

The Politics of Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe: Introduction

The apparent triumph of democracy in Europe after 1989 was as exhilarating as it was unanticipated. A method of government that in the 1930s had seemed doomed to extinction had, by the end of the century, come to be seen as normative. In contrast to the 1930s, moreover, this modern democracy was now intimately associated with political stability and economic prosperity. Despite this late twentieth-century apotheosis of ‘democracy’, however, it is easy to forget that democracy had not only been made to work, but that it had also been tamed. Events since 1989 suggest that what Charles Maier has termed the struggle since the French Revolution to make democracy ‘safe for the world’¹ had finally been won. Maier’s comment is an apt reminder of the importance of locating the ‘democracy’ of the late twentieth century within a proper historical context, and that conceptions of democracy cannot be taken as timeless or unchanging. The democracy that appeared to fail in the interwar years was not, therefore, necessarily the same as that which succeeded after 1945. Likewise, the triumph of a particular conception of democracy in the late twentieth century represented the failure not only of the alternatives *to* democracy, but also of alternative forms *of* democracy.

The study of democracy in twentieth-century Europe has been dominated to a remarkable degree both by political scientists and by methodologies derived from political science. In particular, there has been a flowering of interest since the mid-1970s in processes of change from democratic to authoritarian regimes and, now overwhelmingly, from authoritarian regimes to democracies. These ‘transitions’ have been assiduously tracked, recorded, compared and contrasted by scholars such as Juan P. Linz, Alfred Stepan and Samuel P. Huntington. An entire sub-discipline

of 'transitology' has developed taxonomies of the varieties of transition and the key variables that underpin them. Increasingly these approaches are also being applied to historical problems, perhaps most obviously in the large-scale comparative project on interwar Europe directed by Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell.² However, it is precisely when political science passes from the analysis of contemporary phenomena to analysis of the past that some of its methodological and conceptual limitations become evident. The drive to categorize and tabulate, for instance, may well do violence to the historical record. Hence, Samuel P. Huntington's concept of three 'waves' of democratization³ is less compelling when one is asked to include the events of the late 1940s in Greece and Turkey within one such 'wave'.⁴ Conversely, some political scientists have become almost over-sensitized to the role of historical factors, again with questionable results. Robert D. Putnam's quest for the civic origins of Italian regional democracy, for example, takes him back to the medieval city states, but succeeds only in generating a highly deterministic model of the prospects for democratic politics in the present.⁵

The limitations of the political-science literature on democracy in a historical sense makes the peculiar lack of interest shown in the subject by historians all the more inexplicable. One explanation might be that historians have not been inclined to see democracy as a problematic concept. They are far less likely, for instance, to dwell on the 'nature of democracy' than on the 'nature of fascism' because the answer, by comparison, appears obvious. Secondly, there is the question of how historians can approach the study of democracy in their research, given that the fundamental bases on which democratic societies rest are often invisible. Questions concerning the nature of the democracy are easily lost sight of once democratic states are successfully established, and political debate soon moves on to less abstract issues. Radical or new thinking about democracy tends to emerge only at particular moments when societies are being recast after the trauma of war, when the democratic order is threatened, when authoritarian regimes collapse, or when fundamental constitutional change is enacted. If, as Schumpeter argued, democracy is simply a political method 'incapable of being an end in itself',⁶ it is clearly difficult to disentangle issues directly related to democracy from a wider study of electoral, parliamentary and party politics.

There is, however, much that can be done. The work published

in recent years by Margaret Lavinia Anderson and Philip Nord,⁷ among others, has done much to demonstrate the fruitful analysis which can be carried out by historians on the ways in which the practice of democracy became rooted in European cultures during the later nineteenth century. For the twentieth century, however, this work has hardly commenced. In part, this requires an intellectual history of the changing meanings and conceptions of democracy. Even political ideologies now conventionally regarded as ‘undemocratic’, such as Communism or Fascism, could in certain conditions lay claim to ‘democratic’ ideals and language. In addition, it is necessary to examine the different traditions such as social democracy and Christian democracy which during the twentieth century signified a rallying to the democratic cause and simultaneously an attempt to invest it with new meaning. Beyond such political and intellectual history, what is also needed is a new emphasis on evolutions in popular attitudes and mentalities. What, in short, did it mean to be a ‘democrat’ in twentieth-century Europe, and how did ‘democrats’ — both politicians and voters — practise democracy in their daily lives?

Above all, perhaps, the challenge for historians is to provide a map of democracy’s changing fortunes in Europe since 1900. The articles in this special issue of *European History Quarterly*, which are deliberately intended to be no more than suggestive, offer a first sketch of what such a map might look like. One conclusion that they suggest might be that it is time to dispense with the teleology of Huntington’s ‘waves’, or with the idea that the only significant question is why democracy ‘failed’ before the Second World War and ‘succeeded’ after it. The historical evidence suggests a different and more complex narrative. By 1900 many European countries were moving — at very differing speeds — towards a parliamentary model of representative government. The dynamic for change came as much from the elites (for whom universal suffrage might offer a means of outmanoeuvring opponents) as it did from popular pressures. Although based on incomplete franchises (most notably the exclusion of adult women), and often shackled by restrictive constitutional arrangements, these were regimes characterized by widening political participation. As Anderson has convincingly argued in the case of Imperial Germany, the fact that the constitutional power of the Reichstag was heavily circumscribed should not detract from the very real political openings created by

the advent of universal male suffrage and mass politics.⁸ The consequence was that Germans were learning democratic politics even within the straitjacket of the imperial constitution, and such conclusions can be applied to many other European states. This was even more the case at a local level, where the transition to elected structures of local government in many European states had brought participatory government into the lives of most inhabitants of western and central Europe by 1914.⁹ What one might term a culture of participation had been established which, whatever its many limitations, increasingly provided the framework for European political life.

This hegemonic model of democracy was spectacularly overturned in the economic and political crises of the First World War and the interwar years. In many cases, this was no mere victory of dictatorship over democracy, but rather a failure of a narrowly based and apparently anachronistic model of democracy when challenged by radical movements of left and right that claimed to represent more directly and more authentically the 'will of the people'. In this way, the politics of the 1930s became the arena for many contesting definitions of democracy, within which the least likely to emerge triumphant appeared to be the widely discredited liberal-parliamentary model.

Choices were again on offer during the Second World War, and more especially during the Liberation era of 1943–5, when it was far from clear that the liberated peoples of Europe — and above all the Resistance movements — wanted to restore the democratic *status quo ante*. And yet the outcome of this process was remarkably unrevolutionary. The radical challenge presented by the Resistance or by Communism evaporated or was sidelined. What emerged was a reborn structure of parliamentary democracy, completed by the final enfranchisement of women, but circumscribed by a practice of party-led government which provided little space for a culture of active citizenship. Therefore, in many respects the greatest challenge for historians of twentieth-century democracy is not so much to explain why democracy 'failed' in the interwar years, or why transitions to democracy succeeded after 1975, but rather why a very particular parliamentary model of democracy was so successfully implanted (with a few notable exceptions) in Western Europe after 1945. Without this forgotten 'transition' in France, Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany there would, after all, have

been no normative 'democracy' to offer as a model to Spain, Portugal and Greece in the 1970s, or to Eastern Europe in the 1990s. These immediate post-1945 years represent the 'lost step' between the calamities of the 1930s and the subsequent democratic transitions in southern and eastern Europe. Under the watchful eye of the United States, this period witnessed the creation of broadly similar democratic institutions in the core states of the emergent Western Europe, and the effective marginalization of alternatives to both left and right. The new order was strong enough to survive the upheavals of the late 1960s and the renewed interest in ideas of direct democracy. However, the elusive political legacy of '1968' is perhaps to be found in the intermittent efforts in western Europe to supplement national parliaments with structures of socio-economic councils, regional assemblies and devolved administrations.

What does the democratization of southern and east-central Europe (Huntington's 'Third Wave', triggered by the Portuguese coup of April 1974) tell us about this evolving West European democracy? It is certainly difficult to discern any common pattern in the events of the mid-1970s: the authoritarian regimes of southern Europe fell due to revolution by radicalized army officers (Portugal), a negotiated process following the death of a dictator (Spain) and failed military adventurism (Greece). If 'democracy' eventually prevailed in all three it was surely because representative government offered the elites a road from political anachronism towards international political acceptability and economic integration, while maintaining domestic social stability. The triumph of democracy in southern Europe reinforced rather than questioned the western democratic model. The same conclusions can be drawn from the events in east-central Europe after 1989. Here, far more profoundly than in Spain and Greece (if not in Portugal), there was a real democratic alternative to liberal democracy and sclerotic Brezhnevite Communism. Neal Ascherson is surely right at least to pose the question of 'what democratic innovations might have been made' if 'Forum politics' in Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia had been given their head.¹⁰ The fact that such groups were rapidly swept away in the pursuit of integration with the West, and that the only remaining quasi-democratic alternative was the often ugly face of populist nationalism, has again served merely to reinforce a sense of Western triumphalism.

Such triumphalism may already be misplaced. The early twenty-first century is marked by profound concerns about the health and future of European democracy. Voters feel less inclined to trust politicians, less inclined to participate in elections, and more willing to believe that political power is slipping out of democratic control into the hands of supranational bureaucrats or companies. If the thesis of an ‘end of history’ already appears out of date, so too does any notion of a ‘victory of democracy’. The task for historians remains more than ever to demonstrate that democracy is not a single model but a political practice in a continual state of evolution.

Notes

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1. Charles S. Maier, ‘Democracy since the French Revolution’, in John Dunn, ed., *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford 1992), 126.

2. Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jeremy Mitchell, *Conditions of Democracy in Europe, 1919–1939: Systematic Case-Studies* (Basingstoke 2000).

3. Or, in some interpretations, four waves: see L. Whitehead, ‘Three International Dimensions of Democratization’, in L. Whitehead, ed., *The International Dimensions of Democratization: Europe and the Americas* (Oxford 1996), 4.

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK and London 1991), 18.

5. Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton 1993). Putnam acknowledges the problem of determinism, 184. For a survey of how historical factors have been integrated into theories of democratization, see Geoffrey Pridham, *The Dynamics of Democratization: A Comparative Approach* (London 2000), 29–58.

6. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1943; 1966 edn [London]), 242.

7. Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton 2000); Philip G. Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth Century France* (Cambridge, MA 1995).

8. Anderson, op. cit., 8–13.

9. See, for instance, John Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897–1918* (Chicago 1995); John M. Merriman, *The Red City: Limoges and the French Nineteenth Century* (Oxford 1985); Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830–1910* (Oxford 1987), especially 539–56; Jan Palmowski, *Urban Liberalism in Imperial Germany: Frankfurt am Main, 1866–1914* (Oxford 1999).

10. Neal Ascherson, ‘1989 in Eastern Europe: Constitutional Representative Government as a “Return to Normality”’, in Dunn, ed., op. cit., 227.