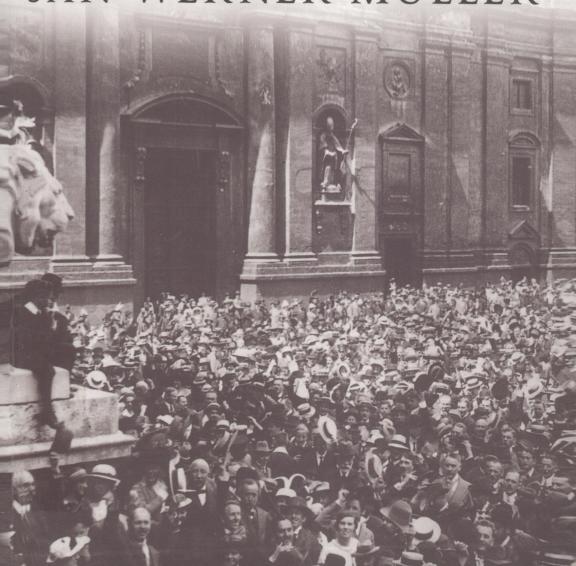'An admirably thorough and comprehensive book.'—Jürgen Habermas

# CONTESTING DEMOCRACY

## POLITICAL IDEAS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPE

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For Erika

# Illustrations

1  Max Weber and Ernst Toller at a conference in Burg Lauenstein, Thuringia, 1917. bpk–images, Berlin.

2  Karl Ehn's, Karl-Marx-Hof (1927–30), Heiligenstädter Strasse, Vienna. © Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, 116.926-B/C.

3  'Commissar Lukács thanks the proletariat for its help in overcoming the counter-revolution'. Still from a newsreel by Red Reportage Films. Hungarian Film Institute.

4  'Soviet Constitution. Article 1: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a Socialist State of Workers and Peasants' by El Lissitzky and Sophie Küppers, fold-out poster from *USSR in Construction*, nos 9–12 (September–December 1937). Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (87-S197).

5  Giovanni Treccani, Benito Mussolini, Calogero Tumminelli, Giovanni Gentile and Ugo Spirito at the inauguration of the Italian Encyclopaedia of Science, Letters, and Arts (*Enciclopedia Treccani*), 1933. Centro Documentale Lampi Neri.

6  Pope Paul VI consults with Jacques Maritain about the Second Vatican Council, 1964. Archives du Cercle d'Etudes, J. et R. Maritain, Kolbsheim, France.

7  'Nous sommes tous des juifs et des allemandes', poster by Atelier Populaire, Paris (1988 reprint of 1968 original). International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

8  Herbert Marcuse at an event at the Freie Universität Berlin, 1967. Ullstein Bild, Berlin.

9  Jean-Paul Sartre, André Glucksmann and Raymond Aron, Palais de l'Elysée, 26 June 1979. © Richard Melloul/Sygma/CORBIS.

10 Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault at a demonstration in the Goutte d'Or quartier, Paris, 1971. Photograph by Gerard Aimé/Rapho/Gamma, Camera Press, London.

# Contents

# Introduction

*. . . it is less the facts that I am looking for than the traces of the movement of ideas and sentiments. It is that above all that I want to paint. . . . the difficulties are immense. The one that most troubles my mind comes from the mixture of history properly so called with historical philosophy. I still do not see how to mix these two things and yet, they must be mixed, for one could say that the first is the canvas and the second the color, and that it is necessary to have both at the same time in order to do the picture.*

Alexis de Tocqueville

*Have you forgotten the other bankruptcies? What was Christianity doing in the various catastrophes of society? What became of Liberalism? What has Conservatism produced, in either its enlightened or its reactionary form? . . . If we are indeed honestly to weigh out the bankruptcies of ideology, we shall have a long task ahead of us.*

Victor Serge

*Democracy has developed wherever the abstract appeal of the ideologue and the concrete experimentation of the practical man have worked together.*

A. D. Lindsay

THE HISTORIAN of ideas Isaiah Berlin once observed: 'I have lived through most of the twentieth century without, I must add, suffering personal hardship. I remember it only as the most terrible century in Western history.'[1] The century was also one in which political ideas seemed to play an exceptionally important role – so much so that contemporaries connected them directly to the catastrophes and cataclysms through which they were living. This belief in the vast influence of ideas did not depend on political allegiance: the Polish

poet (and anti-Communist) Czesław Miłosz pointed out that during the mid-twentieth century 'the inhabitants of many European countries came, in general unpleasantly, to the realization that their fate could be influenced directly by intricate and abstruse books of philosophy'.[2] Around the same time the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev remarked matter-of-factly of the uprising against the Soviets in socialist Hungary: 'None of this would have happened if a couple of writers had been shot in time.'

Consequently, the twentieth century is often interpreted as, above all, an 'age of ideologies'. From such a perspective, ideologies are understood as forms of passionate, even fanatical belief in ideas and blueprints for the betterment of society.[3] The story then tends to go like this: Europeans were more or less inexplicably seized by an ideological fever in or about 1917, the date of the Russian Revolution, an affliction from which they were cured only in 1991 or so, with the fall of the Soviet empire and the apparent triumph of liberal democracy over both fascism and Communism.

Yet seeing the twentieth century simply as an age of irrational extremes or even as an 'age of hatred' means failing to understand that ordinary men and women – and not just intellectuals and political leaders – saw many of the ideologies contained in abstruse books (and the institutions that were justified with their help) as real answers to their problems. True, ideologies were also expected to provide meaning, even redemption, so calling some of them 'political religions' or, with Churchill, 'non-God religions' is justified. But many of the institutions created in their name made a further promise to function much better than those of liberalism, which in the eyes of many Europeans seemed like a hopelessly outdated relic of the nineteenth century. In retrospect, a sentence such as 'Fascism came into being to meet serious problems of politics in post-war Italy' – uttered by the Fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile in the American magazine *Foreign Affairs* in 1927 – seems banal (and, at the same time, a repulsive understatement).[4] But any account which completely leaves out the dimension of ideologies as making claims to problem-solving and successful institutional experimentation misses one of their essential aspects.[5] We need to restore a sense of why and how ideologies could have been attractive in this way – without thereby making any excuses, of course. Few clichés have done more harm to the serious study of the history of ideas than *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*.[6]

To gain this kind of understanding, we cannot rest content with existing accounts of the development of high political philosophy during the European twentieth century. Rather, we ought to be concerned with what happens *in between* more or less academic political thought on the one hand and, on

the other, the creation (and destruction) of political institutions. In short, we must grasp the political thought that mattered politically, the areas where, as the British scholar A. D. Lindsay once put it, the work of the 'abstract ideologue' and practical experimentation come together.[7]

Consequently, this essay will take a particularly close look at what one might call 'in-between figures': statesmen-philosophers, public lawyers, constitutional advisers, the curious and at first sight contradictory phenomenon of 'bureaucrats with visions', philosophers close to political parties and movements, as well as what Friedrich von Hayek once referred to as 'second-hand dealers in ideas'.[8] Describing them in this way was no sign of contempt: Hayek thought they were often much more important than many original producers of ideas. And in fact, there was a particular need for such dealers during an era when 'mass democracy' came into its own, because mass democracy, among other things, imposed the need for what we might call mass justification (or mass legitimation) – the need, that is, to justify forms of rule and institutions, but also, less obviously, the creation of entirely new political subjects, such as a 'purified nation' or a people putting its trust in a single socialist 'vanguard party'.[9] Once traditional conceptions of legitimacy as well as the principles of dynastic descent had become widely discredited – as they had been after the First World War at the latest – the justifications for political rule had to become different.

The point is not that there was no need for public justification before 1919 or so – of course there was. But in the twentieth century it had to become both more extensive and more explicit. This was even the case when legitimacy was supposed to be grounded in the personal charisma of a leader, or rely on a functioning state bureaucracy capable of delivering what citizens desired: neither charisma nor welfare provision speaks for or explains itself. The new pressure for public justification was especially evident with right-wing regimes which sought to rule in the name of tradition, as well as with the royal dictatorships which flourished in interwar Europe in particular: tradition and monarchical legitimacy were no longer understood to be self-evident or habitually accepted – they had to be articulated and actively promoted. There was simply no way back from the demands for mass political justification.

The sense that the twentieth century was different, that it was an age of compulsive doctrine production (and doctrine consumption) was acutely shared by those who lived through it. The British philosopher Michael Oakeshott, surveying *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* in the late 1930s, observed:

We live in an age of self-conscious communities. Even the crudest of the regimes of contemporary Europe, the regime which, admittedly, owes least to

a systematically thought-out doctrine, the Fascist regime in Italy, appears to value self-righteousness enough to join with the others in claiming a doctrine of its own. Opportunism has suffered the emasculation of being converted into a principle; we have lost not only the candour of Machiavelli but also even the candour of the *Anti-Machiavel*.[10]

In a very specific sense, then, the European twentieth century, after the First World War, was an age of democracy. Not all European states had become democratic. On the contrary, many of the newly established democracies were destroyed during the 1920s and 1930s, in the eyes of many Europeans making forms of dictatorship seem the obvious way for the future. But even the political experiments that stridently defined themselves against liberal parliamentary democracy – state socialism as it actually existed and the fully Communist society it promised on the one hand, and fascism on the other – played on the register of democratic values. And sometimes they claimed that they were the real thing: Gentile, for instance, explained to his American readers that 'the Fascist State . . . is a people's state, and, as such, the democratic state *par excellence*'.[11]

To be sure, they were not democracies by any stretch – though, as we will see later on, many defenders of these regimes did engage in strenuous conceptual stretching precisely to make that claim plausible. But both promised fully to realize values commonly associated with democracy: equality, especially a form of equality more substantive than formal equality before the law; genuine inclusion in a political community; and real, ongoing participation in politics, not least to create a collective political subject – a purified nation, or a socialist people – capable of mastering a common fate.[12] This might sound rather abstract. But passion for such values played an important role in animating the major departures from liberal democracy. Not to recognize this is historically naive; it also constitutes a form of liberal complacency which we – which is primarily to say we in the West – can ill afford.

Making this point is not to malign democracy. It actually underlines the power of democratic ideas. As the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen, commenting on the employment by Communist theorists of democratic vocabularies, put it at mid-century: 'it seems that the symbol of democracy has assumed such a generally recognized value that the substance of democracy cannot be abandoned without maintaining the symbol'.[13] Though few people, to put it mildly, would nowadays defend the Nazis' 'Germanic democracy' or the post-war Eastern European 'people's democracies', it is not superfluous to say that most of the 'democratic promises' of the extreme anti-liberal regimes were disingenuous (or, at the very least, dysfunctional in practice). But it is also important

to ask why these regimes felt compelled to make these promises in the first place. Their rhetoric points to the larger constraints in an age when demands for participation could simply no longer be ignored, when claims to rule had to employ a political vocabulary that was at least partly shared with liberal democracy: an age, in short, when political argument was crucially about contesting the meaning of democracy.

More important still for the present: we can make sense of the particular character of the democracies erected in Western Europe after 1945 only if we understand that they were constructed with an eye both to the immediate fascist past and to the claims their Eastern rivals were making to embody true democracy. These post-war democracies were defined not just in stark contrast with state terror or aggressive nationalism, but in opposition to the totalitarian notion of unconstrained historical action by collective political subjects, such as the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*.

It is not wrong, but historically far too unspecific, to argue that the second half of the twentieth century saw 'the return of democracy' or 'the return of liberalism', first in most of Western Europe and then in Southern and Eastern Europe. Rather, Europeans created something new, a democracy that was highly constrained (mostly by unelected institutions, such as constitutional courts). The constitutionalist ethos that came with such democracies was positively hostile to ideals of unlimited popular sovereignty, as well as the 'people's democracies' and later 'socialist democracies' in the East, which in theory remained based on the notion of a collective (socialist) subject mastering history. It is often forgotten that this new set of institutions was not justified by the inherited political languages of liberalism – because liberalism was widely seen as having paved the way for the totalitarian nightmares of the century in the first place. Two particularly important post-war innovations – the democratic welfare state and the European Community – have to be understood in the same light: the former was intended to prevent a return to fascism (competition with the East was an important but ultimately secondary concern) by providing citizens with security or even, as the British Labour politician Nye Bevan once put it, with 'serenity'.[15] European integration, on the other hand, was meant to place further constraints on nation-state democracies through unelected institutions.

This account questions that there ever was a golden age for democracy, and for Social Democracy in particular, in the years after the Second World War. Outside Britain (and Scandinavia, a special case, as I will argue in Chapter 2), the Western European post-war settlement was the work, if anything, of moderate conservative forces, primarily Christian Democracy. If one had to choose one movement in ideas and party politics that has created the political

world in which Europeans still live today, the answer has to be Christian Democracy. This may come as a surprise to all those who see Europe as the blessed (or, as the case may be, benighted) island of secularism in our world. Clearly, it helped that Christian Democracy could present itself simultaneously as the party of anti-Communism par excellence and as a movement that retained connections to a real religion – as opposed to the fake political religion of fascism.

The new post-war form of democracy was eventually confronted with two major challenges: the rebellion that is often abbreviated as '1968' and the calls to scale back the state and free up both the market and the individual, which are now commonly summed up as 'neoliberalism'. As has often been pointed out, the supposed revolution of 1968 might have been rooted in a profound crisis of representation (of youth, of women, of gays), but it left political institutions largely unchanged. Consequently, one may well wonder if '68 deserves a prominent place in accounts of twentieth-century European political thought. It does, because it posed a radical challenge to the post-war constitutional settlement, and to its core principles of a constrained democracy. In the long run, the aftermath of '68 proved that the constitutional settlement was compatible with profound social, moral and ultimately also political changes: the end of cultures of deference and hierarchy, whether in families or universities; and, above all, women (and gays) acquiring power over their own bodies.

Neoliberalism offered a plausible response to what was often called the 'crisis of governability' in the 1970s. It undoubtedly had a major impact on Margaret Thatcher's Britain. But its original political – and moral – programme had been about much more than weakening trade unions and deregulating markets (something that Thatcher herself openly acknowledged when she explained in 1983 that 'economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul').[16] A thinker like Hayek would have liked to see a radically new constitutional settlement – and that did not happen either.

This is no reason to be triumphant about the West European post-war constitutional settlement (which was essentially extended eastwards after 1989) and the ideas that animated it. Rather, historical awareness of how Europeans got there might help at least a little in dispelling the comforting illusion that liberal democracy is necessarily the default position of Europe, or of the West more broadly.

# The Molten Mass

*The whole state of society is more or less molten and you can stamp upon that molten mass almost anything as long as you do it with firmness and determination.*

David Lloyd George, 1917

*Today, the state enjoys its beatification. We turn to it almost blindly in sure faith that its way spells salvation.*

Harold Laski, 1917

*Today the relation between the state and violence is an especially intimate one.*

Max Weber, 1919

*Nowadays, a sure sign of the power of democratic ideology is the fact that so many people pretend to accept it. A sure sign of the decadence of aristocratic ideology is that it has no hypocritical defenders at all.*

Vilfredo Pareto, 1920

*The only meaning I can see in the word 'people' is 'mixture'; if you substitute for the word 'people' the words 'number' and 'mixture', you will get some very odd terms . . . 'the sovereign mixture', 'the will of the mixture', etc.*

Paul Valéry

A T CHRISTMAS 1918 Max Weber had recently returned from Berlin to Munich, only to find himself in the midst of a 'bloody carnival'. In the capital he had played a prominent role in deliberations about a new German constitution. This was somewhat surprising: for almost twenty years, the Heidelberg professor had suffered from various illnesses and was hardly seen

in public. In the last two years of the First World War, however, he had written a series of polemical articles and tried desperately to act as a political educator of the German nation. He had also hoped to stand for the constitutional assembly and, eventually, parliament. But it was clear now that the liberal party with which he had associated himself would always nominate more professional politicians, and not someone widely considered an irascible academic. Weber could not have had high hopes either that the constitution drafters would follow any of his recommendations.

A few months earlier, Weber had been asked by a student society at Munich University whether he would deliver a lecture on 'Politics as a Vocation' for them, in a series where he had already given one talk on 'Academia as a Vocation' in 1917. Weber had been reluctant, but apparently, when he learnt that the students were considering Kurt Eisner as an alternative, he agreed. Eisner, a freelance journalist and life-long socialist, had declared a republic in Bavaria on 8 November 1918, even before the German Kaiser had abdicated in Berlin – and thereby precipitated what Weber was to call the 'bloody carnival' of revolution. He had only contempt for a character like Eisner: in Weber's estimation the man was a littérateur dabbling in politics, a demagogue in love with his own rhetoric, but also the victim of his very short-term success – which, in Weber's view, the head of the Bavarian council republic mistook for genuinely political success when it was merely literary: rather than Eisner actually projecting authority (or just power), romantic hopes for redemption through politics were projected on to a man who, after all, was just a hack.

Weber held that there were three bases of legitimating rule: there was tradition, where men and women obeyed on the basis of precedent; there were formal legal procedures, so that law was judged to be legitimate if it had passed through the correct channels and could be executed by bureaucrats *sine ira et studio*; and, finally, there was personal charisma, which had an affinity with revolutionary politics.[1] The latter term had originated in the sphere of religion and initially designated the qualities of prophets: 'it is written . . . but I say unto you'. According to Weber, it could be applied generally to leaders who seemed to have been graced with special gifts and who therefore inspired fervent devotion and deep trust among their followers. Eisner, Weber thought, was this last type, and a dangerous variety. And so rather than have the self-declared head of the new Bavarian *Volksstaat* seduce the students with his high-flying socialist dreams, he would offer some hard-won lessons in political realism.

On 28 January 1919 Weber began what would turn out to be the most famous single lecture in the history of political thought: 'Politik als Beruf', with 'Beruf' referring to both profession and a sense of personal calling. Weber did not exactly start off on a high note:

This lecture ... will necessarily disappoint you ... You will instinctively
expect me to take a position on problems of the moment. But that will be the
case only in a purely formal way ... when I shall raise certain questions
concerning the significance of political activity in the whole conduct of life.
In today's lecture, all questions that refer to *which* policy ... one should
adopt must be eliminated. For such questions have nothing to do with our
general question ... [2]

What was this 'general question'? In Weber's lecture it was: what is politics as a
profession or a vocation? But, more broadly speaking, the question was how
possible were responsible political action and stable liberal regimes in what
Weber called a disenchanted world, a world in which religion, metaphysics
and other sources of meaning – especially collective meaning – seemed all to
have been placed in doubt. Weber was convinced that traditional legitimacy –
based on precedent and prescription – was disappearing, and that Europeans
had entered the democratic age for good. The charisma of monarchs – not so
much a personal quality as what Weber called 'the charisma of blood', passed
down from one generation to the next, but also attaching to the institution
itself – had been dispelled by the disasters of a war during which monarchs
had generally revealed themselves as incompetent. What had also disappeared
was the belief that members of different nationalities and religions could live
peacefully together in one political association like the Habsburg Empire,
watched over by a revered Kaiser in whom his subjects felt some genuine trust.
Weber was sure that democracy could be realized only within homogeneous
nation-states. And there was no way back from democracy now. In Weber's
mind, disenchantment and democracy went together; they were both peculiar
to the path of development that the West had taken. Dealing with them
responsibly posed the greatest political challenge to Europeans in the first
decades of the twentieth century.

## The Age of Security (for Some)

To understand how European political thought developed in the twentieth
century, it helps to understand how it had developed in the nineteenth – and
which of its underlying assumptions no longer seemed credible in the period
after the First World War. Weber had been shaped by the high tide of
nineteenth-century liberalism, and what the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig in
retrospect called 'the golden Age of Security' (which, he added, had also been
the golden age of insurance policies). Writing from the vantage point of exile
in Brazil in 1942 (and about to take his own life), Zweig remembered that in

those pre-war years 'everything radical, everything violent seemed impossible in an age of reason'. People of his generation, those who had been young before the First World War, had felt an incomparable optimism and trust in the world, a world which they thought was well on the way to ever more freedom as well as 'true cosmopolitanism'.[3]

This age of reason and security had rested on three central ideas (or sometimes just moral intuitions) which had solidified in particular political and economic institutions. Security had meant, to begin with, the absence of war and other kinds of large-scale violence (at least when seen from Vienna or somewhere else safely removed from the Balkans, to say nothing of the world outside Europe). Fewer Europeans died in combat in the nineteenth century than in the eighteenth; and the period 1871 to 1914 proved to be the longest stretch of intra-European peace up to that point in history (the most obvious exception, when the rest of the globe is taken into account, was Great Britain – which was almost always at war somewhere).[4]

Security in the sense of international peace was not thought to be just a lucky break for Europeans; it seemed to be connected to the increasing inter-dependence of European states and empires through the circulation of money, goods – and people. The decades before the First World War saw what has sometimes been called a 'first wave of globalization'. The *Manchester Guardian* announced that 'space has been eliminated' and that 'frontiers no longer exist'.[5] It was a golden age of internationalism in the sense of free trade, international co-operation in setting standards and pooling sovereignty for economic benefits: there was, for instance, the European Postal Union, the Scandinavian and Latin monetary unions; above all, there was the gold standard linking all major currencies. But there was also a sense – and a reality – of freedom of movement and consequently large waves of migration. As Zweig's contempo-rary Felix Somary, a banker born in fin-de-siècle Vienna, pointed out: 'all barriers, as well as the words "hostage" and "exile", seemed to us to belong to a distant age which had long been overcome'.[6] Travel seemed easy; in fact, in the late nineteenth century, only Turkey and Russia had passport controls, and they regulated internal movement only (in the eyes of many observers, it was not an accident that, along with Montenegro, these were the only countries which, by 1900, still had no parliaments). The German industrialist and politi-cian Walther Rathenau observed in 1912 that never before had the European peoples been so close to each other, visited each other so much and known each other so well.

Freedom of movement was just one aspect of a general liberal belief in increasing liberty for everyone, especially if that term primarily meant 'freedom from the state'. As the British historian A. J. P. Taylor was to put it,