

**Martin Conway. *Western Europe's Democratic Age: 1945-1968*. Princeton, NJ & Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press. 2020. v-357 pages. Paperback, \$35.00.**

Martin Conway's recent book, *Western Europe's Democratic Age*, is a new history of how democracy became the dominant political force in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. Conway, a professor of Contemporary European History at Oxford, provides a pioneering account of how a firm, durable, and exceptionally consistent style of parliamentary democracy emerged in Western Europe, and remained dependable for almost twenty-five years. Conway chronicles how Western Europe's postwar democratic order was built by elite, intellectual, and popular forces. This democratic order was much more than the consequences of the defeat of fascism and the rejection of Communism, but anchored on democratic values—universal adult suffrage, new forms of the power of the state to enforce compliance and new Christian and Social Democratic political forces that embraced democratic values. What is more, democratic principles galvanized the support of the general population for whom the new order offered a new model of citizenship that reflected their hopes and longings in a more prosperous society. The book shows how democracy became a firmly-lodged institution in Western Europe's sociopolitical cultures in the decades following the Second World War. But as Conway observed, this new democratic order did not persist. The strains of decolonization and social change, as well as race, gender, and class hierarchies led to an eruption of demands for greater freedoms in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In his analyses, Conway draws insights and illustrations from the bigger European states like France, Germany, and Italy, but also from the smaller states like the Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg). The book has an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion.

In the Introduction captioned “A Democratic Age,” the book began with an exploration of French political philosopher, Raymond Aron's contention that democracy had been stabilized

in Western Europe post-1945. Aron argued that, compared to the ruinous fights over ideology, class, and ethnicity that had typified the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, a new form of industrial society had emerged after the war. This new order was marked by representative democratic institutions incorporating guarantees of personal freedoms. Thus, Aron contended that the new model of society in Western Europe did not completely erase past divisions of ideology, class, and ethnicity but, rather, rendered them old-fashioned through economic prosperity, effective government welfare policies, and social compromise with articulate interest groups and workers' unions. In effect, the new political order that emerged was imbued with rational pragmatism. With constraints imposed by respect for the rule of law, democracy, Conway argues, had become more professional and more serious. In the chapters that follow the introduction, the book discusses the development and nature of democracy, including its limitations in Western Europe between 1945 and 1968, as well as the political and social turbulence that came along thereafter.

In Chapter 1, "Making Democracy," Conway maintains that Western Europe's transition to democracy stemmed from the interaction of four crucial imperatives, namely: the actions of the Allied Forces who liberated and occupied Europe, the successful reorganization of the national state structures, the marginalization of local or unofficial political authorities, and the reemergence of political parties and social associations that mediated between the political authorities and the governed. These factors combined to bring into existence a flexible democratic order. Chapter 2, "Thinking Democracy," examines how a discussion about democracy after the war gradually developed. The debate that ensued reflected the variety of ideological and national persuasions in Europe. In spite of the diversity, the emphasis was surprisingly unified. For instance, despite the fact that the two political party platforms, Christian

Democrats and Socialists, started from opposing sociopolitical visions of democracy during the first half the twentieth century, after World War II there was a noticeable focus of attention in how democracy should work, as well as the risks that needed to be prevented. In this regard, post-1945 Western European nations appear to have fashioned similar democratic models.

Chapter 3, “Debating Democracy,” focuses on how Christian Democratic and Socialist parties grappled with each other and joined forces in building democracy. Historical narratives of the route that each political party adopted enriched the content of the new democratic order. “Debating Democracy” also contrasts the understandings of democracy promoted by Christian Democrats and Socialists through the lens of their past history, their stated political beliefs, and their future plans for democracy-building. While each political movement advanced their claims of ownership of democracy, by and large, they tend to converge and complement each other. This is more evident when aimed at Communism. Chapter 4, “Living Democracy,” discusses the consumption of democracy. In the twenty-three-year gap between 1945 and 1968, Western Europeans felt at ease with democracy and practiced the new model of democracy themselves. But another reality reared its head: the rapid economic growth that occurred after WWII created persistent inequalities of social class. Although the middle class benefitted tremendously, in terms of material prosperity and increased sociocultural domination from the post-war affluence; nonetheless, the way and manner the newly-generated affluence was dispensed buttressed pre-existing class divisions.

Chapter 5, “Contesting Democracy,” examines various discussions about democracy in Western European that emerged in the 1960s. Opposition voices leaned towards the perceived shortcomings of the existing political structures. They doubted that the hierarchies of representation through parties, parliaments, and interest groups were the most conducive

structures and processes for achieving the stated goals of social justice, individual freedom, and a participatory democratic culture. In essence, a radical political and cultural critique arose that raised doubt about existing forms of authority within the new democratic model. They contend that the new democratic structures that came into existence after 1945 successfully tore down totalitarian regimes while keeping intact the structures of state power; thereby, fostering regimented and limited freedoms. As Conway aptly summed it, quoting Habermas's thesis: "In contemporary society, parliament had been subordinated to the control of political-party machines.... The citizen was at best a consumer, and at worst a simple spectator in a process that had the superficial appearance, but little of the substance of democracy" (p. 262).

The Conclusion, "Unmaking Democratic Europe," describes, on the one hand, the consensus that Western Europe had reached political stability, through negotiation between different interest groups with effective executive government. On the other hand, pessimism arose regarding a rebellious society in the late 1960s that rejected the state expropriating power for itself and constraining individual freedoms. In summary, Conway argues that Europe no longer stood at the center of its own history nor spoke with one voice. Conway demonstrates this by documenting the ineffective response of the European Union to the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s as well as the disconnection and policy split among European states during the American-initiated wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Conway concludes that post-democracy might be a fitting description of the fractured politics that emerged in Europe at the end of the twentieth century. The take-way lesson, among others, of *Western Europe's Democratic Age* is that democracy remains a work-in-progress.

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