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**Martin Conway.** *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945-1968.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780691203485 (hardcover, \$35.00/£30.00)

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Looking across the Atlantic from the United States toward Europe often induces longing. But in the Fall of 2020, as a global pandemic has thrown world affairs into a state of chaos, one yearns less for Europe's gastronomic delights or the beauty of the continent's landscape than for something more prosaic: good governance. Most European states have faced the deadly coronavirus by attacking it with scientific data paired with sensible leadership. The results have been imperfect—the virus is far from under control across Europe—but compared with the flailing incompetence and egregious mendacity of elected leaders in the United States, European governments have mobilized science in the public interest. In Europe, government is working.<sup>1</sup>

It is tempting to place the blame for America's failures in facing the pandemic on the singular figure of President Donald Trump. From the start of this global outbreak, Trump politicized the U.S. national response, pressured public health officials to suppress information, suggested bogus cures ("bleach"), mocked mask wearers, and so on. Even after he himself contracted COVID-19, and spent a week sequestered in Walter Reed Hospital receiving urgent treatment, he insisted the virus was a minimal health threat. But the differing attitudes toward the pandemic among leaders in Europe and the United States highlights their contrasting visions of democratic government in general. Martin Conway, in *Western Europe's Democratic Age*, offers a useful framework to understand the historical evolution of European practices of self-government. The stability, prosperity and liberal democracy that has developed in Europe is no accident. It is the result of political choices made since the end of the Second World War. And although Europeans – like citizens in democracies everywhere— frequently voice their displeasure at their leaders, Western Europe today enjoys stronger political institutions, more responsive leaders, and more resilient social cohesion than the United States. Simply put, Europe does democracy better than America.

How did this happen? The decline of democracy in the United States, and its decades-long drift toward illiberalism, has received far more attention from scholars than the story of Europe's political maturity and equilibrium.<sup>2</sup> Crisis and rupture inevitably draw more attention than stability and continuity. But as Charles Maier pointed out many years ago, stabilization

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<sup>1</sup> On coronavirus cases and deaths in the European Union and Britain, see <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19-pandemic>. The response in Britain has mirrored the confusion of the United States government, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who endured a serious illness caused by the virus, failed to find a successful strategy. For the politics behind Britain's struggles, see Robin McKie and Toby Helm, "Lockdowners vs. Libertarians: Britain's Coronavirus Divide," *The Guardian*, 27 September 2020, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/27/lockdowners-v-libertarians-britain-coronavirus-divide>

<sup>2</sup> The Trump era has produced a flood of books on the decline of U.S. democracy. A good introduction that offers some comparative context is Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

has a history too—one that democracies today, in this undemocratic age, need to study.<sup>3</sup> It used to be common in U.S. government circles to claim the credit for Europe's postwar success. After all, America 'rebuilt' western Europe in the late 1940s, the story goes. And certainly, the influx of postwar reconstruction aid, from early stop-gap efforts to the more institutionalized Marshall Plan programs did provide a crucial ingredient—the lubrication—to restart the European economic engines in the wake of the war. By defeating Hitler, occupying Germany, redrafting Germany's legal and political structures, maintaining a military presence in Europe and engineering military alliances, the United States invested its prestige and power in the stabilization and democratization of western Europe. In what became the central battleground of the Cold War, this view holds, the United States stayed engaged, allowing Europe to prosper under the American umbrella.<sup>4</sup> A less flattering version of this argument asserted that America had rescued Europe from fascism only to leave it ideologically neutered and sterile, an Americanized outpost of a globe-straddling empire. Eschewing political and social conflict, and suppressing discussion of their dark past, Europeans under U.S. tutelage stumbled their way towards a consensual consumer-oriented corporatist-style capitalism. By the early 1960s, Europe had begun to take on the characteristics of a pre-made sandwich resting in the window of an automat: stale, bland and inert.<sup>5</sup>

Boring and sterile as the postwar years may have been, we still need to understand how stability emerged from crisis. In a 2003 book called *The Struggle for Europe*, I took my turn at explaining Europe's postwar transformation from a war-riven continent to a united and democratic one. My account was undoubtedly Whiggish—I was writing in that hopeful era between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the introduction of the euro. In my explanation, I emphasized four overlapping forces that seemed to have shaped Europe's postwar democratization: the impact of the Cold War in cementing America's place in European affairs; the economic reconstruction that brought forth a new generation of technocrats, planners, and political leaders who were eager to embed a new form of democratic managed capitalism; the determination of East European dissidents to wage an unrelenting struggle for their own political freedom; and the role of traditional, often conservative elites in defusing (some would say squelching) the promise of radical reform in key moments (1947, 1968, 1989) and moving the process of democratic reform out of the streets and into the parliaments, where the elites could temper the passions of democracy. Reform, not revolution, characterized Europe after 1945. Alas, Martin Conway archly dismissed this contribution to the literature as a book that "eschew[s] any interpretation in favor of a predominantly diplomatic history of the age, enlivened by occasional vignettes of social and cultural change."<sup>6</sup> *Touche!*

Does Conway offer an alternative? Discounting a Cold War framework, he aims to assess the role Europeans themselves played in building the foundations of the *trente glorieuses*—the thirty glorious years of economic growth and political stability after 1945. While his decision to limit the book chronologically (1945-68) as well as geographically (including Western but omitting Eastern and Southern Europe) weakens its impact, there is a stimulating argument at work here that makes us look afresh at the political solutions that were crafted in Europe during its first two postwar decades. His

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<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Maier, *In Search of Stability: Explorations in Historical Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> The large literature on the topic includes Charles Kindleberger, *Marshall Plan Days* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987); Michael Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Immanuel Wexler, *The Marshall Plan Revisited* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983). The work of Alan Milward showed that Marshall Plan aid was less decisive in restarting the European economies than in empowering European recovery plans to pursue their own national ambitions. *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 2000), and Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> William I. Hitchcock, *The Struggle for Europe: The New History of a Divided Continent, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Anchor, 2003), 2-5; Martin Conway, "The Rise and Fall of Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945-1973," *Contemporary European History* 13:1 (2004): 67- 88.

operating assumption throughout is that the process of recovery and stability of these years was not inevitable—the war had stirred radical forces on the Left that wanted far more significant social change than they got—and so the path toward liberal democratic capitalism was a choice that European elites made and which found significant support among trade unions, political parties, churches, women voters, technocrats, and the bureaucracy.

His opening chapter provides a welcome and substantial analysis of the contingent nature of the years just after the war, when the future of democracy in Europe was wholly uncertain. He shows that between 1944 and 1947, various models of democracy – from a people’s democracy of the left to a corporatist democracy of the right – were competing for power in western Europe, just as they had done during the uneasy coalition of the underground resistance. By 1948, the conservatives had triumphed, mainly because this is what the people wanted. In place of radical change came the “managed democracy” (64) of the welfare state, marking the triumph of “material interests over ideology” (70). Conway notes that in rejecting radical change and embracing individual freedom over collective aspiration, Europeans also postponed a reckoning with the past, and the horrors of the war years. Yet that delay suited most Europeans just fine. The result, Conway argues, was a “cautious and unimaginative” but “successful” postwar democracy (96, 97).

Conway tacks back across the early postwar years to show that for many leading intellectuals of the era—Raymond Aron, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Jacques Maritain—Europe’s embrace of the technocrat and the planner provided a welcome alternative to its earlier embrace of ideology. Compromise, stability, prosperity, expertise—these were the watchwords of the moment, and however much these represented the banalization of politics, they also provided shelter from the storms through which the continent had so recently passed. Cold War liberalism, softened by state-managed economic planning, welfare statism, and anti-Communism, all looked better than what was on offer in the era of the Third Reich. Conway helpfully reminds us here that the architects of postwar Europe were not interested so much in grappling with the origins of Fascism or Communism as much as they were seeking to learn from the failures of the previous democratic regimes that had succumbed to authoritarian ideologies. The Weimar Republic in Germany, France’s Third Republic, and Italy’s gossamer-thin constitutional monarchy had all crumpled before the onslaught of fascism. What form of democracy could Europe design that would repel future ideological challengers?

The answer lay in what Conway sees as “anti-popular” democracy (115), though he doesn’t exactly demonstrate how this worked in practice. A “disabused maturity” took hold (108) among European elites, a “new sobriety” (111) that lent itself to pragmatic solutions—which sounds persuasive though Conway rarely delves into specifics. His analysis remains essayistic, skipping rather lightly over the evidence. He points to Germany’s Basic Law of 1949, with its legal framework designed to contain extremism and anti-democratic political speech, as emblematic of the compromises postwar Europeans wanted: a democracy of rules and laws that “would provide a series of dykes within which the will of the people would be contained and channeled” (123). Political parties too moderated their behavior, and the Socialists and Christian Democrats competed for voters within a shared commitment to democratic norms. Conway also describes a profusion of corporatist institutions across western Europe—economic councils, labor-management roundtables, consumer groups, farmers’ leagues—as evidence of this managed democracy. But few examples are developed in depth. Conway could have used European integration to illuminate the way that economic negotiation by transnational elites served stability and prosperity, albeit at the expense of democracy. Yet Jean Monnet, the emblematic French technocrat who designed the European Coal and Steel Community, is mentioned only once in the book, and the process of integration Monnet championed is referred to merely in passing.

Holding this new form of democracy together, Conway insightfully notes, was the growth of the western European states themselves—a novelty in a continent that before the fascist era had been governed by small bureaucracies with limited economic and social power. The postwar states built large welfare infrastructures, invested massively in health care, housing, transportation, energy, and agriculture. In all these sectors the state intervened, and government spending shot up to unprecedented levels. To some critics, the European states seemed to have embraced “rational authoritarianism” (209), supervised by a clique of highly educated specialists and technocrats. But it delivered the goods. “For most citizens,” Conway declares, “conformity to the rules” revealed a “pragmatic and knowing appreciation of the advantages to be derived from the resources of the modern state” (221).

For two decades after the war, then, western Europeans found a way to build democratic polities that could deliver a vastly improved standard of living while avoiding the dangers of factionalism and extremism that had set the continent ablaze in the 1930s. In doing so, they surrendered a degree of popular engagement and direct democracy in return for a stable and prosperous, if at times dull, prosperity. Conway believes this bargain started to come undone in the mid-1960s, though he is evasive about why. A new youth culture, overseas colonial wars (in particular in Algeria and Vietnam), increased immigration, the loss of European prestige on the world stage, all served to weaken the commitment of a new generation to the bourgeois order. Rather than develop any of these points in depth, Conway gestures to the rise of a new critical stance articulated by intellectuals like Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse who found fault with the technocratic consensus of the postwar years.

The book comes to an abrupt end without addressing the immense shock of the year 1968 across the continent. Instead, Conway briefly—and unpersuasively—sums up by suggesting that the disorder of the 1970s revealed that Europe had not figured out democracy after all. The economic crises of the oil shock, the return of political violence by extremists, the appeal of populist and far-right political factions, and the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1980s, even the collapse of Communism in 1989, all somehow reveal that western Europe “lost control” (295) of the process of political development. Europe, he argues, “lost confidence in the democratic model that it had developed” (296). Conway notes the waning of “political parties, parliaments and the print press” as bastions of the postwar order. In their place, “irresponsible ... media conglomerates, financial institutions, and private companies” have undermined the old social compact. Europe now has entered the era of “post-democracy” (303), in which power is negotiated in the marketplace, in an atmosphere of relentless and vulgar consumer capitalism.

As an essay on the deliberately restrained political aspirations of Europe’s first two postwar decades, this book is a helpful synthesis of a large literature on the patterns of democratic development. But Conway’s analysis peters out much too soon, missing a significant opportunity to explain how, in the fifty years since the late 1960s, European democracy evolved. Today, Europe is something of a laboratory in which combustible materials are being tested and combined. Illiberal and authoritarian governments are on the rise (or in power) in the Balkans, in southeast and eastern Europe, in Russia and most of the former Soviet republics. Anti-European sentiment, driven in part by the claims of a ‘democratic deficit’ inside the European Union, drove Britain toward the grievous self-inflicted wound of Brexit.

Yet in most of Europe, the basic structures of democracy endure, as does the transnational idealism of a united Europe. Perhaps the designs of the stodgy postwar founders that Conway examines here have succeeded after all, revealing elasticity in the face of repeated onslaughts from populists and demagogues. As the political order in the United States lurches into a dangerous phase—some elected officials in the U.S. now openly declare their belief that democracy is not the most desirable form of government—the survival of liberal democracy in the ‘new world’ may depend upon our learning how the bland technocrats in Paris, Berlin, and Brussels made democracy work so well.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See the remarks of Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah), discussed in Sue Halpern, “Why the Right Keeps Saying That the United States Isn’t a Democracy,” *The New Yorker*, 15 October 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/why-republicans-keep-saying-that-the-united-states-isnt-a-democracy>.