The forward march of democracy halted?

Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe

Jan-Werner Müller

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

Reviewed by Christopher Brooke

There may be some readers of this journal who think like this: that 1945-73 was a 'golden age of social democracy' in Western Europe, which experienced a flowering of democratic politics in the wake of the fascist catastrophe; that some time during the 1970s the 'forward march of labour' was 'halted', in this country, at least, and there has been a 'crisis of social democracy' bound up with the ascendancy of Thatcherism pretty much ever since. Indeed, the very title of this journal – *Renewal* – is a nod to something like this narrative. People who think things like this may also be the kind who think that ideas have always played a greater role in the life of the left than they have on the right, and that this is particularly true when we compare the extremes of the political spectrum, communism and fascism; and, further, that with the striking exceptions of these particular political religions, twentieth-century politics in Europe has been a largely secular affair. And while I very much doubt that Jan-Werner Müller had such a hypothetical reader of *Renewal* in mind as he was working on his excellent new history of political ideas in twentieth-century Europe, he might as well have been writing for precisely such a person, as he repeatedly seeks to challenge views like these – not because *Contesting Democracy* is any kind of contribution to a distinctively right-wing historiography, but because with a look back at the twentieth century from our own vantage point early in the twenty-first, this kind of bog-standard social democratic or secularist story seems to miss out quite so much of what is clearly very important, and fails to make sense of so much of what actually happened.

The thinker who above all anchors Müller's explorations of twentieth-century political ideas is the German sociologist Max Weber, who died in 1920 and who worried about the future of free individuality in a necessarily bureaucratised society; of responsible political action in a disenchanted world lacking shared collective meanings; and of stable liberal regimes in a rapidly democratising continent. The older liberalism was discredited – it had been shown to be hopelessly naïve in the run-up to the crisis of 1914 (which did for the British Liberal Party), and its cherished principle of national self-determination after the War seemed to demand an 'unmixing of peoples', which 'often translated into invitations to physical or, at least, psychological violence: threats, bullying, forced deportation and even killing' (p. 22). Another thinker to whom Müller returns repeatedly in his book is the arch-anti-liberal Georges Sorel (1847-1922), who wrote of the crucial place occupied by myth in political life, and who found admirers on both left and right: the syndicalists, for example, with their myth of the general strike, or the fascists, with their myth of the nation.

Renewal 20.2-3 12/09/2012 08:04 Page 144

While Müller traces out György Lukács's long revolutionary career from 1918 to 1956, he is not terribly interested in the arguments that the Marxists might have conducted among themselves: Rosa Luxemburg appears only fleetingly (p. 56), the Trotskyists scarcely feature at all. Rather than approaching Bolshevism through any kind of analysis of international political economy, Müller's account of the Russian Revolution is framed by Weber's opinion that socialism meant universal bureaucratisation and Lenin's creation of a remarkable new political instrument for the pursuit of his goals, the vanguard party. (Lenin himself remarked (p. 35) that 'it is impossible to differentiate a political question from an organisational one'). Stalinism is then treated largely as a collection of successful techniques of organisation and domination separated from any particular intellectual content – a matter of 'what works', to use a more familiar recent political idiom. But if Müller de-emphasises the role of ideas among the communists, he leans the other way when he turns his attention to the far right. Benito Mussolini's supporters drew variously on strands they found in Sorel, futurism, and corporatism, for example, and one of Italy's leading philosophers, Giovanni Gentile, became a sophisticated apologist for the new regime. And although the Nazis were less interested in the contribution that intellectuals might make to their new order, and much of their own thinking was patently all over the place, they took their racism – what Müller calls their 'biological determinism' – very seriously indeed.

A theme that Müller pursues throughout *Contesting Democracy* is the idea of 'remaking souls' – that what ideologues sought was the transformation of human beings in order to fit them to, and thereby also to make viable, the different kinds of social order they advocated. The totalitarians of left and right were obviously playing this game – Müller has some fun juxtaposing Lenin, who wanted to turn Russians into Germans, with Gramsci, who wanted Italians to become Americans – but they were by no means the only ones. The Swedish social democrats appear in this account as the victors in a Gramscian war of position, reshaping the national culture from the 1930s around a remarkably successful electoral project, squarely built around the cross-class alliance between workers and peasants that the Marxists had tried to realise elsewhere. But this social democratic model was not really available for export: Sweden was in an unusually advantageous position in the inter-war period, with no deep constitutional conflicts, and – apart from the Åland Islands – no significant national minorities (p. 67). And Müller emphasises the dark side of Swedish social democracy: the eugenics policy through which thousands of Swedish women were compulsorily sterilised over four decades in pursuit of a new kind of national community.

It may be true that the working class often does well in the aftermath of war – the NHS of 1948, for example, following on from victory in 1945. But outside Britain, the working class emerged from the Second World War in a pretty battered condition, and the post-war order in continental Western Europe was built on the foundations of a new cross-class alliance to exclude it from political power. This was the entente between the middle class and the peasantry, held together in Germany and Italy by the ideology we know as Christian Democracy, and its victory is really the focal point of Müller's book. What he wants to emphasise is the historic significance of the reconciliation between the Catholic Church and what we might call the revolutionary tradition of 1789. Even if the Vatican itself tried to keep its options on the hard right open, when it sought to prevent a ban on the Italian Social Movement (p. 147), 'Christian Democrats in post-war Europe were no longer in the business of grudgingly and resentfully accommodating the modern world – Christian Democrats really became democrats' (p. 135). And the democratic ideology they fashioned – the key propagandist being Jacques Maritain, with inspiration from the 'personalism' of Emmanuel Mounier – 'embraced human rights as indispensable to a proper Catholic view of the world' (ibid.). (Once again, liberalism was at a low ebb, this time widely regarded as too relativistic, as theories of natural law enjoyed a recrudescence).

The new post-war regimes were certainly democratic, but they were crafted by men who believed that inter-war liberal parliamentary politics had facilitated the rise of the fascists, and they sought stability by limiting democracy. Legislatures were weakened, judicial oversight and administrative agencies were strengthened, and constitutional courts beyond the reach of democratic majorities were erected to safeguard individual rights in the new political order. The inter-war 'trenchocracy' gave way to post-war technocracy with what Müller calls the triumph of 'a new, chastened Weberian politics' (p. 129). It could also be seen as opening the way to a new kind of Sorelian politics, too. Alcide De Gaspari, the first Christian Democratic prime minister in Italy, remarked in a speech that 'some said that the European federation is a myth'. It's true, he said, 'it is a myth in the Sorelian sense'. But, he went on to ask the Senate, 'Do you prefer the myth of dictatorship, the myth of power, the myth of one nation's flag, even if it is accompanied by heroism?' (p. 142). The European Economic Community of the 1950s – nowadays, the European Union – was the expression of such a myth, and it was also yet another institution for limiting national democratic sovereignty, built around two policies that reflected the dominant class alliance at the heart of the new European order – a common market for the bourgeoisie, and extensive subsidies for agricultural small-holders. (The other dominant Sorelian myth of our times, that of human rights, took institutional form in the same decade as the European Convention on Human Rights).

Two final chapters explore the twin challenges this Christian Democratic order faced (as well as the disintegration of the Eastern bloc). First, there is the one we associate with 'the 1960s' in general and '1968' in particular, a radical challenge directed against the democratic limits of post-war regimes. This was a political assault which failed, but which – partly as a by-product, partly as a backlash – catalysed the remarkable social transformations associated above all with feminism and gay liberation. Second, there is the neo-liberal advance that made significant gains from the 1970s, and which – certainly in Britain, but not only in Britain – changed the ways in which states went about the business of political economy. But even here, Müller stresses the limits of neo-liberal success. Margaret Thatcher herself remarked that 'economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul', aligning her project with the ambitions of the inter-war doctrines considered earlier, and there are good reasons to think that she never really achieved this goal. In short, the fundamentals of Christian Democratic Europe have persisted down to the present day – and it is that technocratic order of constrained national democracy that is being tested as never before in the crucible of the crisis that swirls around the eurozone today.

Christopher Brooke is Lecturer in Politics in the School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies at the University of Bristol. He is the author of *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton University Press, 2012).