

2025 DONDENA LECTURE

Democracy in the 21st Century

Hierarchy, Egalitarianism and the Struggle over New Institutions

22 SEPTEMBER 2025
6:15 - 7:45 PM
Bocconi University
Aula Franceschi
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WELCOME ADDRESS

Francesco Billari
Rector, Bocconi University

SPEAKER

James Robinson

Harris School of Public Policy and Department of Political Science, University of Chicago
Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences, 2024

ABSTRACT

Current understandings of human society, either the materialism of mainstream economics or Marxism, or evolutionary approaches, fail to take into account the independent importance of ideas. Ideas are critical in providing justifications for social arrangements and allowing for humans to exercise agency. I focus on two sets of opposing ideas - those justifying hierarchy and its opposite, egalitarianism - and show that human society has oscillated between them with the forcing variable being ideational innovation. Liberal democracy is a particular institutionalization of egalitarianism but as such is always vulnerable to being challenged by ideational innovations justifying hierarchy.



James Robinson is an economist and political scientist. Robinson has conducted influential research in the field of political and economic development and the relationships between political power and institutions and prosperity. His work explores the underlying causes of economic and political divergence both historically and today and uses both the mathematical and quantitative methods of economics along with the case study, qualitative and fieldwork methodologies used in other social sciences. Together with Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson, he was awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for groundbreaking research on how political and economic institutions shape prosperity. Their work has shown that inclusive institutions foster long-term growth and development, while extractive ones lead to poverty and stagnation.



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