiburg) broadened the topic from educational ideas to governmental agendas and the political subjectivities of young people in post-war France. Citizenship education remained contested since policymakers believed that this type of instruction only contributed into deepening the fault lines of an utterly fractured society. In the context of national and imperial reconstruction, schools turned to promoting the uncontroversial ideals of patriotism and national duty. Only the student movements of the late 1960s attempted to introduce different ideals and practices of citizenship to the lycées.

Yet the student revolts of the late 1960s hardly represented the apogee of Europe’s democratization. Rather, they culminated in new conflicts around the definition of citizenship ideals, as panels 4 and 5 explored. Particularly in East Central Europe, reform movements violently clashed with the defenders of state socialism. Focusing on primary education in Czechoslovakia, JIŘÍ ZOUNEK (Brno) and MICHAL ŠIMÁNE (Brno) described that many primary teachers introduced democracy as a topic in schools during the 1960s and some even participated in the Prague Spring. However, many of these teachers were purged from their schools when Moscow axed the reformist wing of the Communist party and installed a new government that re-enforced the teaching of orthodox socialist norms in turn. Concentrating on the other side of the ‘iron curtain’, SIAN EDWARDS (Winchester) examined the Girl Guide movement, one of the many private
initiatives that provided citizenship training in Great Britain. Merging environmentalism and individualism, the Girl Guide movement championed an ideal of planetary citizenship that emphasized responsibility for the planet through conscious consuming in Thatcherite Britain.

Competing Social Democratic and conservative ideas of citizenship stood at the centre of WIM DE JONG’s (Nijmegen) talk. He first inspected the Social Democratic reform of Dutch citizenship education, which aimed at fostering democratic capabilities but, on the other hand, also sought to control the attitudes and customs of a citizenry supposedly disoriented by the modern world. These reforms provoked a conservative backlash in the 1980s, when the Christian government transformed moral citizenship into the objective of schooling. As de Jong added in the discussion, this ideal was paradoxically both neoliberal and communitarian, resting on the premise that people needed firmly established moral principles to cope with the dismantlement of the welfare state.

The workshop also featured a keynote lecture by PAWEŁ KAROLEWSKI (Leipzig), which intended to broaden the perspective into contemporary issues of democracy and citizenship. Karolewski’s lecture pertained to the effects of illiberalism on political culture and citizenship in contemporary East Central Europe. Comparing Poland and Hungary, he argued that the emergence of patronal networks, the disassembling of the rule of law, and exclusionary identity politics contributed to the development of a clientilist, neurotic and acclamatory citizenship.

Another part of the conference was a round table, which aimed to connect the topics of this workshop to larger political and cultural contexts of modern democracy. In her opening statement, MARIA FALINA (Dublin) argued that older narratives of European democratization appear problematic in the light of the current rise of populism. Instead, she argued for opening up the understanding of democracy, proposing to historicise the multiple languages of democracy in a comparative East-West perspective, and to integrate the connection of economic and social aspects in the history of democracy. Adding to the theme of Falina’s statement, HARM KAAL (Nijmegen) sketched how a history of democracy might reflect recent experiences of populism. He outlined an integral approach to political history that addressed the nexus between ordinary expectations and high politics. Specifically, Kaal called for studies that reflect onto the complex communication between the public, media and politics. Perplexed by the recent nostalgia for post-1945 political culture, he also proposed to study the narratives of European history that emerge from contemporary perceptions of crisis. HEDWIG RICHTER (München) emphasized the importance of being sceptical about the conventional plotlines in the histories of democracy. Emphasizing the many sources of democracy, she argued that the history of democracy could be framed both as a struggle from below and as an elite bourgeois project. Moreover, Richter elaborated on the twisted connections between national and transnational contexts. Sure, democracies develop within nation states. However, transnational connections and international trends also play into the transformation of democracy.

The ensuing discussion centred on how to position European histories within larger global developments, a theme mostly absent from this conference. What constitutes the European element specific to the democracies that the workshop was studying? What is the difference to, for example, North American or Latin American developments? Which global connections do historians need to consider when writing the history of European democracies? How do, for instance, imperial contexts shape democratic cultures in the metropoles?

Conceptual issues were also at the heart of the concluding discussion. In the light of the huge influence which religion had on education and youth institutions, one participant proposed to consider more comprehensively the role of religion in shaping the discourses and practices of citizenship. Another participant put forward the issue of teacher training as a fruitful domain of research. The teacher represented the central intermediary between governmental agendas and the subjectivities of youth but is still insufficiently studied. How to periodicize the developments the
workshop portrayed remained equally unsettled. The conference placed emphasis on the two world wars. However, it would be possible to envision alternative caesuras, taking into account the experiences of countries such as Switzerland and Sweden, which were only indirectly affected by the two wars, as one participant remarked.

Provoking more questions than it answered, this workshop met one of its goals. It contributed to propose education as a fruitful domain of studying the tensions of democracy in the twentieth century. Studies on different educational institutions, ideas and practices are not only able to cast light on the conflict between democratic ambitions and the power of educational institutions to exercise power over (young) people. Additionally these future works might also reveal the controversies between policymakers, experts and the wider public on where to draw the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate citizenship norms and practices, the inclusion and exclusion of ethnic minorities, and the gender order of modern democracies.

Conference overview:

Daniel Fulda (Halle): Opening address
Till Kössler (Halle) and Phillip Wagner (Halle): Introduction

Panel 1: Ambiguities of Postwar Reform: Citizenship and Education in the Interwar Period
Tiina Kinunnen (Oulu): Democracy, Citizenship and Education as Key Concepts in Ellen Key’s Vision of Europe
Anne Otto (Halle): „Democratising” the Working-Class Youth? Education and Politics during the Weimar Republic.

Keynote Lecture
Paweł Karolewski (Leipzig): Caesarean Politics and Dynamics of Citizenship

Panel 2: The Many Quests for Postwar Citizenship: Politics and Education in Western Europe after 1945
Zoé Kergomard (Paris): Enforcing a ‘Moral Duty’ to vote? Citizenship Education as a Contested Answer to the „Problem of Abstention” in Post-war Switzerland (1950s-1980s)

Panel 3: Multiple Reeducations: Post-1945 Europe between Fascism and Democracy
Lisbeth Matzer (Cologne): Gender and Democracy: Gendered Citizenship Education in Austria’s Adult Education since the 1950s
Claudia Gatza (Freiburg): Teachers of Democracy: The Old Left and Post-Fascist Voters in Italy and West Germany after 1945
Florian Heßdörfer (Leipzig): No Partners, no Enemies: Imagining the Democratic Society in West Germany’s Postwar Educational Theory
Sonja Levsen (Freiburg): „Une et indivisible”: Citizenship Education and the Fear of Division in France, 1945-1980s

Roundtable on the History of Democracy
Participants: Maria Falina (Dublin), Harm Kaal (Nijmegen), Hedwig Richter (München)

Panel 4: Visions of a Participatory Citizenship: East and West after 1968
Michal Šimáně and Jiří Zounek (Brno): Primary Education and Teaching Profession in Czechoslovakia between the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution

Panel 5: Educating Democratic Citizenship between Communitarianism and ‘Neoliberalism’
Wim de Jong (Nijmegen): Citizenship Education in the Netherlands and the Paradox of Paternalism, 1966-2018

Conclusive discussion