
Jan-Werner Müller’s *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* is the first history of European political thought to be published since the end of the Cold War. Müller’s approach to his subject contrasts with that of Karl Dietrich Bracher, whose *The Age of Ideologies*, is the last comparable book on this topic to have been published before the collapse of communism. Where Bracher stressed the irrational, political religious appeal of fascist and communist ideologies, Müller, without entirely rejecting such interpretations, emphasises the practical, problem-solving claims and the institutional manifestations of the new ideologies that emerged from the rubble of the First World War.

Müller presents World War One as a threshold between an ‘Age of Security’, characterised by liberal optimism, internationalism and peace between predominantly monarchist states, and a new age of uncertainty resulting from the total collapse of traditional forms of political legitimacy. The necessity of formulating new justifications for political rule ushered in ‘an age of compulsive doctrine production (and doctrine consumption)’ (3). Müller’s central thesis is that, despite the profound institutional crisis of democracy in the interwar years, democracy provided a sort of universal language of political legitimisation after the First World War. The history of European political thought in the twentieth century thus becomes primarily a history of contesting the meaning of democracy.

This argument is more persuasive when it is applied to socialist and communist political thought (chapter 2) than as an interpretation of fascist, and especially Nazi, ideology (chapter 3), where the political religion theory used by Bracher arguably offers a more useful approach. Müller’s argument is thus most
comprehensively convincing when applied to the post-1945 period when fascism had been fundamentally discredited. The most significant ideological development in Western Europe during these years was, Müller argues, the reconciliation of Catholic political thought to democracy: it was primarily Christian, not social, democracy that legitimised the post-war order.

After 1945, democratic legitimacy in the West was re-imagined so as to de-emphasise popular sovereignty and promote a new constitutionalist ethos. Institutionally, this translated into a form of ‘constrained democracy’ characterised by a relative strengthening of executive over legislative functions and the rise of constitutional courts. The ‘popular democracies’ established in post-war central and Eastern Europe laid claim to a more substantive realisation of democracy, but one that in reality was even more constrained than the model adopted in the West. On both sides of the iron curtain, however, the critique of the post-war settlements was often formulated in a common language of self-management and, later, human rights.

Müller suggests that whereas the importance of intellectuals in Western Europe declined after 1968, intellectuals were central to the emergence of subtle new forms of dissent in communist countries during the same period. Especially after the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which officially committed signatory states to uphold human rights, dissent took the form of an insistent legal positivism challenging states simply to comply with their own laws. Nothing of comparable influence occurred in Western Europe, where the late 1970s witnessed a dramatic decline in Marxist thought and the rise of neo-liberalism.

Overall Müller’s practical, institutionally sensitive approach to the history of political ideas in twentieth-century Europe is largely successful, although there are some moments when the book tilts towards political history pure and simple. It is extremely well written and mostly well balanced in its treatment of East and West,
the familiar and the esoteric. Although it adopts a different angle of approach, *Contesting Democracy* stands alongside Bracher’s *Age of Ideologies* as a major contribution to its field, and a timely historical warning against liberal democratic complacency.

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Emile Perreau-Saussine’s text boasts endorsements on its jacket-cover from authorities as diverse as Charles Taylor and Raymond Geuss, and a laudatory foreword by Alasdair MacIntyre. Tragically, each encomium comes as eulogy; Perreau-Saussine died in February 2010, at the age of 37. But this posthumous publication bears witness to much more than a promising talent; it is, as MacIntyre notes, an extraordinary work of political imagination, as well a compelling contribution to the contested history it seeks so boldly to interpret.

In four concise chapters, Perreau-Saussine charts the unfolding of an epic ecclesiological problematic: the Catholic Church’s faltering attempts to find its bearings in the unfamiliar and unforgiving terrain of the modern world; its gradual construction of a *modus vivendi* with liberalism and democracy. This is a narrative customarily structured around the first and second Vatican councils (1869-70; 1962-65) and Perreau-Saussine defers to convention here. His first two chapters seek the ‘origins of Vatican I’ (5) in the deconfessionalisation of the state and the struggle, within the Church, between forces Gallican and Ultramontane. The second