The Rise and Fall of Western Europe’s Democratic Age, 1945–1973

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Postwar western Europe has long been *le plat pays* of the historiography of Europe in the twentieth century. Survey histories of Europe’s evolution during the twentieth century tend to pass over almost in embarrassed silence the history of this least remarkable period of Europe’s twentieth century, preferring to dwell instead on periods both more murderous and more interesting. There was indeed something almost unnaturally calm about the history of much of western Europe from the terminus of the conflicts produced within and around the Second World War in 1948–9 to the re-emergence of socioeconomic conflict and political contestation in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. There were of course many exceptions to this rule: the demise of the French Fourth Republic amidst the disintegration of state authority in Algeria, the artificially glacial character of politics in the Iberian peninsula and the persistent undercurrents of sociopolitical violence in Italy. Nevertheless, they do not, I believe, detract significantly from what should be the primary focus of historians of postwar western Europe. This must be to explain the particular muted character of western Europe in the roughly twenty-five year period from the end of the 1940s to the early 1970s.

This essay is therefore intended to explore in a highly schematic form some of the ways in which historians might choose to approach this period. My own approach arises from the archival work that I have been undertaking for a forthcoming study of Belgian politics in the immediate postwar era. It also reflects, however, my evolving interest in the broader nature of postwar western Europe, which I have explored in

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2 To be published as *The Death of Belgium. The Normalization of Politics in a West European State 1944–47* (2004).
a number of recent articles. This work arises at least in part from my dissatisfaction with the way in which the history of this period has been conceptualised in much recent historiography, which seems to me to be characterised by two somewhat contradictory trends.

On the one hand, historians have sought to explain, or even excuse, what they regard as the ‘strange’ stability of postwar western Europe in terms of the absence of the forces that otherwise serve to make the history of twentieth-century Europe interesting. In particular, there is an inevitable tendency on the part of those many historians who arrive at their study of the postwar era from a much greater familiarity with the preceding era to emphasise the absence of the social and ideological dialectics that had generated extremist movements of left and right in much of Europe between 1900 and 1945. Fascism and the other forms of authoritarianism which had become caught up in its tentacles had imploded in the war years, leaving only vague and often subterranean traces in the history of postwar Europe, while communism was forced into a pro-Soviet ghetto, partly as a consequence of the Cold War and partly as a consequence of the success with which the Soviet leadership recaptured control of the disparate European communist parties in the late 1940s. With the marginalisation of these forces, Europe collapsed, partly from exhaustion and partly even from a lack of ideological imagination, into a conformist politics of the centre ground.

On the other hand, historians have also emphasised the hegemonic power of certain other forces, which it is suggested forced west European politics into a new and by implication somewhat artificial mould. Foremost among these was the sudden and unexpected impact of the Cold War, which resulted in the imposition on non-communist Europe of a US overlordship and a concomitant politics of liberal democracy and anti-communism. The straitjacket of the Cold War was reinforced by the no less unpredictable force of postwar economic prosperity. The sudden and sustained impact on the populations of western Europe of the new conquering forces of consumerism and welfare capitalism served to create, in the dismissive phrase of the


4 This shadow effect of the conflicts of the preceding era is, I think, particularly evident in the approach adopted by Mazower, Dark Continent, and Eric Hobsbawn, Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991 (London: Michael Joseph, 1994) to post-1945 Europe.

5 This is particularly prominent in the ‘failed revolution’ approach adopted in much work on southern Europe during the 1940s, whereby a presumed victory of the left was prevented in, for example, Greece and Italy by external intervention and the internal mobilisation of the post-fascist forces of counter-revolution. See, for example, Tony Judt, ed., Resistance and Revolution in Mediterranean Europe 1939–1948 (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). Emphasis on the repressive weight of the Francoist regime in Spain mirrors this approach: Michael Richards, A Time of Silence: Civil War and the Culture of Repression in Franco’s Spain, 1936–1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
French communist poet Louis Aragon, ‘une civilisation de frigidaires’. Enthralled (in both senses of the term) by the new consumer wonderland (which formed such a startling contrast to the situation east of the Iron Curtain and south of the Pyrenees), west Europeans found themselves unable to conceive of a return to radical politics, until their children woke themselves from this Marcusian slumber through the street demonstrations and cultural conflicts of the late 1960s.

To explore here the shortcomings of these interpretations is probably unnecessary. As encapsulations of the broader narrative of the postwar era, they oscillate between statements of the obvious and a rather too visible scorn for the temper of postwar western European politics. Nobody would, for example, seek to deny the impact of Cold War diplomacy on postwar western Europe, but it is similarly obvious that to regard it as an external phenomenon visited upon Europe by the global conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union is an inadequate framework long rejected by historians of international relations. Indeed, the causality could be reversed, to the extent that the Cold War (or at least its initial genesis) can be seen equally well as a process ‘made in Europe’ and imposed on the no more than semi-conscious superpowers. These problems suggest that much work remains to be done. Europe ‘after 1945’—to employ the revealing phrase used in many books—has for too long remained part of a continuous present. After the changes of 1989–90, the western Europe of the post-1945 period passed in some sense into history. But, as Europe during 2001–4 experiences a second fundamental change in its shape and structures, so there is an enhanced need not merely to ‘confine’ the postwar decades to history but to understand them.

What, then, might be the elements of a better approach? A good starting point might be to define a little more closely what we are seeking to explain. Put briefly, the phenomenon that historians need to address is the uniformity and stability of western Europe in the period 1948–73. This bland statement contains three assumptions on which it is worth dwelling a little. Uniformity is the most obvious and probably the least controversial of these. If one leaves on one side certain micro-sovereignties, fifteen states in western Europe possessed largely similar political structures and ruling parties within this period. Never since at least 1914 had Europe looked so much alike, or seemed so bland. Stability is the second of these assumptions and is of course more relative. But it is worth noting that the collapse of the French Fourth Republic in 1958 provides a unique example of what we are now doomed to term

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8 In no particular order, these were France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland. I exclude Greece and Cyprus as distinctive cases.
'regime change' in this period. Other states came close, notably Belgium in the royal crisis of 1950, but they never quite achieved meltdown.\footnote{10} The third assumption is that this is a period that one can define in terms of a necessarily approximate beginning and end. The beginning is perhaps obvious: European states exited from the conflicts of the Second World War at different times and in very different ways. The politics of liberation Europe is a fascinating and as yet still under-researched field in which military, political and social dynamics criss-crossed each other in complex and unexpected ways, but which culminated in the re-establishment of state power, the avoidance of revolution (except in the strictly legal dimension of the creation of new constitutions) and the setting of the molten politics of the mid-1940s into formal frameworks and informal hierarchies.\footnote{11} The end is, however, distinctly less obvious. If historians have now begun to farm the virgin lands of the 1960s, the 1970s remain as yet largely over the historiographical horizon. This is unsurprising. Apart from the obvious paucity of available sources (except in the field of interstate relations), there is the broader problem of how one should conceptualise a decade of bitter social conflicts, new ideological dynamics, and obstinate political stasis. To write about it is very difficult, and it is only to my mind Paul Ginsborg who has so far provided us with an account of politics in Italy in that decade which succeeds in adopting a genuinely historical approach.\footnote{12} My own terminus date of 1973 is of course little more than arbitrary. It reflects, however, a wish to emphasise the socioeconomic dynamics set in course by the oil crisis of that year,\footnote{13} rather than the more common tendency among historians to focus on the events of 1968. The studies that we now possess of the protests of 1968 have served to demonstrate that the events of that year had a significance that went further than their rather limited political and social impact.\footnote{14} But they also, I think, serve to show that the forces that emerged in that year only acquired a real importance in the early 1970s. Indeed, the common theme that emerged from a recent interdisciplinary seminar on the 1960s in Oxford was principally that, to put it at its most simplistic, much of that which we think happened in the 1960s in fact occurred in the 1970s.\footnote{15} 

\footnote{10} Re Belgium in 1950, see Jules Gérard-Libois and José Gotovitch, Léopold III. De l’an 40 à l’effacement (Brussels: Pol-His, 1991), and Paul Theunissen, 1950, Le dénouement de la question royale (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1986).


\footnote{15} This is of course to disagree with what one might term the maximalist account of the changes which occurred during the 1960s as presented in Arthur Marwick, The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States c.1958–c.1974 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
If therefore one chooses to adopt these three assumptions of uniformity, stability and terminus dates at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1970s, the historians' agenda is perhaps a little clearer. Unlike political scientists, for whom the principal goal is to construct a typology of the criteria that must be fulfilled for democratic stability to be achieved, the task of historians is a finite and historically specific one. What we are confronted by is one of those peculiar, and exceptional, periods in European history when interstate conflict and political revolution are largely absent from the map. As a rough comparison, one might think of the era that followed the establishment of the Italian and German states and the repression of the Paris Commune. Around 1870–1, European politics took a new shape, which in turn reached some form of conclusion in the ‘politics in a new key’ that Carl Schorske famously located in the 1890s. That period of the mid- to late nineteenth century lacks, perhaps significantly, any generally accepted historical label, though in a British context I have always found Michael Bentley’s concept of ‘politics without democracy’ not entirely inappropriate. In the same spirit, perhaps the best approximation that one might offer to encapsulate the stability of western Europe between the late 1940s and the early 1970s would be ‘western Europe’s democratic age’. Several major shortcomings of this phrase are of course immediately apparent. By focusing on a particular form of politics, it fails to embrace the socioeconomic changes of the era. Moreover, by privileging the democratic character of postwar politics, it risks emphasising the strengths rather than the limitations of the rather constrained form of democracy established after the Second World War. Perhaps most seriously it might be seen to imply a return to the western and northern bias of much historical writing on Europe. The Mediterranean is (partly) dismissed as an exception to a northern rule, while the east is excluded on the arbitrary basis of the imposition of Soviet-led communist regime. These are serious problems. Nevertheless, the label does have the compensatory benefit that it focuses our attention on the political character of the era when, compared with periods before and since, the spectrum of possible politics in western Europe appeared to have been narrowed to a particular model of predominantly parliamentary democracy.

Confronted by this reality of the dull rotation of coalition governments populated by nationally and ideologically indistinguishable ‘men in suits’, the instinct of historians is to think first in terms of origins. Just as we are accustomed to search for

19 The Gaullist republic of the 1960s is of course a partial exception to this rule. But it is now being recognised that the Gaullist party and, consequently, the French Parliament had a much greater impact on the politics of the era than it has been customary to assume: Jonathan Watson, 'The Internal Dynamics of Gaullism, 1958–1969', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2001.
20 Conway, ‘Democracy in Postwar Western Europe’, 60. 'A common greyness suffused all the men elevated to power in postwar Europe – drab prime ministers, cold, little police chiefs, pickle-faced
the origins of wars, revolutions and genocides in twentieth-century Europe, so we need to look for how the stability and uniformity of postwar Europe emerged out of the almost twenty-year crisis that preceded it. This has many merits. Too much of the historical writing on Europe during the Second World War has been preoccupied with agendas that tacitly see the war years either as a self-contained phenomenon or as the culmination of the conflicts of the preceding decades. This has resulted in much excellent historical work, but even in some of the finest (notably Rod Kedward’s remarkable studies of wartime France), there seems to be a tendency to neglect the rather prosaic issue of outcome. The largely redundant debates about a Stunde Null in Germany, and indeed elsewhere in Europe in 1945, are indicative of this problem. That the outcome of the various crises that had swept across Europe since the early 1930s should not have been an implausible ahistorical caesura but a complex amalgam of restoration and renewal should surprise no historian. What is more challenging is to analyse the nature of the forms of continuity and change evident in Europe after 1945. The multiple shadows of the war, and indeed of interwar conflicts, did of course have a strong influence on subsequent events. Much energy, for example, has recently been devoted to exploring the complex ways in which the populations and states of postwar Europe remembered and forgot about different aspects of the war years. This analysis of Europe’s ‘undigested past’ does, however, tend to privilege the particularly ‘postwar’ character of the subsequent decades, as if the history of western Europe after 1945 was little more than the after-shocks of the cataclysm which had preceded it. This is no more than a partial truth, and we also need to recognise that the contested struggle for postwar memory was often a mechanism by which the political forces of Europe in the 1950s and 1960s competed for the present and the future by instrumentalising an increasingly distant past.

To move the agenda of wartime history towards a greater preoccupation with outcomes is therefore to go further than a one-directional preoccupation with seeking out the legacies of the war in the postwar. It is also necessary to search for the postwar in the wartime. To do so runs the obvious risk of teleology. Twenty-five years ago, economists with their dry statistics and bulging brief cases have mumbled where once great men thundered: White, Fire, 19–20.


22 Writing about the Stunde Null rarely fails to convey an impression of regret that a more radical rupture was not achieved in 1945. See, for example, Rebecca Boehling, A Question of Priorities. Democratic Reform and Recovery in Postwar Germany (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1996).


Paul Addison wrote a book on wartime Britain entitled *The Road to 1945*, which now seems highly inadequate in its over-eager determination to ‘read’ the wartime history of Britain in terms of a process leading to the Labour Party’s electoral victory in 1945. Such an interpretation neglects the often contradictory forces provoked by the war years. Political radicalism and conservatism were both products of the war; so too were a dramatic extension of state ambitions and a simultaneous erosion of state authority. No search for the origins of post-1945 political stability within wartime Europe can therefore ignore the powerful factors that made other outcomes simultaneously possible. But, in acknowledging these, it would also be wrong to throw the entire responsibility for the nature of the postwar political order onto the accidents of the US military occupation of western Europe and the subsequent Cold War. The particular character of European democracy in the postwar decades, with its combination of parliamentary representation, corporatist negotiation and a somewhat depoliticised individual freedom, had roots that can be found in the events of the preceding decades and more especially of the war years. To search for these requires, however, a reorientation of historiographical attention away from highly visible phenomena such as collaboration and resistance towards less dramatic processes of social and institutional evolution which ran through the 1930s and 1940s.

Any attempt at analysing these processes would clearly be beyond the scope of this brief article. Three somewhat random and very brief examples may, however, suffice to indicate the potential and also the limits of this search for the wartime origins of the postwar order. First, one might take the case of the industrial working class. Though it is customary to emphasise the important role that social conflicts played in European politics around the period of the liberation, it is remarkable how little historical work has been done on the working class in this period. Moreover, that which has been done has tended to be dominated by either Labourist or Marxist agendas which alternately celebrate the good sense of trade unions in participating in new structures of corporatist negotiation or bemoan the betrayal of the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat by their reformist or Stalinist leaderships. Both approaches suffer from placing the political ahead of the social, and seem to me to be based on the empirically dubious assumption that the war years had strengthened and radicalised the European working class.

If one examines the social history of the working class in wartime Europe, a rather different picture emerges. Though national experiences clearly varied, the starting point almost everywhere must be that the working class, and more

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28 Some of the best work on the working class has been done on central Europe in the early communist period. See, for example, Mark Pittaway, ‘The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture
especially the working-class communities of major industrial and urban centres, had been hit disproportionately hard by the war. The heart of such communities was often ripped out by policies of repression and exploitation. In the case of Belgium, conscription in 1939–40, detention in prisoner-of-war camps after 1940, deportation to German factories from 1942 onwards and aerial bombing from 1943, as well as the enforced demobilisation of trade unions and the simple difficulty of acquiring sufficient access to food within urban communities, were all factors which destroyed much of the internal coherence of the industrial working class.\(^{29}\) Far from emerging with a newfound confidence into the postwar era, the Belgian working class was therefore a diminished and inchoate presence in postwar politics. The strike waves that surged unpredictably across the major industrial centres throughout the 1940s were expressions not of empowerment but of an often desperate wish to recover not merely their prewar living standards but also a voice in the decision-making of the postwar years. Trade unions were an inadequate mechanism for voicing working-class interests. In Belgium, as in many other areas of western Europe, they were fiercely divided between communist, socialist and Catholic organisations, and the non-communist unions became embroiled in a prolonged and ultimately somewhat fruitless pursuit of influence through state-encouraged structures of corporatist negotiation.\(^{30}\) The consequence was a diminishing of the visibility and power of the working class in the politics of postwar Europe. Historians have often pointed to the success with which notable elites succeeded in regaining control of the political process, especially at a local level, after liberation.\(^{31}\) This, however, becomes more comprehensible if one recognises how the war years had simultaneously strengthened the power and profile of such notables while demobilising and weakening the working class.

Second, let us consider the issue of localism. It has long been a common theme of work on wartime Europe, notably on France and Italy, that the war years narrowed horizons and gave a new importance to the local community. This was made manifest at the liberation in the new-found municipalism, the rediscovery of communal traditions and the emphasis on the purging or cleansing of the local community.\(^{32}\)


\(^{31}\) See the illuminating case studies provided for Germany in Boehling, *Question of Priorities*.

Only gradually, and rather imperfectly, did the national regain precedence over the local, leaving behind a contested bundle of local memories (and often intense divisions) as well as a pervasive sense of loss as the normality of national rule was reimposed.33 In many respects, the localism of the war years can be regarded as no more than circumstantial. With the collapse of national bureaucracies and political systems, local communities were thrown back on their own resources, and were obliged to negotiate forms of coexistence with a variety of invading, occupying and liberating authorities. The reworking of the local community, be it an urban quartier or a rural village, which this brought about was, however, a phenomenon that had important legacies. It was evident, for example, in the new passion that was brought to local politics (of which national politics were often merely the pale reflection), which remained a focus for political energies long after national politics had subsided into a disciplined and predictable game.34

There was also perhaps a larger legacy. Just as, say, in Spain during the mid-1930s, the disappearance of many of the explicit and implicit structures of government in wartime and liberation Europe (be it an Auvergnat village in 1943, a factory in Turin in 1944–5, or a Tyrolean village in 1945) had the effect of breaking the link between the individual and the authority of the state, which had gradually strengthened since the late nineteenth century. Memoirs and novelised accounts of the war years are replete with examples of the strange sense of individual freedom and personal uncertainty to which this hiatus gave rise.35 The increased importance of family networks and of informal social hierarchies was one of the consequences of this new world. So too was the predictable increase in petty crime as Europeans were obliged to confront not a Manichean struggle of black and white but one of manifold shades of grey. This unheroic mentality of ‘getting by’ is now becoming the theme of much recent work on the Alltagsgeschichte of the occupation years in Europe.36 Once again, however, there is a tendency not to think through the implications of this phenomenon for the character of postwar Europe. Yet its social legacies were surely evident in the exuberant consumerism of the postwar era, as Europeans indulged repressed appetites, and in the less disciplined and deferential character of the postwar


36 Gildea, *Marianne in Chains*, exemplifies this trend.
In political terms too, its legacies were also perhaps apparent in a subtle change in the political culture of western Europe. The surviving Europeans who re-entered the structures of national politics at the end of the 1940s were relieved to be alive but also newly reluctant to accept constraints on their individual freedom. Once the rush of liberation had passed, Europeans seemed all too eager to disengage from wider political and ideological agendas, in order to ‘return’ (as it is always somewhat inaccurately expressed) to the private sphere. ‘All we hoped for from the liberation was to live normally again’, as one woman from Toulouse commented to an oral-history enquirer in the 1980s. The pursuit of normality took many forms, but its most striking manifestation in the political sphere was perhaps the more circumspect and demanding attitude which Europeans adopted towards all forms of political mobilisation. That there was some form of re-engagement by most Europeans with democratic values during the war years has long been recognised. But this went hand in hand with a heightened sense of the potential costs and benefits of any form of engagement. To parody the words of John F. Kennedy, citizens tended to ask not what they could do for their rulers, but what their rulers could do for them.

Finally, in terms of these examples, one might consider state bureaucracies. Here the lines of continuity are more visible. Historians have been at pains in recent decades to break down the paper walls that divide prewar, wartime and postwar. Thus, for example, we can see how much the initiatives of the Vichy regime owed to the policies and personnel of the late Third Republic and how the shadow of Fascist bureaucracies and mentalities extended into the postwar Italian Republic. If this point is not to become simply a fin-de-siècle polemic about the illusory revolutionary dawns of the 1940s, however, such continuity needs to be complemented by an awareness of the broader ways in which the state cultures of the 1940s were changing. Thanks in part to the work of Jose Harris, Britain stands out as the historical example about which we are best informed. It is also, alas, among the least typical. The very particular conjuncture of the prominence of a small group of reformers such as William Beveridge, of the British wartime mood of national solidarity and of

the temporary abeyance of the customary influence of interest groups created the space for a jump forward in state responsibility for large areas of welfare during the latter war years.\textsuperscript{42} It was a window of opportunity which closed rapidly, and which, for all of the subsequent praise of Beveridge’s principles, was not replicated elsewhere. Outside Britain, the war years led to a deepening and a self-limiting of the pretensions of state power. The ideological ambitions of left and right during the preceding decades, as well as the dictates of wartime and occupation, had led to a vast increase in the scale and ambitions of regimes. Much of this was improvised and largely ineffective. Even in the case of Germany, state bureaucrats were unable to respond sufficiently effectively to the tasks imposed upon them, obliging Hitler to turn to ad hoc structures based around the SS. Similarly, studies of the efforts of the United States and Britain to impose a viable form of occupation rule on the liberated territories of Europe convey the impression of a highly improvised structure which succeeded in exercising only the most transient and inefficient authority.\textsuperscript{43}

Yet there were undoubtedly forms of progress. State bureaucrats became more experienced in forms of social planning; structures of taxation and public finance finally left the nineteenth century; and, above all, state management of the economy underwent a rapid revolution in terms of methods and mentalities. At the same time, however, the state became more conscious of the tasks that it could not accomplish. The dismantling of state controls of the wartime economies occurred very rapidly after 1945, and the Monnet model of a neo-capitalist revolution in production rapidly replaced state-oriented planning.\textsuperscript{44} In France, the ambitions of state bureaucrats to institute a system of structured industrial relations were broken on the rocks of determined employer opposition.\textsuperscript{45} Most strikingly, the goal (often formulated in wartime exile in London) of state-controlled and universal systems of welfare remained unfulfilled outside Britain and Scandinavia. Elsewhere, especially in Catholic Europe, a mixed and often incomplete system emerged in which state legislation was accompanied by the devolution of much executive responsibility to pre-existing confessional and sectoral social insurance organisations.\textsuperscript{46}


\textsuperscript{43} This is the principal theme of Alice Hills, Britain and the Occupation of Austria, 1943–45 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), but its conclusions could easily be extended to, for example, the cases of Italy and Greece.


\textsuperscript{45} Adam Steinhouse, Workers’ Participation in Post-Liberation France (Lanham, MD, and Oxford: Lexington, 2001).

of the state was thus more pervasive in postwar Europe, but also less obviously coercive or ambitious. State bureaucracies were better resourced, better staffed and more efficient than their predecessors of the 1930s; but they were also more willing to recognise the limits of state power and to share responsibility with social organisations and with an advisory cohort of technocratic experts. 47

Origins are therefore important. The three examples I have presented indicate in very approximate terms how one can draw lines of continuity from the experiences of the war years to the realities of the postwar world. They are, of course, no more than sketches, but they do perhaps suggest that if one changes the agenda of study of wartime Europe to focus less on causes or events and more on outcomes, the broad current of political developments in western Europe after 1945 does not seem so arbitrary or accidental. If the process whereby democracy became the ‘regime of choice’ of postwar Europeans was not preordained, 48 it is difficult to imagine how things could have been radically otherwise. Although it is clearly possible to think of alternative scenarios, such as the establishment of a communist-led regime in a major west European state, it is much less easy to imagine those alternative scenarios sustaining themselves over a prolonged period of time. This is not an argument that one can extend indefinitely across Europe. The experiences of the war years in the Balkans, the killing fields of Poland and those points further east in Europe were different, indeed radically different, and the political and social processes to which they gave rise, for example in the Greek civil war, were similarly different. 49 But in the reduced territory of western Europe there was a logic to the particular model of representative politics which emerged from the war, with its combination of more efficient but less invasive government, more inclusive but unequal welfare provision and the channelling of socioeconomic negotiation into more complex and frequently opaque structures of corporatist negotiation.

Historical explanations that dwell on origins do, however, also have their natural limits. Revolution was not made in 1789 but was sustained by the social forces, political discourses and forms of cultural practice which carried the revolutionary process through the 1790s. Similarly, the democratic order that endured for twenty-five years after the Second World War in the walled garden of western Europe derived much of its power from realities that were internal to the postwar history of Europe. The strangely non-revolutionary character of western Europe during the 1950s and much of the 1960s cannot be explained merely by the events of the preceding years or by the coercive framework imposed by the Cold War. It was


47 See, for example, Hitchcock, France Restored, 1–2.


49 John Coutouvidis and Jaime Reynolds, Poland 1939–1947 (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986); Conway, ‘Greek Civil War’. The cases of Czechoslovakia and Hungary were of course distinctly more ambiguous.
also reinforced by political and social processes that were emphatically postwar in character.

Social class would seem to be a good vantage point from which to approach these realities. Interpretations of almost any other period of modern European history accord considerable importance to conflicts of social class. Yet, once the threshold of 1945 is passed, historians seem inclined to abandon social class in favour of a dizzying digest of statistics of social change, implying that class lost much if not all of its former importance. Yet Europe did not stop being a class society in either the 1940s or the 1960s. Indeed, the conclusion of much sociological work on postwar Europe has been that the opportunities for social mobility (especially out of the industrial working class) were lower, the reduction in income differentials slower and the ‘invisible’ cultural barriers to social mobility more resilient in western Europe than in the United States during the same period. Of course, class cannot become a catch-all framework for analysis. One of the most arresting (and to secular-minded historians surprising) features of the electoral dynamics of postwar Europe is that religious practice remained a much more reliable determinant of electoral behaviour than social class until circa the 1980s in much of western Europe. But class remains an important and necessary means of approaching the history of the era. In particular, much of the solidity of the postwar political order can be explained (outside Scandinavia) in terms of the durability of the class alliance which emerged at the end of the 1940s between a broad swathe of Europe’s rural producers and the professional, public-sector and business sections of the middle class. Expressed in these terms, such a generalisation risks sounding like so much post-Trotskyist rhetoric. However, it does perhaps capture something of the sense in which postwar democracy was structured in such a way that not all were equal participants in the game. In the new political culture, power lay not so much in numbers as in proximity to power through the channels of influence and lobbying. Those who found themselves on the margins of the system, such as the industrial strikers in France in 1947, Belgium

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52 Hartmut Kaebble, A Social History of Western Europe 1880–1980 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1989), 39–59. There were of course manifold differences between the west European states.


during the winter of 1960–1 and Italy in the autumn of 1969, were obliged to resort to more direct but generally less effective forms of action.55

The winners on the other hand were the farmers and much of the middle class. The reversal in the political and, subsequently, economic fortunes of agricultural producers was particularly dramatic. During the interwar years, rural populations had generally been a disadvantaged and discontented group, capable of being mobilised behind the various populist and authoritarian movements of the era. In the postwar years, pitchfork revolts disappeared almost completely from Europe’s politics. Only Poujadism in France in the 1950s (provoked by the Fourth Republic’s intermittent neglect of rural interests) offered some sort of return to the rural protest movements of the 1930s.56 Elsewhere, rural producers (and more especially organisations of commercial farmers) acquired prominent and influential roles in the decision-making processes of nation-states and, subsequently, of European institutions.57 This influence could not, of course, prevent the rapid decline in the numbers employed in European agriculture, but it did ensure that those who remained tended to be more prosperous than in the past. The other beneficiaries were undoubtedly much of the middle class. The term ‘bourgeois’ fits so naturally with our sense of the dynamics of the postwar era that it has perhaps prevented us from noticing the remarkable extent of the bourgeois recapture, or conquest, of political, economic and cultural power in western Europe in the later 1940s.58 This was not the nineteenth-century liberal bourgeoisie of top hats and frock coats but a much broader grouping, which reached out to incorporate new strata such as the technical professions and white-collar employees of the new industries and parastatal bureaucracies. Their economic interests flourished through the new trading and technology capitalism of the postwar years, but so too did their social interests through the construction of systems of welfare, pensions and higher education which worked disproportionately to the benefit of the middle-class nuclear families of postwar Europe.59 This was, especially in contrast with what was to follow, the golden age of a mid-twentieth-century middle class, which had finally come of age.60 Politically, it no longer needed to rely on false saviours to protect it from the largely defunct spectre of revolution. Instead, it was the middle class who staffed the new political and state structures, and who set the tone of the culture of the era.

58 This point is well made in Richard Vinen, Bourgeois Politics in France, 1945–1951 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–11.
59 On the historic victory of the small nuclear family within western Europe see Kaelble, Social History, 15.
were, in the words of the British Conservative prime minister Harold Macmillan at the end of the 1950s, the Europeans who ‘ha[d] never had it so good’.  

The political expression of these social realities was the remarkable hegemony of centre-right politics. This took different forms in different European states. In Britain Conservatism was again the implausible survivor, while in France the inclusive and less doctrinaire Gaullism of the 1960s ultimately emerged as its particular expression. But undoubtedly its most successful and durable manifestation between the Adriatic and the North Sea was Christian Democracy. Christian Democrats ruled more Europeans for more of the time than did fascists in twentieth-century Europe, yet it is remarkable that, in comparison with the enormous historical literature on fascism, socialism and communism, there is still little serious literature on Christian Democracy. Moreover, much of that which does exist remains rooted in the mentality of the movement, privileging its long-term and spiritual origins at the expense of more circumstantial and material factors. It is therefore worth stating the perhaps obvious point that Christian Democracy did not suddenly become the most successful political force in western Europe because various largely minority currents of European Catholics had long been seeking to construct a pluralist form of Catholic politics which engaged with modern society. Religion was indeed an important factor, but less in terms of its ideological content than in terms of the way in which it provided the collective identity and organisational basis upon which the largely Catholic Christian Democrat parties could be built. Issues of religion mattered to many postwar Europeans, partly no doubt because of the prominence that religious faith and the Catholic Church had acquired in local and personal life during the war years. The moral leadership offered by some clergy, the physical sanctuary provided by churches and religious communities and the structures of welfare and solidarity that clustered around the


Churches brought religion back towards the centre of local life in all but the most dechristianised areas of wartime Europe. Moreover, amidst so much political and physical destruction, the Catholic Church and its imposing archipelago of allied social organisations loomed large in the landscape of liberation Europe. The Christian Democrat parties that emerged so rapidly in much of Europe during 1945 and 1946 were the political beneficiaries of this circumstantial but tangible process of ‘reconfessionalisation’. In much of Catholic Europe, the Church proved able to capture the political initiative and to generate a seemingly inexhaustible supply of new elites, possessed of the sense of purpose that came from membership of the ‘imagined community’ of Catholicism.

But, for all that, the durability of Christian Democracy also had a more material basis. As many of the predominantly intellectual founders of the postwar parties soon discovered, the social and political visions fostered in interwar youth movements or wartime resistance were less important than taxation rates for small businesses, child allowances and the price of sugar beet. The most successful Christian Democrat parties of the postwar decades, notably those in the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, Italy and Belgium, were those that succeeded in marrying the idealism of a younger generation of Catholic militants with the social texture of the new Europe. They gave voice to an unambiguously Catholic world-view, based on a fundamental (and largely unattenuated) antipathy towards liberal and socialist values. But, at the same time, they were attentive to the more secular interests and aspirations of their electors. This was made much easier by the internal structures of the parties. Again with the notable exception of the Popular Republican Movement (MRP) in France, the Christian Democrat parties were not predominantly individual membership parties but composed of what in Dutch are termed steden organisations. These Catholic sociopolitical organisations, notably the trade unions, farmers’ organisations and middle-class interest groups, played a major role within the Christian Democrat parties, carving out their share of offices and competing for influence over the policies


of the party. This internal coalitionism ensured that the parties remained tied to the concerns of their electors but also enabled the Christian Democrats to develop a cross-class image of which, for example, the distinctly hesitant efforts of the postwar socialist parties to reach out to non-working-class groups and producer organizations were only a very pale imitation.

There was no single magic factor that explained the rapid success of Christian Democracy and, apart from the decline of the MRP in France, its remarkable staying power in the politics of postwar western Europe. But at its heart lay the way in which it constructed an inclusive politics of limited and largely collective participation. Part of the disdain with which some historians seem to regard Europe during the postwar decades lies in the relative absence of crowds and other forms of popular protest. Noisy and unstructured mass action had largely left Europe for the more distant and romantic revolutions of decolonisation. Yet, this absence was not the simple product of the distractions of cars and refrigerators, still less the sedative of television. It reflected the mundane fact that the rules of the democratic game had changed. In place of noisy elections and turbulent parliaments, there had developed a less glamorous but more predictable means of conducting business. Parliaments remained the public face of democracy, but, again with the partial exception of Fourth Republic France, their activities were less important than what happened behind the scenes in the complex world of intra- and inter-party negotiations and corporatist institutions. Policy-making had become a much more specialist business in which civil servants, technical experts and representatives of interest groups met far from the disruptive noise of public debate. This new form of polity, of which the institutions of the European Union might be regarded as the greatest illustration and memorial, was one in which citizens participated not as activist individuals but as members of collective interest groups seeking to ensure that they received at least


72 Larry Siedentop, Democracy in Europe (London: Allen Lane, 2000) provides an interesting but somewhat ahistorical approach to this phenomenon. See, for example, his misplaced determination to locate the origins of the European Union's bureaucratic culture in a distinctively French model of the state: 102–21.
their fair share of the political offices, bureaucratic posts and material benefits that lay within the gift of the state.73 At the political level, multi-party coalition governments constructed what political scientists have come to term ‘consociational democracy’,74 while at the economic level increasingly elaborate corporatist institutions embedded employers and labour in a culture of reciprocal compromises.75 The shortcomings of this form of democracy in terms of bureaucratic inefficiency, a lack of transparency and the withering of active citizenship were considerable. But, after Europe’s previous experiments with democratic politics, it also had the not insignificant advantages of predictability and inclusiveness.

It was also a model of politics that, though it did not empower women, certainly involved them. Assessing the place of women in postwar European life is a problem which seems to trouble many historians. Especially among those who remain wedded to mapping a process of progressive emancipation during the twentieth century, the postwar decades are problematic. The absence of any surge in the rhetoric and aspiration of gender equality in the years that followed the war seems peculiar,76 and is all too often explained in terms of a resurgent masculinity evident in the now obligatory references to the head shavings that occurred in some areas of liberation Europe.77 Yet, at the same time, it is an obvious fact that it was in the post-1945 era that the majority of European adults who were women voted, either after a lengthy hiatus or for the first time. This dramatic enfranchisement cannot be ignored simply because, as has been exhaustively demonstrated, its implementation was a product of factors almost entirely independent of women.78 Instead, it is perhaps necessary to adopt a new approach to the gender politics of postwar western Europe that, in place

78 Sylvie Chaperon, “‘Feminism is dead. Long live Feminism!’” The Women’s Movement in France at the Liberation, 1944–1946, and Anna Rossi-Doria, ‘Italian Women enter Politics’, in Claire Duchen and
of bemoaning the relative absence of discourses of liberation, seeks out the ways in which a female presence can be identified in politics and policy-making. These took largely gendered forms. The new agenda of politics in the postwar era, with its emphasis on family, welfare and education, might have lacked some of the passion of preceding political conflicts, but it offered new opportunities for women in terms of participation and implementation. Women, for example, were the beneficiaries of many of the new welfare structures, in the postwar decades women's organisations acquired a new influence as lobbyists in the corridors of power; and women entered in unprecedented numbers the bureaucracies of parastatal social institutions and local government. Little or none of this prepared, except in the most subterranean manner, the gender changes of subsequent decades. Indeed, these were often implemented by women, such as those active in the powerful Catholic women's organisations, who repeatedly emphasised the language of separate spheres. But it was indicative of a new assertiveness on the part of women, who participated in the new culture of consumerism and welfare not so much as the victims of capitalist advertising and male-constructed rhetoric but as self-conscious citizens.

Of course, none of this was the simple achievement of Christian Democrat politicians, even if, in the case of the process of European integration, the extent of their influence was remarkable. The broader success was the construction of an apparatus of state – society mediation, which lasted for roughly twenty-five years. This operated, as has been famously argued by Alan Milward, through the framework of the nation-state. The 'European rescue of the nation-state' was indeed one of the most remarkable features of the post-1945 era, and the influence of Milward's argument is rightly evident in the way in which processes of limited European integration now have a much more modest place in general narratives of the history of postwar Europe. But it also needs to be recognised that the national framework within which


80 This applied of course to the particularly controversial issue of benefits paid to war widows. See, for example, Elizabeth Heineman, 'Gender, Public Policy and Memory: Waiting Wives and War Widows in the Postwar Germanys', in Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., The Work of Memory. New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 220–25.


84 For a rather extreme example of this new-found scepticism about the emergence of a European polity, see Mary Fulbrook, ‘Conclusion’, in Mary Fulbrook, ed., Europe since 1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 278: 'What is perhaps distinctive about the latter half of the twentieth century is that, for many Europeans, the existence of sovereign nation states seemed so utterly natural, so utterly taken for granted, that wider patterns of interdependence and interaction over centuries almost disappeared from their mental horizons.'
postwar policy-making occurred was perhaps less important than the nature of the policy-making itself. The real success in the postwar decades was the construction of a form of policy-making that combined more technocratic mechanisms of government with the involvement of the representatives of the principal social forces.

Success was not universal. The enduring problems of the Italian Republic and the Belgian nation-state demonstrate the limitations of the postwar democratic model. Much the most dramatic case of failure was, however, that of the Fourth Republic in France. In the context of an essay on the success of postwar democracy, it is tempting to explain away the crisis of 1958 as (yet another) French exception, brought on by the specific crisis in Algiers and the more general legacies of the war and of longer-term Franco-French ideological conflicts. Such explanations obviously have their place. But the inglorious demise of the Fourth Republic and its replacement by a regime that, it should be recalled, deviated less than its founder claimed from its predecessor, does also serve to throw into relief certain factors general to the history of postwar democracy. The structural problems of the Fourth Republic could perhaps be defined as threefold: the electoral fracturing of the non-socialist centre and centre-right of the political spectrum; the difficulties in constructing a sufficiently responsive ‘transmission belt’ between the grievances of certain social constituencies, notably the middle class and farmers, and the policies of the successive governments; and the collapse of state authority under the pressure of the challenges of decolonisation and the insurgency in Algeria. These problems were not unique: decolonisation was a major challenge to the postwar regimes in the Netherlands and Belgium, while the alienation of certain interest groups from the political process occurred intermittently in many of the postwar states. What was distinctive about the French case was the conjuncture of these factors to create a situation in which the viability of the regime came into question.85

What happened in France could have been replicated elsewhere. That it was not, however, would seem to be more than the product of the accidents of good fortune. In general the virtuous circle of participation and provision, supported of course by the tax revenues generated by unprecedented economic growth, created a new culture of political stability. West Europeans grew accustomed to the ways in which postwar politics worked and internalised the norms on which they were based.86 Attacks on invasive governmental power were far less vocal than they had been in the 1930s or would become in the 1970s, and for perhaps the first time most Europeans felt themselves to be net beneficiaries of the taxation – provision equation. West Europeans were not, contrary to what some superficial descriptions of postwar prosperity seem to suggest, uniformly contented. But the appetite for fundamental change had diminished (and continued to diminish) in ways that were not merely the product of political repression or cultural indoctrination. The regimes

86 The development of a culture of democracy is of course an amorphous process. It is explored for an earlier but comparable period in Margaret Anderson, Practicing Democracy. Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
of postwar western Europe were accepted not merely as efficient or preferable to their alternatives. They also connected, at least in much of northern Europe, with more long-standing and embedded notions of political legitimacy.87

This sense of postwar west European democracy as the victory of a particular model of mass politics seems to me to be the best way of approaching the problem posed at the beginning of this paper by the stability and uniformity of European politics in the postwar era. It also, in conclusion, has two further implications. The first is that, even if we understand very imperfectly the dynamics of what happened in Europe from the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards, we can perhaps grasp that the realities which had provided the basis for the postwar model no longer held true. The interests of rural Europe (at least in the west and the north) no longer had the same weight in the political process. The protected world of the European bourgeoisie was eroded, if it did not entirely collapse, during the economic crises of the 1970s. Working-class demands, so long marginalised, returned centre stage with the strike waves of the early 1970s in states such as Italy. The postwar narrowing of the spectrum of permissible politics was reversed with the emergence of New Leftist movements, liberated from the yoke of loyalty to Brezhnevian communism, and of a new and often violent politics of the right. Christian Democracy, already weakened by the sudden decline in religious practice during the 1960s and the changes inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council, lost votes, office and its privileged role as the mediating space of Europe’s postwar social compromises. The consequence of all of these changes was not a collapse of western Europe’s democratic norms. Indeed, one of the more remarkable features of the 1970s is how democratic structures were preserved (albeit not without some damage) even as the realities on which those structures had been based disappeared. More than that, the decade saw the extension of the postwar model of democracy to Portugal, Greece and Spain. Nevertheless, the basis of parliamentary democracy in the 1970s and 1980s was clearly different, and both less emphatic and less consensual than it had been in the preceding decades. The contest between different definitions of democracy had returned. Nation-states were less viable, the mechanisms of government less effective and the populations less contented than in the preceding era. Europeans had not come to the end of their experience of democracy, but western Europe’s Democratic Age had come to a close.

The second implication concerns the history of democracy itself. Perhaps the most substantial work to appear on this subject in the last couple of decades is the imposing study by Geoff Eley of the struggle for democracy in Europe from the nineteenth century to the present day.88 For all of its impressive breadth and forceful argument, it seems to me to be a book that is posited upon a mistaken assumption. To assert that a central thread of European history during the twentieth century was the struggle (accomplished, it should be noted in passing, almost exclusively

87 Legitimacy is emerging as a new theme in the history of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. See the comments of Peter Romijn, ‘Boozaardig bestuur’ (Amsterdam: Vosiuspers, 2003), 18–21.
by the left) for an evolving but essentially homogenous democratic model risks occulting the extent to which twentieth-century European politics was a struggle between contesting models of democracy, including ideologies of the left and the right which one might not automatically associate now with the practice of democracy. Democracy was therefore a contested term, and one that rarely achieved any single definition. The postwar era from the late 1940s to the early 1970s was perhaps one of those exceptional periods, at least in the restricted territories of western Europe. But the character of the democracy of that era, and more especially its obvious shortcomings in terms of limited participation, enduring social and regional inequality and the absence of a culture of active citizenship, demonstrates also that democracy is not a gradually perfectible political model. Its history is one not of progress but of a series of discontinuous paradigms.

89 Eley writes of ‘a century of democratic struggle’ during which ‘the frontier of democracy’ was moved steadily forward under the agency of the political left: Eley, Forging Democracy, 12, 503–4.