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Call for Proposals

International Conference on Political Transitions and Federal Projects (late 18th - early 21st centuries)

*Sciences Po Paris, American University of Paris, University Paris Diderot
23-25 May 2018*

Contemporary societies, from Catalonia to Kurdistan, from the European Union to India, have been marked in recent history by a lingering debate on the most desirable and practical levels of political sovereignty, legitimacy and institutions. In times of crisis, this debate has found particularly strong echoes in federal projects purporting to reconfigure existing polities.

The aim of this conference is to foster a historical questioning on federalism in periods of political transition. Departing from a normative vision that has too often associated federalism with liberal democracy, the idea is to explore unexplored regions of federal projects and practices, such as the Soviet Union, often perceived as a “pseudo-federation”, or Jacobin France, supposedly impervious to federalist ideas. International comparisons and transnational approaches are encouraged, since the rhetoric and practice of federal alternatives have more often than not drawn on multi-level horizons.

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The conference will be organized around four main themes:

- A first axis focuses on **federalist moments** in contemporary history on a transnational scale. They are often times of war, revolution, or institutional collapse, when political elites and social actors alike have developed political projects within or across existing borders. They have sought to rebuild states, nations, polities and social systems on new foundations and with new forms of government (American revolution, collapse of the Spanish Empire, Eurasian continuum of crisis between 1905 and 1921, from Central Europe to China, decolonization in Africa and Asia). But these turning points have also coincided with transitions of lesser intensity as part of reforming agendas which challenged the forms of political sovereignty and territorial administration.
- A second line of thought questions the **nexus between the federal option and multinationalism**. The New Imperial History has turned its back on the linear vision of an



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ineluctable transition from Empires to nation-states, and emphasized the role played by forms of rule through difference across time. Imperial and post-imperial crises have therefore been key moments for federal projects concerned with solving the dilemmas of national self-determination (nineteenth-century Hungary, early twentieth-century Russia and China, colonial empires after 1945). Simultaneously, the aim is to understand how federations such as Mexico, Yugoslavia and Brazil have given constitutional and institutional expressions to multinationalism. Attention will be paid to “defunct federalism” which reveal much about the ambiguities of such projects (Mali Federation, Caribbean Federations, United Arab Republics, etc.).

- A third aspect deals with the **levels of federal government and imagination**. Political options about sovereignty, democracy and economic efficiency frequently underlie federal projects. Federations, conceived as “empires of liberty” (in the North-American context) or revolutionary polities, can harbour from the start an internationalist or irredentist dimension. But they also encompass local projects and actors (communalism, French and Spanish cantonalism), whose perceptions may or may not coincide with these transnational projections. Starting from the revolutions of the late 18th century, regionalism and pan-movements have been important ways in which these levels of federalism have been articulated.

- Finally, the conference will discuss the **ideas, ideologies and political practices underlying the federalist idea**. Although often associated with a Western and Tocquevillian acceptance of liberalism, federalism has also been advocated by radical movements as a way to restructure societies (anarchists, Marxists, anti-imperialists). It has also been used by authoritarian regimes and we will pay particular attention to the use of *de iure* or *de facto* federalism in such countries as Bismarckian Germany, the Soviet Union, Brazil and, in a sense, China, where federalism could appear at times as one of the tools of government for authoritarian rulers.

The conference aims to initiate and further a discussion between scholars with different geographical, disciplinary and methodological approaches. It intends to clarify the global scales and connections of the federalist imagination. Contributions focusing on Latin American, African and Asia history are particularly welcome with a view to highlighting the role of federalism in the political development of these regions in the last two centuries. Comparative, international and transnational perspectives on federalism in a period of political transition are especially welcome, as are contributions considering the birth and use of federalist ideas in concrete political contexts.

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Proposals should be submitted in English or French by December 20, 2017 to poltransitions@gmail.com and include a short project for the 20-minute presentation (with references to sources/bibliography and methodology), as well as a curriculum vitae. The Scientific Committee will notify successful applicants in early January 2018. The organizers



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will take care of the accommodation in Paris, and lunches and dinners during the conference. Some funding is available for travel grants, with priority being given to junior scholars and researchers whose home institutions cannot pay for the travel expenses.

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Organizing Committee

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