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Cogs in the Machine: Actors and the Transformative Power of Emergency Laws

University of Ghent – 26-27 November 2026

Call for Abstracts

This event is organised as part as the ERC Consolidator Grant: EMERGE Project, Rethinking emergency from a legal historical perspective: contexts, actors, practices 1914-2020.

Themes

Crisis is animated through its actors. It is these actors which are called on to define the emergency, to interpret emergency legislation and to utilise emergency powers in response. Over the course of several days, we hope to explore the role that a myriad actors have in enumerating emergency legal regimes and legislation. One must situate the contributions of these individuals and organisations in defining the emergency within a context of global crises and the evolving perception of State power in responding to crises. The objective is to convene experts from various disciplines to critically reflect on these questions of legal and historical significance. This will provide an opportunity for lawyers, historians, sociologists, political scientists and philosophers to enter a rich dialogue with one another on the nature and utility of these powers. From these diverse perspectives, it will be possible to build a collective understanding of these emergency regimes.

The suspension of the normal legal order in times of emergency has been returned to regularly to address the different perceived threats which States have faced. From terror attacks to the COVID-19 pandemic, passing by various different internal and external conflicts, these emergency regimes have already had their mark on the 21st century. It is not solely a tool for States to face war, nor a relic from a past that relied less on rule of law. Martial Laws, States of Emergency and special powers have been used repeatedly throughout history and across the world.



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The use of such powers – which by their nature are subject to lower levels of supervision than the normal legal framework – needs to be interrogated and investigated. Recourse to such powers has the ability to shake the basis of constitutionalism and the law-based order to its core, and lead to significant interference with human rights. All of this is given effect through the actors of emergency: each actor breathes life into the law and humanity into the human rights violations which they perpetrate.

We are, therefore, excited to invite abstracts from researchers interested in considering the role that actors have played and continue to play in animating emergency regimes. This will be made possible through two different sub-themes that centre the interaction between law and its actors in the transformative powers of emergency.

The first of these sub-themes will address the way different actors interact with the emergency legislations. At every stage of the crisis politicians and civil servants, lawyers and judges, and security forces personal and emergency responders are required to enumerate, interpret and apply emergency laws, regulations and directives.- Equally, it is under these conditions that journalists, activists and academics are not only required to challenge and critique the interferences with human rights, but are required to navigate them as they, in some instances, become subjects of these emergency regimes. Within this sub-theme, the actors of emergency are understood in the broadest sense, and while the focus remains on the legal powers of the exception, the discussions aim at broadening the spectrum to include the perception of the regime by said actors, and the role that their actions play in upholding or challenging these regimes.

The second sub-theme will focus on the transformative power of these regimes. This offers important opportunities to more explicitly centre the subjects of emergency within an examination of the legal framework. More specifically, this sub-theme will encourage participants to examine the more prolonged impacts of emergencies on different communities within society and the different ways in which these emergency regimes reconfigure the fabric of society. There will also be space to consider the role that different actors played in inaugurating this transformation: allowing for a much-needed examination of the amalgamation between the theory of emergency and its enactment by individuals. All of this enables an examination of the impact that emergency regimes have in its broadest sense and brings to the fore the relationship that exists between its actors and its subjects.



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Presentation Format

The format of the study days will be a sequence of panels, centred around two to four presentations each. Each panel will be followed by a discussion around the common theme of the presentations of between 20 and 30 minutes. The panels will be structured around topics that promote interdisciplinary dialogue within the examination of emergency regimes, their actors and their effects. We welcome presentations with a variety of focuses, whether that be theoretical inquiries or an examination of specific events or jurisdictions. Each panellist will be provided with 20 minutes with which to present their topic in English.

Conference Outcomes and Publication Opportunities

We hope that this interdisciplinary conference on emergency's actors will offer an important opportunity to allow for our collective reflection; to inspire and challenge each other. As part of this, we are committed to capturing the rich contributions of the participants and hope to offer a range of opportunities for people to publish their work.

Abstract Submission

Deadline for submission: **30th July 2026**

Please send an abstract of around 250 words, in English, and a short curriculum vitae, to Louis Bremond (Louis.bremond@ugent.be), Elias Dessantis (Elias.dessantis@ugent.be) and Cosmin Cercel (Cosmin.cercel@ugent.be).

These study days / this seminar will take place at the Ghent University, campus Aula, Ghent, Belgium.