

Introduction

Reflections on the Place of Democracy in the Process of European Integration

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What is the place of democracy in the project for a United Europe these days? The democratic character of the European project has gained new momentum with the war in Ukraine. The discourse about “Ukraine’s place in our European family,” with the EU making democracy its main long-term goal, is no doubt a pillar of today’s public discourse. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, addressing the Ukrainian Parliament on 1 July 2022, insisted on the vision of a free Ukraine that is part of a democratic Europe, reinforcing the view of a fully-fledged democracy in place since the Maidan protests of 2014.¹ “You have kept your state and your democracy up and running against all odds. I saw it with my own eyes, after taking the train to Kyiv twice since the beginning of the war. You have kept the Parliament open even in the darkest days.” The idea of a reunion with the European family, so typical in the discourse of eastward enlargement after 1989, has returned—and democracy is a fundamental component of this European family life.

European leaders have often identified democracy as one of the fundamental elements driving the construction of Europe, complemented by others such as peace, welfare, social justice, and the rule of law. In 2012, the European Union was awarded the Nobel peace prize because it has “for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe.”² Historian Konrad Jarusch, in his 2021 book *Embattled Europe*, describes how the European experience has evolved along these lines over the past three decades, stressing how Europe provides an informative guide to the possibilities and problems of progressive politics in the twenty-first century. He claims that the European model’s first positive trait is the existence of a genuinely

democratic election system that seeks to encourage citizen involvement. He argues that the democratic character of Europe is complemented by peaceful international behavior and choice for the welfare state, offering a sense of security and solidarity that is a preserve of the EU member states.³ His description of the European project over the last thirty years reflects the rosy picture of “Europe as a civilian power” sketched by François Duchêne in his famous 1972 piece on “The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence”: a vision of Europe as a progressive, ideal force in world politics. In interpreting the new global vocation envisaged by European institutions at the time, Duchêne focused on the following elements: promoting welfare and social justice, unique attention to the poor at home and abroad, spreading democracy, and a revival of human rights. “The European Community,” he claimed, “must be a force for the international diffusion of civilian and democratic standards, or it will be more or less the victim of power politics run by powers stronger and more cohesive than itself.”⁴

In the 1970s, democracy was thus identified as a critical element of “civilian power Europe.” The road to making democracy an integral part of the project of uniting Europe, however, was still rough. Kiran Patel argues compellingly in his *Project Europe* that, at the time, the European Community was to inject new values into a project that responded to profound changes on the international scene and in the social and economic setting worldwide.⁵ The new leadership installed at the turn of the decade was meant to cope with the demands of a rebellious youth movement, with dramatic changes in the global economy, with the prospects of a first enlargement to include an ambitious new member such as the United Kingdom, and with the implications of the latest round of decolonization after the collapse of the Portuguese empire. The transition to democracy in the Mediterranean, with Greece, Spain, and Portugal rejecting their autocratic governments, made of democracy a powerful driving mission. Europe emerged as a normative power, a community of values that not only practiced democracy and social justice within its borders but also wanted to export its principles and, increasingly, the methods to implement them. Reflections on European identity, which in the early 1970s were formulated looking outwards, instilled a sense of disappointment in many quarters. The democratic identity, quintessential to the single European countries, was not so manifest in the institutional setting of the Community. This came as a new task for the European Community. The efforts to move towards a different kind of Community were a constant source of frustration. In both the economic and institutional settings, the concept of eurosclerosis described the disappointment with the slow progress toward a

closer European union. The European Summit of the Hague in December 1969, with the visionary impetus of the social democratization of European politics and the new leadership, had raised hopes.⁶ Many voices, including the European Parliament, asked to define the European project in constitutional terms. The constitutional drive came then in another wave in the 1990s, with animated debates after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. Discussions revolved around the European constitutional order and the EU as “a different kind of democracy.”⁷ This time, many more complained about incomplete participatory democracy in Europe. At best, the EU, born in 1992, was an indirect form of democracy based on delegating power from nation-states—complained political scientists and philosophers, pointing at the perceived democratic deficit in the European project.⁸ Frustration was amplified by the fact that the history of democracy, like the one of the European construction or modernity, is by nature progressive. This history is best told forward, with increasing participation and more rights.⁹

This collection aims to study the contested trajectory of democracy within the European project. The introduction covers how democracy and Europeanness intertwined throughout the years from the aftermath of the Second World War until the turn of the 1970s, when democracy became a mission for Europe. It then turns to how the essays included in the book deal with the interrelationship between the history of democracy and the history of Europe and the debates around the democratic deficit until today.

Democracy was crucial in the reconstruction of Europe after 1945. In the aftermath of the Second World War, it was clearly identified as a priority. Writing post-war constitutions meant articulating ideas of democratic identity. Democracy has a relevant tradition of being the inspirational discourse of modern peace-making. Making the world safe for democracy was the Wilsonian principle that ruled throughout the twentieth century. During the First and the Second World Wars, the winning coalitions were fighting for democracy and portrayed the parliamentary government as a superior political system.¹⁰ A democratic form of government was essential to countries that emerged victorious or liberated from fascism. Democracy was used as an ideology against fascism and its resurgence. In the Declaration of Liberated Europe agreed upon in Yalta in February 1945, the “Big Three” (Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin) promised to help all liberated peoples “to solve by democratic means their pressing political and economic problems” through “free elections of Governments responsive to the will of the people.”¹¹ The war alliance defined itself as an alliance of great democracies. It is not surprising, therefore, that democracy was a buzzword everywhere, in the West and the East alike. Its meaning, however, was not the same. In the West, democracy primarily meant free elections. The United States

offered denazification, democratization, and post-war recovery in one bundle. Amerika Häuser were set up in 1946 all over occupied Germany, serving the purpose of re-education, which meant learning and applying the principles of American democracy. In communist countries, democracy primarily meant freedom from fascism by purging Nazi collaborators from politics and society.

Very soon, though, with the inception of the Cold War, democracy was dramatically reconceptualized, losing a little of its main anti-fascist traits and morphing into anti-communism in the West and anti-capitalism in the East. In Western political and intellectual discourse, Western Europe came to be seen as the home to freedom and true democracy, as opposed to the fake democracy on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The Congress of Cultural Freedom was an important setting that popularized the mix of liberal democracy and intellectual freedom as the guiding principles in the reconstruction of Western Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, a new governance model applied: people's democracy. People's democracies retained parliamentary forms and multi-party systems. Very soon, though, they tipped toward one-party communist rule. Later, in the 1950s, they were promoted worldwide as national democracies and became fundamental to exporting a Soviet-friendly setup to the Third World, with economic empowerment supplementing the concept of democracy.¹²

In Western Europe, democracy was a shared project. Liberation restored pre-war institutions of representative government, which were held by elites born in the 1880s who had suffered the wrongs of fascism and were determined to come to terms with the past. Under their guidance, democratic stabilization proceeded swiftly.¹³ It was associated with the promulgation of remarkably innovative democratic constitutions. All over Western Europe, political elites were increasingly speaking the same language. There was a substantial convergence in how democracy was defined, experienced, and practiced in continental Europe—in France, Germany, the Benelux countries, and Italy. Democracy as a set of commonly shared values and a political system included notions of European identity, and political democracy became a site of Europeanization.¹⁴ Catholic forces adopted democracy as their prime inspiration, seeking to reconcile religious and humanistic values with parliamentary institutions. Jacques Maritain's 1943 work on Christian democracy became a reference.¹⁵ By the mid-1950s, the defense of Western civilization was one of the cardinal principles of Christian democracy. Party leaders and intellectuals shaped a Christian European culture that, in contrast to the liberal primacy of the nation-state, would bring about a new era of European cooperation. Democracy after 1945 was understood as a method to reconcile freedom, peace, and social

justice—to borrow the words of one of the Christian democrat fathers of Europe, Alcide De Gasperi.¹⁶ Thanks to the rapid economic growth of the postwar decades, European governance became a subtle mix of social democracy and Christian democracy. Political parties and social actors made the welfare state the dominant feature of European democracies, thus creating a mix of welfare-state with free-market traits that became a distinct European model. Social democratic concepts of planning and the Christian democratic idea of subsidiarity were fundamental notions that spilled over into bigger, European-wide projects that found their political and ideological borders in the Cold War confrontation. West European socialists began to stress the democratic character of socialism in the West as opposed to socialism on the other side of the Iron Curtain—and social-democratic parties were born as moderate splinters of socialism.¹⁷

Democracy was a shared ideal in political elites but did not enter immediately project Europe. In historiography, the inception of the European project is mainly described as the result of three concurring plans: Europe as a continental project for maintaining peace in Europe; Europe as a transatlantic project to fight the Cold War; and Europe as a project to support the declining and eventually collapsing colonial empires. The democratic character belonged to all three different albeit intertwined projects, but it was not especially stressed. Only partially did European integration identify with establishing supranational self-governing institutions that would cement democracy. The reason is obvious, up to a certain extent. It lies in post-war European states' resistance to a federal project for uniting Europe. It was fundamental that European construction was voided of much of its political potential to ensure that cooperation in the European project would not undermine national sovereignty. Therefore, democracy was not to be part of projects for Europe: it was a *domain réservé*, like defense, a prerogative of nation-states. The troubled agony of the project for a European Defence Community in 1954 and of the European Political Community attached to it made it especially clear.¹⁸ Scholars rightly focus on the “two forgotten communities” as the lost opportunity for substantial powers for the European Assembly.¹⁹ Of the several projects for uniting Europe, the Council of Europe, born in 1949, was the only European space to discuss democracy and rights. After all, even the idealistic Union of European Federalists had a vague conceptualization of democracy as a European value. Their idea of Europe “was certainly not directly identified with democracy, political unification or any particular economic model.”²⁰ Neither the Spaak Report that launched the negotiations in the mid-1950s nor the 1957 Treaties of Rome expressed any clear commitment to democracy as a fundamental principle and membership criterion. Civil or human rights received no mention in

the preamble of the EEC treaty, which provided just a general reference to liberty. Only later, in what Daniel Thomas describes as the decade of the “community of parliamentary democracies” (1962–1969) was the priority of democratic principles and institutions increasingly endorsed, albeit in somewhat marginalized documents (the European Parliamentary Assembly document known as the Birkelbach Report) or in contested projects such as the Fouchet plans of 1961/62, which mentioned defending democracy and human rights as an objective.²¹

Parliamentary democracy was fundamental in defining a Western style of government in Cold War terms. But what about the role of dependent territories? Right after the war, many West European countries were colonial empires in decline. Facing increasing pressures for decolonization, they resorted to European solidarity as a tool to preserve the empire.²² The civilizing mission was inspired by the idea of defending European values and democracy. In his plans for the League of Nations, Jan Christian Smuts was clear that spreading civilization was a fundamental task of free democracies.²³ Democracy was not per se in the civilizing mission package of the interwar years. Double standards applied: democracy was desirable for the white people in Europe, but surely not for the colonies. Differentiated regimes were in place in terms of rights and citizenship. After all, many intellectuals still identified with the words of historian Hugh Seton-Watson, to whom decolonization was not “a glorious extension of democracy, but a tragic delay of civilization, like the fall of the Roman empire.”²⁴ Democracy was a constituent part of civilization, a particular trait of the West and the civilized Global North. But was teaching democracy to newly independent countries in Asia and Africa on the “to-do list”? It was often not. In the discussion around the *Union française* in 1946, Léopold Senghor praised the draft constitution because it was based on the prospect of a federal democracy, which offered a new humanism connecting the colonies and France.²⁵ However, he was quite the exception: most African founding fathers of the post-colonial world did not insist on democracy as a political project. They were not interested in cooperating with the EEC in order to import European concepts of democracy. They were interested in trade and development—and adopted the language of development as the tool for real, practical emancipation.

The end of the 1960s marked, no doubt, a turning point for the role of democracy in the European project. The rebelling youth around 1968 had plans for reinventing a democratic society by turning away from the model of democracy designed after 1945 with the directing role of the state. It imagined a democracy in which everybody would have a voice by introducing alternative arenas for democratic discussion, such as general assemblies,

workplace meetings, and student sit-ins.²⁶ The wind of change opened new political avenues. Visionary social-democratic elites were personified by Willy Brandt and Olof Palme, who included values in their political reasoning. The EC gained a new ethic dimension, too. The document on the European identity published in December 1973 referred to “the cherished values of their legal, political, and moral order.” In the second half of the decade, a new sense of mission developed, made of guarding democracy and civil human rights. With the collapse of autocratic regimes on the northern shore of the Mediterranean, the European Community became a tool to anchor democracy and regain democratic status. The case of Spain became especially paradigmatic.²⁷ EC membership became conditional on sharing values, the rule of law, and democratic standards. The Community promptly embraced democratization as a new civilizing mission and turned enlargement into foreign policy.²⁸

The 1970s were undoubtedly a pivotal moment, and many of the essays collected in this volume discuss this transition. From different perspectives and spanning from the early twentieth century until the present day, they offer details and interpretations of the disjuncture between democracy in European nation states and democracy in the European project and deal with the controversial concept of democratic deficit. In the first chapter, Martin Conway explores what he defines as the paradox of European democratic identity: even though democracy has been the *raison d’être* for postwar Europe, it has not been central to uniting Europe. The reconstruction of democracy in the single European states and the European integration process were independent projects that ran in parallel but influenced and reinforced one another. The dynamics of European integration changed how Europeans think of democracy, with Europe occasionally emerging as a laboratory of innovative policies and navigating the making of a new democratic culture. Wolfram Kaiser centers his argument on the nature of the European project as an international organization of a particular kind that mimics the state right now but did not do so in the beginning. Democracy, he argues, was not at all part of the tale until the 1970s. His exploration of what he calls “the components of the European soul” (intergovernmentalism, technocratic internationalism, and neo-corporatist concertation practiced by the trade unions) shows that European leaders were uncompromising and confirms the interpretation offered by Alan Milward that the site of democracy was exclusively the nation-state, and European integration was, for a long time, purely a mechanism for strengthening the re-established national democracies.²⁹

When switching to European institutions, however, the picture acquires different nuances. Piers Ludlow, Umberto Tulli, and Benedetto Zaccaria

look at the injection of democracy into European institutions by adopting the point of view of different actors. Ludlow explores how the European Commission pledged to empower the European Parliament. His intriguing account starts with the European Commission, charmed by the thought of encouraging the Assembly in order to limit the powers of national governments. Most Presidents supported the Parliament's acquisition of new powers, in the awareness that promoting democracy was a credible mission only if the Community strengthened its democratic standing. But the effort to counter the democratic deficit mainly resulted in dangerous inter-institutional tensions. The democratic deficit is at the core of Gabriele D'Ottavio's piece, which elaborates on the concept as a variable dependent on culture. He does so by zooming into a specific case study: constructing a democratic reading of European integration through audio-visual propaganda in post-war Italy. The case of RAI-TV fashioning an all-positive picture of a united Europe is especially telling. It explains how complex it was to rekindle enthusiasm for the project. Umberto Tulli's chapter also deals with information campaigns. It argues that the democratic deficit became problematic in the early 1970s because of the feeling that democracy was suffering at all levels throughout Europe. Raised as a consequence of the European Parliament reclaiming more powers at the turn of the decade, the democratic deficit was then instrumentalized by Eurosceptics in the debates accompanying the referenda for the accession of more skeptical Europeans around the 1973 enlargement.

The end of the Cold War was undoubtedly a fundamental turning point for the European project. Benedetto Zaccaria focuses on democracy as a criterion for EU membership in the early 1990s. In his detailed study of the 1993 Copenhagen meeting, he shows—in line with Ludlow's chapter—how the introduction of criteria such as full democracy, a free market, and the acceptance of the existing body of European Community Law served the purpose of a more prominent institutional role for the European Commission. At the time, they were fashioned to fit a spasmodic drive to enlargement. Today, they are highly contested. Populists all over Europe argue that the European Union cannot impart democratic lessons, given that it is not a democracy itself, lacking a sovereign people. Emanuele Massetti's essay on the emergence of the Spitzenkandidat system seeks explanations for the failure of creating a sovereign people through a technocratic move such as democratizing the European Parliament elections. The assumption that Europarties were—or were about to become—real parties rather than just federations of national parties and that an “EU demos” existed or was likely to emerge soon did not materialize. No institutional fix, as he argues, had yet made up for the emergence of a bottom-up cultural community.

The specific case studies of Hungary and the UK featured in this collection deal with different reasons for populist success in getting votes by arguing for the lack of democracy in the EU.

Stefano Bottoni, writing on Viktor Orbán, gives the most striking example of the hypercritical populist attitude, discussing the defeat of Western-style liberal democracy in post-communist Hungary. He focuses on the cultural dimension, the reaction to the presumption of Western liberal elites that they have a monopoly on democracy. Orbán's "illiberal democracy" clearly responds to the conditionality and appropriation of EU legitimacy. With populism and Brexit, the debate on the democratic deficit has acquired a new lease on life. Russell Foster's chapter discusses the relationship between the two phenomena and argues that Brexit was not part of a transnational populist strategy. Although it intersected with Eurosceptic arguments connected with economic malaise after the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2008, and cultural anxieties over immigration, Brexit was essentially a protest against Britain's status quo. More than a discussion on the EU, which rarely appeared in everyday life, Brexit was about the UK's anxieties, anger, and hopes.

Eurosceptics believe the European project is a technocratic entity far removed from the people's aspirations. The problem of participation in and control over the integration process by the citizens of the member states is more urgent today than in the 1970s because the EU has more significance now than it did back then.³⁰ However, there is no use for rational claims that "constitutional checks and balances, indirect democratic control via national governments, and the increasing powers of the European Parliament ... assure that the EU policy-making is, in nearly all cases, clean, transparent, effective, and politically responsive to the demands of European citizens."³¹ Criticism from populists has its roots in the failure of constitutionalizing Europe and European citizenship, allowing the broad circulation of "no demos" theories, according to which there are no European people and the cosmopolitan dimension of Europe is a myth to be rejected.³² The idea of "Brussels, the Gentle Monster"³³ is often exploited by nationalist politicians to weaken the project's legitimacy. It may well be that the European Union is a *doppelgänger*, accompanying the nations that created it but with less personality and a little dull.³⁴ But national governments systematically abused the EU to justify and externalize rigor and unpopular policies. The "external constraint" trap is notoriously typical of Italian policy-making and at the origins of Italian Euroscepticism.³⁵ As the chapters dealing with the media in this collection make clear, the EU has served all over Europe as a formidable scapegoat for weak leadership.

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Notes

1. See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_4253.
2. See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2012/press-release/>.
3. Jarausch, *Embattled Europe*, 4.
4. Duchêne, “The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence.”
5. Patel, *Project Europe*, 163–71.
6. Gilbert, *Surpassing Realism*, 119–20.
7. Lord, *A Different Kind of Democracy?* On the constitutional inspiration of the EU, see van Middelaar, *The Passage to Europe*, 90–96.
8. Tulli, *Un Parlamento per l'Europa*.
9. Conway, “Democracy,” 122.
10. Jarausch, *Out of Ashes*, 140.
11. Amended Draft of the Declaration on Liberated Europe, [Yalta, February 10, 1945.] <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Malta/d454>
12. Naimark, “The Sovietization of East Central Europe 1945–1989”, 140–55.
13. Jarausch, *Out of Ashes*, 411–19.
14. Conway and Depkat, “Towards a European History of the Discourse of Democracy,” 132–33.
15. Maritain, *Christianisme et démocratie*.
16. De Gasperi, “Le basi morali della democrazia—Bruxelles, 20 November 1948”, 1146–56.
17. Müller, *Contesting Democracy*; Judt, *Postwar*, 63–82.
18. On the EDC, the best account remains Fursdon, *The European Defence Community*.
19. Rittberger, “No Integration without Representation!” 103.

20. Patel, *Project Europe*, 120.
21. On democracy and civil society participation, see Patel, *Project Europe*, 122–26, Thomas, *The Limits of Europe*, 60–69. In the enthusiastic account by Wilfried Loth, the term democracy appears only once in the chapters covering 1948–1969: Loth, *Building Europe*.
22. Hansen and Jonsson. *Eurafrica*.
23. Smuts, *The League of Nations*.
24. Betts, *Ruin and Renewal*, 386.
25. Ibidem, 295–98.
26. Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age*, 304.
27. On the paradoxes of the Spanish case see Guirao, *The European Rescue of the Franco Regime*.
28. Karamouzi, “Enlargement as External Policy: The Quest for Security?”
29. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation State*.
30. Conway and Depkat, “Towards a European History,” 140.
31. Moravcsik, “In Defence of the Democratic Deficit,” 83.
32. Habermas, *Die Krise der Europäischen Union im Lichte der Konstitutionalisierung der Völkerrechts*, 1–44.
33. Enzensberger, *Sanftes Monster Brüssel oder Die Entmündigung Europas*.
34. Maier, “Reflections, Reactions, Conclusions: *The Doppelgänger*,” 243–57.
35. Gualtieri, “L’Europa come vincolo esterno,” 313–31; Pasquinucci, “The Historical Origins of Italian Euroscepticism,” 297–311.

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