Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945–1968. By Martin Conway. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 357 + xii.

Martin Conway's most recent book focuses on one simple question: how did democracy become the dominant form of organizing politics and societies in Western Europe following World War II. Conway, who teaches contemporary European history at Oxford's Balliol College, proffers no simple answers. As he emphatically argues, establishing and consolidating political democracy in postwar Europe was neither a simple nor a smooth process. The fact that representative democracy was sustained in the Western half of Cold War Europe is to be explained by a range of factors and, indeed, a variety of historical accidents. Perhaps the most innovative methodological and original theoretical points of the book is its focus on the contingencies of making democracy. Conway challenges the often smug presumptions about the organic and automatic genesis of democracy in Western Europe (and, by implication, in North America), which rest on an implied faith in an obvious road from Enlightenment ideas towards contemporary democratic societies and politics. Conway argues, instead, that the perilous position of democracy in the postwar period renders the concept more an exception to be explained than a natural process to be taken for granted. By doing so, he unfetters democracy from the clutches of theological thinking and makes it a historical event again.

The five chapters of the book contribute to this historicizing of democracy from several angles: by explaining the genesis of postwar democracy, its stabilization in the 1950s, the dynamics of its Christian Democratic and Socialist alternatives, its broad-ranging social and cultural appeal up until the late 1960s, and the attempts to reinvigorate the meaning and content of democracy in the 1960s. The book is based on an extensive secondary literature on France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux states. Conway also often adds complementary material from Scandinavia, the UK, and southern Europe. Albeit the comparative angle is not lost, instead of registering national differences, he focuses on what connected these countries. He expressly suggests a broader template for rethinking post-World War II European history and therefore uses national cases to discern general developments valid throughout Western Europe. This is, emphatically, a book about European history and not a comparative history of European politics. Thus, North America and Eastern Europe are also brought into the discussion when they provide eloquent contrasts with which to highlight the specificities of developments in post-World War II Western Europe.

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In the first chapter, Conway underscores that the democratization of Western Europe was, in many ways, a consequence of the demise of central governments during the war. The serious lack of infrastructure and communication rendered the organization of food and fuel, first and foremost, the task of local communities. The book argues that these processes of localizing authority opened ways for communities to shape political power effectively. The democratization of Western Europe was also spurred by the forms of making politics that democracy embraced, which were in many ways continuous with prewar precedents. Despite the postwar rhetoric of radical change, such continuities helped attenuate political struggle and antagonism and, thus, encapsulated the widely shared desire to return to normalcy after the war, as Conway claims.

The book is emphatic in its insistence that political democracy in Western Europe was also the product of the Cold War. The ideologies of liberty, property, tradition, and Christianity, which postwar democratic elites advocated, were embedded in a broadly shared anti-communist consensus in Western Europe and North America. Democracy in this context appeared the bulwark of European civilization and nations against the threat of communism. In Western Europe in the 1950s, when many considered communism the dead end of popular participation based on the psychological manipulation of the masses, democracy could be seen a sustainable mode of responsible mass political participation. Nevertheless, as Conway highlights, democracy was not powerful and appealing simply as an antidote to totalitarianism. The democratic state in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s promised and also had the ability to give benefits to its citizens. The consolidation of postwar democracies was linked to the establishment of the welfare state: to the extension of social security systems, improvements in schooling, and growing investments in the public sector. Although Conway is not explicit about this, the extension of welfare systems was also part of the Cold War competition. In many ways, increasing maternity benefits or state education investments in Western Europe were responses to similar measures in socialist Eastern Europe. In addition to the material benefits, the institutions of representative democracy offered modes of participation in political decision making in ways completely absent from (and rejected by) the party-states of contemporary Eastern Europe. As Conway underscores, these factors shaped new forms of active citizenship, which helped the peoples of Western Europe perceive the democratic state as their own.

Conway concludes that the consolidation of democracy was linked to the growing power of the state. The democratic welfare state was based on the increasing ability of the institutions of the state to predict and plan processes and, thus, to shape and manage societies. These fresh capacities of the state, claims Conway, not only spurred state intervention into the lives of citizens, they also empowered the people to build pressure on the institutions of the state. The ways in which the elites rendered the wellbeing of citizens the responsibility of the democratic state prompted the citizenries of these states to put new social expectations on the state and opened up novel ways of exerting popular control over the state. Conway presents democracy as a serendipitous biproduct of the confluence of the political agendas of elites and the expectations of the societies they sought to govern.

Conway seems very much aware of the limits of postwar democracy. He points out that Western European democratic governments in the 1950s and 1960s were carefully structured and engineered towards the balance between the political elites and mass participation. As such, postwar democracy was biased in terms of class and gender. The Western European democratic states benefited the middle-classes the most and succeeded in quickly expanding the borders of these groups by offering new types of urban professions and jobs as well as paths of social mobility. At the same time, however, democratic governments also sustained and invigorated class identities and frontiers. Similarly, the enfranchisement of women made the Western European electorate predominantly female for the first time, though male dominance in public politics remained largely unchanged until the 1960s.

The book argues that conflicts and tensions concerning forms of participation created possibilities for a democratic critique of democracy. Conway makes an important point when he asserts that the growing voices of discontent at the beginning of the 1960s espoused the values of postwar democracy such as individual freedom, social justice, and political participation. Dissent was not a rejection of democracy, but it was an expression of doubt concerning the notion that the existing institutions of vertical political parties and representative government based on these parties were the most adequate means of achieving the goals of democratic societies. The modes of contesting democracy in the 1960s became debates concerning various visions and understandings of democratic practices and rights. These debates increasingly drew from global sources as anticolonial movements in the Global South challenged Western European notions of self-determination, human rights, and social justice.

Conway limits himself in this book to Cold War Western Europe, but his work has important implications for the study of post-World War II Eastern Europe, as well. The approach he adopts invites an exploration of the socialist dictatorships as the contingent outcome of a range of historical factors instead of the consequence of a Manichean struggle between advocates and enemies of democracy, ending with the victory, at least for a time, of the latter. Conway's vigorous push to problematize some of the sacrosanct concepts of contemporary history makes it relevant to fields and contexts beyond postwar Western Europe. This aspect of the book makes it important reading for anyone who hopes to understand the recent history of Europe and beyond.

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