

Tocqueville²¹ Book Forum

Western Europe's Democratic Age: 1945-1968

Martin Conway

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Introduction by David Klemperer (Queen Mary University of London)

Comparative Democracy

In a [recent interview](#), Martin Conway described the twentieth-century history of Europe as “The Struggle for Stable Forms to Manage Participatory Pluralism.” His new book, *Western Europe's Democratic Age: 1945-1968*, is a study of an era when those stable forms appeared to have been found—on one side, at least, of the Iron Curtain. Tocquevillian in its scope, Conway's work is a thematic exploration of the genesis and nature of Western Europe's post-war political order. The lens through which Conway approaches his subject is “democracy,” understood not as a fixed concept, but as a contested and evolving set of ideals, which came in this period to be embodied by a particular combination of institutions and practices.

As Chris Bickerton's review emphasizes, what Conway depicts here is “a form of mediated democracy, where state and society were bound together in a multiplicity of ways, but where popular sovereignty was constrained.” While elites sought to limit direct popular participation in politics, corporatist institutions and well-organized political parties combined to enable the interests of competing social groups to be expressed within the state.

For Bickerton, the great strength of this account is its lack of nostalgia—while Conway shows that stabilization and social integration were achieved, he also makes clear this was no golden age of social equality. Indeed, one of the more revisionist contentions of Conway's book is that far from being the principal beneficiary of the post-war order, the working class was the relative loser in the period's socio-economic settlement. Bickerton equally praises Conway's exploration of post-war democracy's evolving relationship with individualism: while the material security generated by welfare states at first encouraged a turn towards the private sphere, this ultimately fuelled a drive for personal autonomy that brought parts of society into conflict with the state's regulatory power.

Alain Chatriot, in his review, focuses heavily on Conway's historical approach. Highlighting Conway's unique synthesis of the history of ideas with the history of social and political practices, Chatriot praises the book for offering “a rigorous interrogation of the content of institutions and policies” rather than any single definition of democracy. For him, Conway's methodology is what successfully distinguishes his book from other popular histories of the era—most notably those of Tony Judt and Mark Mazower. Nonetheless, he takes Conway to task for various omissions: what, he asks, of empire? Western Europe's “democratic age” was after all also the age of decolonization, a process that was not without domestic ramifications. And what of the work of Pierre Rosanvallon, whose explorations of the different forms of political legitimacy could perhaps have nuanced Conway's discussion of how post-war democracy contrasts with politics today?

Jan-Werner Müller's review equally notes the specificity of Conway's approach, and the importance of his focus on “democracy” as a socio-political phenomenon. However, Müller offers a gentle critique of Conway, centered on the question of sovereignty. For Müller, while Conway shows how popular sovereignty was constrained in practice, he underplays the extent to which post-war democratic institutions were shaped by a conscious rejection of the very concept. This has implications for the present: in his book, Conway endorses Colin Crouch's “post-democracy” thesis, according to which “assertions of collective political will were somehow more common or easier” in the post-war period than they are today; Müller, by contrast, insists that “the basic template of European democracy” is largely unchanged—it was “anti-populist then, and remains anti-

populist now.” What has changed, he argues, are rather the institutions through which pluralism is organized. For Müller, the key feature of post-war democracy was the presence of vibrant “intermediary powers” (parties, trade unions, newspapers, interest groups) all characterized by a significant degree of internal democracy. And it is in the present weakness of such intermediary powers—and in the efforts of some politicians to bypass them entirely—that he sees the threat to democracy today.

In a measured reply, Conway integrates these reviewers’ points into his analysis. Responding to Chatriot, he reflects on how empires impacted Europe’s democracies, notably through embroiling them in military conflicts that made the “post-war” period anything but for many. Embracing Müller’s description of western European regimes as “non-sovereign democracies,” he emphasizes the agency of political movements—above all Christian democracy—in making choices that enabled this kind of democratic stabilization. Picking up Bickerton’s discussion of state and society’s eventual “disembedding”, he unpacks the gradual (and ultimately unresolved) “*crise de régime*” that he sees as having unfolded through the 1960s and 1970s, and which resulted in a “more personalized and less party-based” style of democratic life. This in turn brings him to the question of how his analysis relates to democracy today: re-considering his use of the term “post-democracy,” he regrets its normative overtones, stressing that we should see gains as well as losses in what is now “a less ordered but more plural democratic process.”

Conway is at pains to emphasize the primarily historical purpose of his book. But as the discussion in this forum makes clear, it is nonetheless a study rich in contemporary resonances. Above all, his analysis serves as a powerful rejoinder to the oft-heard laments—whether liberal, social democratic, or *souverainiste*—for the post-war era as a lost golden age. Instead of a fixed model to be emulated, western Europe’s post-war regimes are presented as contingent constellations of institutions and circumstances. *Western Europe's Democratic Age* thus encourages us to see democracy as something always in motion, whose meaning lies as much in the future as in the past.

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Review by Chris Bickerton (University of Cambridge)

Embedded Democracy

“We are infested with politics!” So laments one of the main characters in Hugo Claus’ classic novel, *The Sorrow of Belgium*. Set in the late 1930s, the novel documents the way in which conflicts of class, religion and national identity had penetrated Belgian society so deeply that it was impossible to escape them. One of the great qualities of Martin Conway’s book, *Western Europe’s Democratic Age*, is the way he captures this imbrication of society and politics which persisted long after the end of the Second World War. What developed in this era was a form of mediated democracy, where state and society were bound together in a multiplicity of ways, but where popular sovereignty was constrained. While there was no common formula across France, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Low Countries, this mediated quality was a shared feature of their democratic life.

Conway visits this theme repeatedly in his book. “The democracy of post-war Western Europe was... intended to be one not of direct popular sovereignty, but representation and of intermediaries” (134). This “democratic age” was a fusion of party democracy and a corporatist mode of social integration (141). Party democracy referred to the way in which political parties – more than any other actor—structured political life and the political choices presented to voters. In one of his rare forays into a narrative form of historical writing, Conway recounts the events in Belgium when the catholic monarchist Christian Social Party organized a consultative referendum on whether or not Leopold III should return to the Belgian throne. Leopold had surrendered Belgium to the occupying German army and had remained in Belgium until 1944, after which he was deported to Germany. His critics accused him of treason. Leopold III won the referendum by some margin but his return was met with a general strike and street protests. As his support within the Parliament waned, Leopold III was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, Baudouin. As Conway notes, “[t]he decision by the Belgian political elite to overrule the results of the referendum on Leopold’s future was indicative... of the wider caution with which all such exercises in direct democracy were regarded after the war” (133).

In its more pejorative form, party democracy was a *partitocrazia*—rule by the parties. These were not, however, the deracinated and much maligned parties of our present era. Conway describes how Christian democratic parties in particular reflected the interwoven quality of society and politics. Christian democracy was a movement rooted in Catholic trade unions, farmers’ leagues, and a variety of professional and sector-specific interest groups, while also electorally mobilizing the interests of property owners and those seeking to buy their first home. Particularly in Italy, *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) was accused of buying votes and colluding with the mafia. Figures such as Giulio Andreotti—a DC leader and one of the most prominent politicians of the Italian First Republic—have been viewed in retrospect as emblematic of the corruption that brought the country’s political system to its knees in the early 1990s. Conway is critical of this reading, which projects back onto the 1950s and 1960s the concerns of the 1980s and 1990s. In his words:

The somewhat pejorative sense of clientelism that often characterized studies of Christian democracy fails to do justice to the way in which the parties operated in their electoral heartlands as a two-way intermediary between voters and the state. They certainly built electoral loyalty by distributing the resources of the state to their voters

but they also provided a channel for the requests of communities and of specific social constituencies to reach the offices of the local and national state (191)

While parties served to translate social interests into platforms for government, these same interests also had many other routes via which they could influence policy-making. Corporatism, a distinctive feature of Western Europe's political development after 1918, had originally had an antagonistic relationship to parliamentary democracy. After 1945, it was repackaged as a way of making democratic regimes last longer: "the replacement of Darwinian struggles between conflicting interests by institutions of social negotiation would create an economic parliament to sit alongside the political democracy of parliament" (139). Western European democracy after 1945 was a dense patchwork of organizations, with unions, consumer groups and rural interest groups all vying for some share of the growing economic pie, and this corporatist mode of social integration stabilized Western European regimes. As Conway notes, this period saw democracy embedded within society, and society within democracy.

Conway further suggests that post-war stabilization in Western Europe was achieved by making democracy itself the focus of political debate: earlier conflicts between democracy and other sorts of political regime had given way to debates about the manner in which democracy itself should be organized. While this was a welcome development, Conway reminds us that this shift came with a loss of popular control over power. In Europe's "democratic age," democracy "was less a form of popular rule than the means... through which the state transacted its business with society more widely" (115). The democracies of the post-war decades, writes Conway, "retained... something of an anti-popular ethos... [T]he people had to be made to fit democracy, rather than vice versa" (115).

In the minds of those who built the new and more rule-bound democratic regimes after 1945, the democratic failures of the interwar period were themselves the result of an unbridled and out of control form of popular sovereignty. The Nazi era was taken as an example of what can happen when modern mass democracy runs free from legal and constitutional rules. In short, the collapse of democracy in the interwar period was blamed on "the arbitrary nature of popular power." This legitimized a more constrained form of anti-majoritarian democracy. As Conway explains:

Rather than presenting the NSDAP as the heir to a tradition of anti-democratic nationalist politics in Germany stretching back to the pre-1914 Kaiserreich, the party was perceived as the manifestation of a distinctively modern style of mass politics (116)

This particular reading of history meant that democratic stabilization after 1945 came with a strong dose of paternalism. The people could not really be trusted with power themselves. Rather, they needed to have their interests curated by a skilled and forward-looking national bureaucratic apparatus:

[T]he distanced perception of the people, not as the collective sovereigns of democracy but as the objects of solicitude on the part of a well-intentioned state, was integral to the practices of the proliferating governmental agencies of the post-war years (125)

Conway observes how this cautious approach to the question of popular sovereignty laid the basis for closer inter-governmental cooperation at the European level. The early instances of European integration reflected the new commitment to economic planning along with a preference for policymaking at a distance from popular mobilization. "European integration served many

purposes after 1945,” Conway remarks, “but the sovereignty of the people was not foremost among them” (213). He adds that “the European institutions of the 1950s and the 1960s tended to replicate, in a more exaggerated form, the patterns of bureaucratic rule evident at the national level” (215).

In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the multiple connections to their own societies severely curtailed the freedom of national governments to enact agreements with other governments. Conway writes that “the imposing networks of pillarized interest groups, notably the trade unions, welfare institutions and farmers’ groups, acted as the gatekeepers of the state’s relationship with society, by influencing its decisions and acting as executants of its policies” (218). These groups also served as gatekeepers of the state’s relationships with other states at the international level. Regional European integration in the 1950s and 1960s was limited in scope and scale, with states constrained in their actions by the embedded and mediated quality of national democracy. It is because of the disembedding of democracy from the 1970s onwards that European integration was able to move forwards in leaps and bounds, as it did from the mid-1980s onwards.

One of the qualities of Conway’s book is his sensitivity to the complex relationship between embedded democracy and a rising individualism. The former relied upon the power and influence of mediating institutions, the latter rallied against these same institutions as constraints upon individual freedom and choice. Paradoxically though, the catalyst for this individualism was the powerful post-war national state. As Western European countries became welfare states, administering to the growing needs and desires of their respective populations, greater material security opened up the possibility for exploring new aspects of oneself. These new freedoms were by no means universal—Conway notes that the working class was the relative loser of *les trente glorieuses*, while the biggest gains went to an expanding middle class. But the cultural ascendancy of this middle class—which included the expectation that one could decide how one wanted to live one’s life, and an impatience with the hierarchies and rigidities of the pre-war social world—was made possible by state interventionism. “Government had become more predictable and more beneficial to people in ways that broadly matched the individualist spirit of a time of rapid social and economic change” (223).

However, this complementarity between individualism and embedded democracy did not last. The earlier forms of individualism had been relatively apolitical: in the aftermath of the war, they manifested themselves as a retreat from politics and a focus on “the cultivation of the private, the domestic and the personal” (202). The project of individual autonomy—which had already manifested itself in the heady interwar years and survived throughout the rise of fascist regimes – sat alongside the building of strong, interventionist state machines. Later, especially from the early 1960s onwards, Conway recounts the ways in which individualism ran up against the limits and constraints of embedded democracy. One clash was between individual freedom and the expanding regulatory and supervisory power of the state:

For the first time in Europe’s modern history, the resources of the state had decisively outstripped those of the people, investing Western European states in most circumstances with a routine ability to control their citizens, and defeat direct challenges to their authority (208)

In essence, the compatibility between rising individualism and the post-war welfare state depended upon the former taking on an entirely apolitical character. This was true in the late 40s and

especially the 1950s but no longer the case in the 1960s. By that time, individualism manifested itself as opposition to the perceived paternalism and excessive authority of the welfare state.

This opposition was a product of the gulf between a new caste of experts and officials that had accompanied the development of national Keynesian corporatist states and the population at large. A generational gap emerged between a middle aged and moderate male political leadership and the questions and demands of a younger generation. Having been so closely woven together from the late 40s into the early 60s, society and politics was starting to come apart once again.

Conway's book is a thoughtful and subtle account of this period in Western Europe's history, one that lay between the excitement and relief of Liberation and the social upheavals of the late 1960s. At times, his analytical style is too dry, and some more narrative would have been kinder on the reader. Conway's aim is to "make the emergence of democracy in post-1945 Western Europe appear more historically complex, and also more open-ended" (20) but he does so by taking a thematic and transnational approach. This may make the book more conceptually rigorous but it is difficult to communicate and illustrate historical complexity in this way. Much of the detail of the era is lost in book's broad, thematic arguments.

One of the strengths of Conway's book is that his examination is entirely lacking in nostalgia, and after reading it, one is left with a sense of ambivalence about Western Europe's "democratic age." It was an era where democratic stabilization was achieved, but at some cost in terms of popular participation. The party system was profoundly "sociologized" in ways that bound state and society together but this was slowly undone as individualist pressures reshaped Western European society. And while some sort of democratization of everyday life occurred, this was also a "triumph of the bourgeoisie"—a far cry from the ideals of social equality that had animated the political struggles of the last century and a half.

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Review by Alain Chatriot (Sciences Po)

Comprendre les démocraties européennes après la Seconde Guerre mondiale

L'ambition de l'ouvrage de Martin Conway est considérable non pas seulement par le fait qu'aborder l'histoire de plusieurs pays européens dans les décennies qui suivent la Seconde Guerre mondiale oblige à dévorer des bibliothèques entières mais d'abord par le questionnement sur les formes de la démocratie. Loin d'une approche théorique parfois portée par une partie de la science politique – il n'y a pas ici de définition unique de la démocratie mais plutôt une interrogation rigoureuse sur le contenu des institutions et de la politique –, le travail de l'historien s'inscrit au plus près des pratiques des acteurs individuels et collectifs et permet un regard assez neuf sur une période trop souvent résumée autour de quelques idées simples : reconstruction, américanisation, guerre froide. Méthodologiquement, Conway ne propose pas une approche par l'histoire des relations internationales, ni en termes d'histoire globale mais articule de manière intéressante histoire des idées politiques et histoire des institutions et des pratiques sociales – son entreprise se distingue ici des perspectives prises par les remarquables synthèses par Tony Judt et Mark Mazower sur l'histoire européenne au XXe siècle.

L'intérêt de la perspective de Conway est vraiment d'insister sur le fait que les formes d'équilibre démocratique atteintes dans les années 1950 ne sont pas compréhensibles si on ne tient pas ensemble les mobilisations des partis politiques, des syndicats (de salariés mais aussi d'agriculteurs), des mouvements chrétiens (dans leur diversité mais avec leur rôle prépondérant dans cette période en Europe), des consommateurs regroupés en association, des technocrates, des administrations et des femmes dont l'entrée sur la scène politique a longtemps été retardée dans certains pays où elles restaient privées du droit de vote. Le cœur de son interrogation repose sans doute sur le fait de savoir pourquoi et comment un équilibre a pu être trouvé autour d'une forme de démocratie à ce moment précis. Une des réponses du livre consiste à montrer que la stabilité (l'expression de « démocraties stabilisées » est employée par Raymond Aron comme le rappelle Conway) a été possible au prix d'une vision « cautious and unimaginative » (p. 96) mais le point se comprend d'abord comme une résultante de tensions considérables marquée par des intérêts opposés – il n'est que de penser au poids des partis communistes en France et en Italie à la Libération ou dans le cas français la trajectoire spécifique du général de Gaulle.

La fine connaissance de l'histoire de la Belgique est régulièrement mobilisée par l'auteur et c'est un éclairage qui complète bien les analyses sur la France, l'Allemagne ou l'Italie. Sur le cas français, que l'on connaît moins mal, on peut insister sur quelques éléments en complément de ceux rassemblés par l'auteur, qui au-delà de ses connaissances et de ses nombreuses lectures a eu la chance de bénéficier de deux très importants ouvrages publiés au cours de la dernière décennie (Philip Nord, *France's New Deal. From the Thirties to the Postwar Era*, Princeton university press, 2010 et Herrick Chapman, *France's Long Reconstruction. In Search of the Modern Republic*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018). Conway y insiste mais on peut d'autres exemples de la volonté de refondation de la démocratie à la Libération en France. Ainsi le philosophe et écrivain Albert Camus a dans ses articles du journal *Combat* (un titre de presse issu de la Résistance) des paroles très sévères contre les échecs des institutions et des hommes de la IIIe République. Parmi de multiples textes, on peut citer un éditorial du 2 septembre 1944 intitulé « la démocratie à faire » où il dénonce violemment les élites radicales de la Troisième République finissante : « Le plus sûr moyen d'obtenir le désordre est donc de vouloir restaurer cet ordre médiocre et taré que représentent M.

Chautemps, M. Chichery [deux anciens ministres radicaux à la fin de la III^e République] et bien d'autres sous le vain prétexte de la démocratie. Nous sommes fâchés d'avoir à le dire, mais cet ordre ancien avec lequel on veut aujourd'hui renouer, ce n'était pas la démocratie, mais sa caricature. » La question ici n'est pas tant celle de la trajectoire politique de Camus que l'idée que pour une large part des femmes et des hommes issus de la Résistance la reconstruction politique impliquait de nouvelles formes politiques et non la répétition des institutions qui avaient sombré avec la guerre. Conway note d'ailleurs très justement : « Many of those who played an influential role in the construction of democracy after 1945 remained scarred by their personal experiences of the pre-war and wartime years [...] They did not want to return to the past but escape it, by forging a new model of democracy that would provide stable parliamentarism and effective government. » (p. 16).

Autre exemple qui consonne bien avec ce qu'indique Conway sur les enjeux que constituent les conseils économiques après la Seconde Guerre mondiale comme une forme de renouvellement des pratiques démocratiques : le juriste Georges Vedel publie en 1947 un article dans une revue de droit intitulé : « Démocratie politique, démocratie économique, démocratie sociale ». Il y est très explicite montrant combien la réflexion sur les formes de la démocratie est un débat majeur de l'heure : « Au cours des débats constitutionnels de 1946, tant devant la première que devant la seconde Constituante, une affirmation a été répétée si souvent qu'on peut y voir le leitmotiv de ces débats et peut-être l'intuition (sinon l'idée) fondamentale d'où procède notre régime constitutionnel actuel. Cette intuition, c'est que la démocratie que nous avons vécue avant la guerre était incomplète ; elle se limitait au terrain politique et ne touchait que très imparfaitement à l'ordre économique et à l'ordre social. Il fallait compléter 1789, sinon le refaire. » (Collection Droit social, XXXI, mai 1947, pp. 45-58, p. 47). Ce moment de « démocratie sociale » que le leader socialiste Léon Blum appelait de ses vœux se retrouve dans beaucoup d'éléments qui accompagnent en France les droits sociaux proclamés dans le préambule de la constitution de 1946, la reconnaissance du droit de grève, la création de la Sécurité sociale et toute une série de dispositifs développant l'État-providence.

L'ampleur des analyses proposées par Conway fait naître bien sûr quelques questions au fil de la lecture. On s'interroge parfois sur le fait de savoir si les enjeux impériaux ne sont pas un peu sous-évalués dans un moment où les formes de la décolonisation interrogent et déstabilisent les projets démocratiques qui se mettent en place en Europe de l'Ouest – pour la France, l'histoire de la IV^e République ne se réduit pas à Diên Biên Phu et à l'Algérie mais en reste nettement déterminée. Un autre point concerne la chronologie déployée et la place du chapitre 5 du volume sur les critiques de la démocratie au début des années 1960. Conway fait le choix de laisser « les années 68 » (entendues au sens large et qui peuvent se comprendre aussi bien comme les « global sixties » que comme s'ouvrant sur les « seventies ») à part du livre ce qui est compréhensible mais questionne parfois un peu l'ensemble de la démonstration. Autre regret, le livre ne se confronte pas vraiment à l'œuvre de Pierre Rosanvallon (la seule référence citée concerne *Le Sacre du citoyen*, un volume publié il y a presque 30 ans) et c'est dommage car le questionnement aurait pu se poursuivre sur une histoire de la démocratie qui interroge les formes de légitimité politique, l'enjeu de l'égalité ou celui du gouvernement. Ce dernier point aurait pu être mobilisé au moins dans la conclusion où l'on peut ne pas toujours être totalement convaincu avec les pages sur la « post-democracy ».

Bref, ce livre très riche qui fait naître beaucoup de pistes pour relire l'histoire de nos démocraties fait souvent penser au « classique » proposé par Charles Maier il y a bientôt cinquante ans et qui

voulait quant à lui comprendre l'Europe après la Première Guerre mondiale (Charles Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016 [1975, 1988]). De tels ouvrages méritent d'être lus et débattus car ils sont de fortes propositions et montrent la vitalité de l'histoire politique.

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Review by Jan-Werner Müller (Princeton University)

The Pre-History of Post-Democracy

Come to think of it, there aren't that many historians of democracy. Of course, there are plenty of people writing about democratic ideas in the history of political thought, and there are those ambitious enough to attempt blockbuster accounts of democracy from NATO to Plato (with varying degrees of success). But the historical study specifically of democratic institutions during discrete historical periods is surprisingly rare.

Martin Conway has been a pioneer of properly understanding the development of democracy in Western Europe. Long before others took note of the fact that the 1950s were not really an era of "restoration," as German critics of Adenauer kept asserting, Conway emphasized the distinctive—and novel—character of the democracies that were created in the Western half of the continent after the Second World War (Britain, as so often, took a bit of a *Sonderweg*). He has now given us a sweeping account of the era from 1945 to 1968. Just as with his previous articles, I have learnt much from this synthesis (for which Raymond Aron serves a self-consciously sober guide). For the sake of debate, though, I shall highlight some differences between Conway's perspective and my own.

Conway rightly argues that there was no masterplan for democracy after the Second World War. Democracy, as he nicely puts it, was not its own author; its success has to be understood less in terms of the strength of normative ideals put forward at the time, but rather as the result of democracy being combined with the reconstruction of effective state capacity and a whole range of practices for containing conflict (corporatism, for instance) which had only a tenuous connection to political democracy as conventionally conceived. What's more, democratization was, as he puts it, a matter of "cautious improvisation" and consciously unheroic—though often highly paternalistic—leadership by old men deeply marked by the cataclysms of the mid-twentieth century. Still, there are common patterns, and the one I would emphasize even more than Conway does is the desire to constrain popular sovereignty.

In political philosophy, sovereignty was systematically devalued as a concept—the highly influential Jacques Maritain was one of its most vociferous critics. But it was also delimited in practice, because European elites felt a deep distrust of the demos. After all, in light of the numerous accounts of how "mass democracy" had enabled totalitarianism (Jacob Talmon's was only one among many), there was a sense that the people themselves—irrational, easily seduced by demagogues, etc.—had brought recent political catastrophes on themselves. Democracy was crafted in the shadow of a pervasive cultural pessimism.

Concretely, the imperative of constraining peoples translated into things like a de facto ban on national referendums in some countries, and, less obviously, a comprehensive weakening of parliaments: France and Germany are prime examples; in fact, the National Assembly ended up as the least powerful parliament in the West. The ability of legislatures to delegate power was restricted—preventing them, so it was hoped, from the kind of democratic suicide the Weimar Republic and the French Third Republic had committed (or so common interpretations went at the time and, to some degree, still today). Never again should an assembly abdicate in favor of a Hitler or a Pétain. The danger of what the German lawyer Hugo Preuss—one of the fathers of the Weimar Constitution—had described as the danger of "parliamentary absolutism" had to be banished.

Further constraints were provided by constitutional courts—an invention of the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen from the interwar period—and the supranational quasi-constitutional layer of rights protections provided by the Council of Europe and eventually the European Union. In some countries, “militant democracy” became a further means to limit the popular will: militant democracy—which was fully adopted by the German Constitutional Court in the 1950s—legitimated the banning of political parties and even restrictions of individual political rights for the sake of protecting democracy from enemies within. Those justifying this approach remembered all too well Goebbels’ gloating that “it will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy that it provided its mortal enemies itself with the means through which it was annihilated” (or his remark that “one could have arrested a few of us in 1925, and everything would have been finished and over”).

This distinctive, in many ways antitotalitarian, model of democracy was thus based on a thorough rejection of the past—as well as, needless to say, opposition to the “people’s democracies” being erected in the East. It was a new institutional configuration, but it was decidedly not accompanied by innovative political languages (Conway rightly highlights the fact that “democracy” played hardly a role in the rhetoric of the resistance and liberation). If anything, its public justifications were couched in traditional accounts of natural law and human dignity (and dignity, not freedom, turned out to be the master value of post-war constitutions).

European societies became more pluralistic in general (pluralism in the sense of decentralization of power was also promoted by thinkers suspicious of popular sovereignty); but the boundaries of *political* pluralism remained relatively narrow and were often rigorously policed. As said, this included formal party bans, but it also meant informal attacks primarily on the left; just remember how even by the 1960s Willy Brandt was still attacked as a traitor. Overall, political mobilization thus took relatively predictable forms; as Conway says, this was the era of intermediary powers: be it parties, whose legitimacy was now accepted in a way that had not been the case in the interwar period, or trade unions and employer organizations which bargained with each other in corporatist frameworks.

I am not sure how one would ultimately decide whether this new political model, with its innovative constitutional provisions, was ultimately less important than what Conway calls “the reshaping of the internal mechanisms of the state” (65). The latter may have made for effective governance, but the former provided a template for a stable politics for the continent as whole—a model that was flexible enough to accommodate the contestations in and after 1968, and one that could be more or less successfully extended to Central and Eastern Europe after 1989.

I belabor this point partly because, towards the very end of his book, Conway also enters the debate about how to tell the story of democracy in Europe up to the present. And there he appears to express at least some sympathy for Colin Crouch’s post-democracy hypothesis (which has been highly influential on the continent, much less so in the UK and the US). To be fair, neither Crouch nor Conway claim that there was a golden age of popular sovereignty in the post-war period; they have a much more nuanced account of democratic gains and losses. Still, there is the notion that somehow, before an age of individualism and a primacy of rights over democracy, assertions of collective political will were somehow more common or easier. This might be plausible for the UK (even though even there the creation of the welfare state is a more complicated story), but it’s hard to think of the constrained democracies in Western Europe this way (and I haven’t even mentioned the constraints created by the Cold War). Conway himself stresses time and again how the people were “kept at a distance” in “safety-first” democracies; and it’s not obvious why the term [coined](#) by Bernard Manin for a much more recent period—“audience democracy”—would not also apply to an era characterized by what Conway plausibly calls an “anti-popular ethos.”

If one looks back from the post-1989 period, as Conway has also done in a [suggestive essay](#) on “regressive history,” the continuities dominate, as opposed to a periodization according to which a “democratic age,” with substantive collective choices of different kinds of society, was followed by an “era of rights” held by atomized individuals (a periodization that also easily becomes normatively loaded: just think of Marcel Gauchet’s [lamentations](#)). Rights were already crucial for the various constraints created for democracy in the post-1945 period, while the later period was characterized by a more profound and sustained mobilization of different groups who had been marginalized by the post-war democratic settlement. One might speak of a simultaneous deepening and widening of political pluralism, as well as novel forms of practicing democracy as a way of life, which, as Till van Rahden has pointed in a number of important [contributions](#) on the history of postwar-democracy, always needs to be thought alongside a more conventional perspective on political institutions.

What has changed, I would argue, is not so much the basic template of European democracy: it was in a certain way anti-populist then and remains anti-populist now. Rather, it is the role of intermediary powers: parties, professional news organizations, and trade unions in particular. Again, one should resist the temptation to idealize the post-war period, but the strength of the inner life of these organizations was remarkable. Conway at one point (71) claims that there wasn’t much “intra-party democracy” during the period, but I’m not sure that’s right. Figures like Adenauer and de Gaulle no doubt were dominant, and domineering, in many ways. But, unlike with parties today, which have sometimes deteriorated into personality cults (Trump’s Republicans are an extreme example; or think of Boris Johnson’s purges of the Tory party), there was plenty of space for internal legitimate opposition and critical loyalty. The German Basic Law —another important constitutional innovation—actually made intra-party democracy obligatory; the entirely plausible thought was (and is) that a party that is an autocracy on the inside might also turn out to have autocratic tendencies when in government. And while the weakening of intermediary powers is not solely responsible for what is often described as “the rise of populism” in our age, it arguably has been a contributing factor. Populist leaders present themselves as the uniquely authentic representatives of the people, with a supposedly direct connection between themselves and the people. What Nadia Urbinati [has called](#) “direct representation” has nothing to do with broadening popular participation; it is simply about removing anything or anyone standing between the leader and the people. While it might be tempting to think that de Gaulle or Adenauer already practiced a similar form of politics, Conway’s book makes us see the differences—and thereby should also deepen our concerns about the inherently anti-pluralist populist politics of today.

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Reply by Martin Conway (University of Oxford)

The Past and Present of Democracy

All books are out of date by the time that they are published; and not only because they always take so much longer to write than one wished. The more profound problem with any book published in recent years on the history of democracy, however, is that it risks being crushed between the rapidly shifting tectonic plates of present and past. Thus, while I was writing *Western Europe's Democratic Age*, I had an uneasy feeling that present-day controversies about the evolving nature of democracy (Brexit, Trump, Salvini, *gilets jaunes*, Johnson, Orban, Zemmour) were in danger of dominating what I had initially conceived of as a contribution to the historicization of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Above all, therefore, I am indebted to the three participants for their willingness to recognize my primarily historical purpose. In particular, I welcome the way that they engage with my focus on the embedded nature of post-war western European democracy. This political order was the expression of a new relationship between regime and society, or perhaps more exactly between the new democratic institutions and the balance of social forces within post-war Western Europe. Of course, the dynamics of that relationship varied somewhat between the different states; but, taken as a whole, the primary distinguishing feature of the twenty-five-year period after 1945 was the way that the major political forces—most notably Christian Democracy—and the principal social and economic organizations (such as trade unions, employers' groups, farmers' representatives, and small business organizations) acted to mediate conflicts between a newly-ambitious and competent state authority and the rapidly modernising fabric of West European societies. That success was far from accidental: post-war elites were anything but naïve, and they drew on their personal and collective experiences of the preceding thirty years to create a consciously modern form of democracy, which pursued the pragmatic goal of stability. This resulted in what Jan-Werner Müller rightly describes as a non-sovereign democracy, in which intermediate institutions and judicial structures would temper the dangers posed by unmediated popular will and the parliamentary absolutism of the Weimar Republic or French Third Republic. But this success was also the product of other elements of the post-war context, including the broad coalition of support for a moderate but resolute anti-communism, and the self-conscious restraint of political movements who for the most part were very conscious of the damage caused by the ideological and social conflicts of the preceding decades.

Of course, all of this could easily have gone wrong, and I am grateful to Alain Chatriot for highlighting the relatively limited space which I accord to the imperial dimension and what came to be termed, albeit retrospectively, decolonization. That is a good point. The crises of empire are present in my argument, but predominantly in terms of how they never quite derailed the post-war construction of democracy. That at times they came close to doing so is of course undeniable—above all, the crisis of the Dutch East Indies in the later 1940s, and the Algerian war in the 1950s and early 1960s, which ended the Fourth Republic but not the wider continuity of post-1944 French democratic governance. However, that is perhaps to disregard the broader impacts that empire (and its aftermaths) had on post-war democracy. Empire maintained a grip on the male populations of a number of European states after 1945 by obliging them to fight messy wars (often termed emergencies, or police operations) in distant places. “Post-war” was therefore anything but a reality for the conscript soldiers, and their families, in France, the Netherlands, or Britain. Moreover, the largely accepted centrality of empire to the project of nation-state reconstruction legitimized the deferral of the distribution of the rewards of economic growth from state to society. In sum, empire was a disciplining structure in certain European states, which

prolonged the rhetoric and reality of sacrifice beyond the end of the war against Nazi Germany until the impotence of the projection of imperial power beyond Europe only became fully apparent at the end of the 1950s.

As all three commentators point out, my book also risks serving as a demonstration of the familiar adage that historians are better at beginnings than endings. My chapter on the 1960s argues that democratic stability was increasingly under strain by the early 1960s, and for reasons much broader than those often evoked by a historiography unduly focused on the events of 1968. Instead of an explosion, I seek to convey—in a manner one might even describe as Tocquevillian—a waning over a roughly ten-year period from the early 1960s to the tensions of the mid-1970s in the post-war relationship between the democratic state and an increasingly volatile and assertive society. The reasons for what Christopher Bickerton aptly terms this “disembedding” of democracy are various, or perhaps better described as a wider *crise de régime*. If that is so, the problem is that the crisis lacked a clear denouement. If there were places and moments in the 1970s when it seemed as though the combination of political radicalization, social conflict and state authoritarianism risked a return to the upheavals of the inter-war years, this never quite came about. Instead, Western Europe emerged into the era of Kohl, Mitterrand and the acceleration of European integration, before experiencing the divine surprise of 1989.

But what of the place of democracy in that contested process of transition? As Bickerton suggests, the renewed energy of European integration in the 1980s might be seen as a demonstration of the enhanced freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed by governments that were no longer constrained by their negotiation with nationally-rooted social-interest groups. This new-found presidentialism stretched the distance between rulers and societies, just as the shift towards a more personalized and less party-based structure of party politics replaced—most strikingly in Italy—the party frontiers of the post-1945 era with the much less predictable political culture of the 1990s and beyond.

To characterize this change, I reach in the book for Colin Crouch’s concept of post-democracy. I should perhaps have resisted the temptation. As I comment in my Conclusion—and have had ample opportunity to reflect on subsequently—the concept of post-democracy is elusive in its meaning, and misleading in its resonances. Most obviously, it is western European in its conception, and is inseparable from a social-democratic lament for the post-war democratic moment that the remainder of my book seeks to eschew. Jan-Werner Müller rightly points to this contradiction, while also suggesting that there is a more fundamental problem of perspective here. Rather than lamenting what has been lost in recent democracy—especially in terms of meaningful negotiations between state and society—historians would do better to recognize the way in which formerly marginalized groups such as immigrants and sexual minorities, have now become participants in what is a less ordered but more plural democratic process.

There is much that I find attractive in Müller’s recharacterization of the recent history of democracy. In [other recent work](#), I have been concerned to sketch the lineages of a new history of the European present which needs to be separated from an over-long and superannuated history of the twentieth century. That history of the present has many different aspects—including a radically transformed European geography—but it remains for the most part democratic. Indeed, it might be described as simultaneously both less and more democratic. Democratic rights and processes have been dented, specifically by the state authoritarianism of certain regimes in central Europe, and more generally by the anti-popular regime of economic orthodoxy imposed on the states within the Euro zone. If, as Müller suggests, populism is the greatest threat to the pluralism of European democratic politics, then this is not the work of unscrupulous adventurers but a phenomenon rooted in the structural tensions under which democratic regimes have operated in

the first decades of the twenty-first century. But the other side of the coin is the way in which those socio-economic, cultural and environmental conflicts have also generated new patterns of democratic politics. Democracy has moved to the streets, be they digital or real. The *gilets jaunes*, marches for and against migration, for Black Lives Matter and for the defence of Europe's cultural or religious identity, lack quite obviously a common thread. But they demonstrate that the history of democratic practices in Europe is neither ending nor unchanging.

The tangibly unfinished nature of these transitions serves as a sufficient deterrent, if one was needed, from writing a second volume, which would bring the history of European democracy to the present day. As Tocqueville recognized, a distance of roughly fifty years between the historian and the events she or he studies is a healthy one. But the contemporary evolution of democracy also brings us closer to earlier democratic moments. The rather too familiar comparisons with the Weimar years are perhaps less relevant for our times than the politics of the nineteenth century. There is more than a whiff of 1848 about recent politics, while General Boulanger, Karl Lueger and Georg von Schönerer do not lack for imitators in the crowded field of present-day apprentice tribunes of the people. Anti-semitism may have declined (but not disappeared); however, the slogans and spurious solutions voiced in the electoral politics of the late nineteenth century have once again come to the fore, against a similar background of population migrations, social inequality, and economic fragility. Such historical comparisons do, of course, have their limits; but they might indicate that not everything in the history of democracy moves forward in a linear fashion.

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