

BOOKS

fancy prose remains reminiscent of something Robert Musil said about another young writer's idea of his own work: "[H]e was more dazzled by its brilliance than able to see what was going on in light of it." But not only youthful ambition and certain kinds of moral pride show

a greater desire to shine than to see by the light one gives off. So do good shoes, and many other things radiant throughout any unjust city with fame, glamour, and success. ●

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## The Left and Democracy

*The Triumph of Realo-politik*

**Sheri Berman**

FORGING DEMOCRACY: THE HISTORY OF  
THE LEFT IN EUROPE, 1850-2000

by Geoff Eley

Oxford University Press, 2002 720 pp \$35

“DEMOCRACY,” Eduard Bernstein once said, “is both a means and end. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realized.” Although not quoted, this argument lies at the heart of Geoff Eley’s massive new book *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000*.

The main goal of Eley’s book is to remind us of the centrality of the left in the struggle for democracy. He takes aim in particular at two views that continue to characterize much popular rhetoric and thinking about democratization: that liberalism and the bourgeoisie have historically been the “carriers” of democracy, and that it has generally emerged naturally alongside modern capitalism. In contrast, Eley argues that for the last 150 years or so it has been not the liberal middle classes but the socialist movement that has “most consistently . . . held up the banner of democracy.” And in Europe, he notes, “democracy did not result from natural evolution or economic prosperity. It certainly did not emerge as an inevitable by-product of individualism or the market. It developed because masses of people organized collectively to demand it.”

The book’s narrative covers three broad periods—the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the interwar years, and the postwar era—and describes a common pattern playing out in each, with mainstream left parties taking two steps forward in the political arena but falling one step back thanks to their timidity and neglect of social issues. The left’s push for democracy really began in the 1860s, Eley notes, when a system of liberalized nation-states “solidified” and the “legal and constitutional conditions . . . for popular democratic parties” were created. During this era the socialist movement turned its attention away from utopian communities, producer cooperatives, and the like and toward the national political arena, organizing the world’s first modern, highly institutionalized political parties. These parties, in turn, enabled socialists to transform the economically and socially disadvantaged working classes into a potent political force. Eley documents how these parties struggled to force *ancien régimes* to accept full democratization—and “struggle” is indeed the right word, because in no European country was full democracy achieved without a fight. It took strikes, protests, and, most of all, persistent political organizing to get recalcitrant elites to recognize worker demands.

The battle, moreover, was not just against conservatives, Junkers, and other easy-to-demonize political reactionaries, but often against liberals and the middle classes as well. The latter may have been eager to establish the rule of law and curb the power of monarchs and illiberal elites, but they were also fearful of the

masses and wanted to protect the prerogatives that they enjoyed under the existing systems. As Eley notes, "liberals consistently disparaged the civic capacities of the masses, reaching a crescendo of fear during the 1848 revolutions and the first pan-European surge of popular enfranchisement during 1867-71. In liberal discourse, 'the democracy' was synonymous with rule of the mob." Indeed, the struggle over democratization ended up dividing many liberal movements and alienating many of their erstwhile working-class supporters, thereby contributing to liberalism's declining fortunes in the decades before the First World War.

Eley argues that the mainstream left's focus during these years on national parliaments and democratization, however, led it to ignore or downplay issues that fell outside a traditional "class-political framework," such as those relating to gender, sexuality, family life, nationalism, and race. By slighting these social issues, he claims, socialists forced those concerned with them to form their own movements—movements that, in turn, pushed the boundaries of democracy forward.

The same process occurred after 1918, Eley contends, but this time with tragic results. As a wave of democratization swept Europe, socialists found themselves in previously unimaginable positions of power. This was particularly true in Germany, a case that Eley discusses at length. There, in addition to propelling the socialists into power, the end of the war also led to the rise of a new type of leftist organization, the councils—essentially spontaneous local associations of workers and others, generally lacking both a coherent vision of the future and any real institutional infrastructure. Rather than embrace this new, unorthodox movement, mainstream socialists chose to ignore or suppress it, following what Eley refers to as a politics of "intransigent moderation." Throughout the revolutionary period of 1917-1919, he writes, the German Social Democratic Party remained focused on calling a constituent assembly and "made no mention of socialism . . . or the [councils]. The SPD leaders were thinking less of socialist construction than of the orderly transition to a parliamentary republic."

Eley argues that here, as during the pre-

war period, by sticking to a traditional view of politics mainstream socialists lost an "unprecedented chance to expand the frontiers of democracy." By "holding the revolution to a narrowly constitutionalist path . . . [and] restraining and then repressing the popular movement," he writes, the SPD lost the opportunity to use the councils to institute a "third way" between [traditional] constitutionalism and the insurrectionary politics inspired by the Bolshevik revolution." These choices, in his view, contributed greatly to a dampening of the "popular enthusiasm for democracy" during the interwar period, and as the "limited resilience of the Weimar Republic . . . confirmed, the costs were huge."

Eley sees the same dynamic continuing after 1945. He stresses the critical role played by mainstream left parties in solidifying the hold of democracy on European societies after the Second World War and emphasizes the significance of their efforts to complement political with social rights—to employment, unemployment and health insurance, pensions, housing, education, and so forth. The left, he demonstrates, was critical to the crafting of a postwar settlement that "transitioned from the liberal democratic ideals of 1789, which saw political rights as sufficient guarantees of freedom, toward social democracy and rights in the socioeconomic sphere." Once again, however, he criticizes the mainstream left, this time for focusing too exclusively on the institutionalization of democracy and the expansion of the welfare state while neglecting other issues—and once again he argues that the result of this neglect was the proliferation of new social and extraparliamentary movements, this time led by "feminists, gay liberationists, environmentalists, autonomists, and others." He claims this threw into question "socialist parties' claims to be the vanguard of democracy" and praises the new movements for extending the "boundaries of politics."

**F**ORGING DEMOCRACY is an important and valuable work, one that provides insight into the major achievement of modern political life and the left's role in driving it forward. Its thorough research and comprehensive scope should prove invaluable for anyone seri-

ously interested in the subject. For all the book's virtues, however, one wonders whether the author's sympathy for nontraditional radical groups may have colored some of his interpretations. In the language of the German Greens, a party that evinces many of the trends he is enthusiastic about, Eley comes across as something of a "fundi" who constantly laments the endless compromises made by the "realos." His mainstream leaders are always ignoring their radical consciences, abandoning the movement's goals, and making deals with the devil. What this approach overlooks, however, is the essential realo insights—no less true for being clichés—that politics is the art of the possible and the best can be the enemy of the good.

Eley's curious treatment of Eduard Bernstein and his fellow "revisionists" is a case in point. As noted above, he does not mention the Bernstein quote with which this review begins, nor does he focus much on Bernstein himself. Yet it was indisputably the moderates like Bernstein, and not their radical or orthodox Marxist opponents, who were the true champions of democracy on the left in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It may be true, as Eley stresses, that socialist parties in general were the main champions of political liberalization and democratization during this era. But there were important splits within the socialist movement over the meaning and value of democracy, and it was primarily Bernstein and those like him who believed that democracy was so important that they were willing to sacrifice other goals to it, and make difficult compromises in order to achieve it. For orthodox Marxists and other radicals, in contrast, democracy was at best a means to an end—important to fight for because it would provide the best context for the struggle for socialism, but itself part and parcel of the bourgeois world that needed transcending.

This was no mere intellectual or theoretical conflict, moreover. Some of the most difficult and divisive issues facing prewar socialists—whether or not to form strategic alliances with the bourgeoisie and with liberal parties, whether or not to accept positions in a nonsocialist government—really boiled down to a question of how socialists interpreted and valued democracy. The ability of orthodox

Marxists and other radicals to prevail over Bernstein and other revisionists meant that although socialist parties did indeed fight strenuously for democracy in the years before 1914, many decisions that might have helped them speed up the process of political change were not taken.

ELEY'S CHASTISEMENT of interwar socialist parties for their "limited" vision of democracy and refusal to embrace the councils and other, more radical demands for change is open to similar challenge. Eley focuses largely on the SPD's failure to "harness the new popular energies the councils movement released," but the party's real mistake was that it did not (as he himself notes) work more strenuously to dismantle "the bases of authoritarianism." With power thrust into its hands after 1918, the party failed to act decisively and strategically, and allowed too much of the *ancien régime* to retain its hold over key institutions of German political life. This, in turn, was at least partially a consequence of the relative lack of attention the SPD had devoted to thinking about the role it wanted and needed to play in Germany's democratization in the years before the war—a state of affairs that was itself largely a function of the instrumental view of democracy held by the orthodox Marxists that dominated party debate during this era. As a result, when the SPD found itself at the head of a democratic government at the end of the war, it was unsure of its role, uncertain of precisely what it wanted to achieve, and therefore ended up following, rather than leading events during an extremely chaotic and fluid time.

As for the councils, they are probably best understood as a consequence of the political vacuum that accompanied the collapse of the old order and as a reflection of a widespread, generalized, but somewhat amorphous longing for change; to see them as the potential core of a revitalized left seems romantic at best. They contained a myriad of different and potentially conflicting interests and groups, and could never have formed the basis of any political alternative of real consequence or staying power. Indeed, in another case Eley discusses, that of Italy, councils were more di-

rectly embraced by a radicalized socialist movement, and yet the outcome for democracy was not much better.

Eley's analysis of the postwar period can be questioned as well. He is certainly right to argue that the mainstream left could and should have moved more quickly to incorporate the demands of peace activists, environmentalists, feminists, and others. But is his praise of the extraparliamentary movements that grew up around these demands during the 1960s and 1970s really deserved, especially in a book devoted to the struggle for democracy? Many of these movements, after all, rejected what they dismissively considered "bourgeois, capitalist" democracy and praised the likes of Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, and Fidel Castro—hardly icons of freedom. Similarly, stung by the relative lack of popular support they received, some participants in these movements developed scorn for workers and public opinion more generally, revealing a distaste for the "masses" and the "mob" oddly reminiscent of that of liberals and conservatives a century earlier. And finally, it is worth remembering that no matter how valid the desire for progressive change, these extraparliamentary movements were for the most part amorphous, localized, and fragmented. Although vehement in their rejection of the contemporary order, they had little concrete to offer in return. As François Mitterrand once said of the leaders of the May 1968 student movement, when they "wanted to explain the motivations behind their demonstrations . . . what a mish-mash of quasi-Marxism, what hotch-potch, what confusion."

Here the story of the German Greens is instructive. They have proved the most durable and influential of the nontraditional groups Eley lionizes, but only by deciding to join and

conform to the system they had earlier so vociferously criticized. Indeed, the Greens eventually learned precisely the lessons that mainstream socialists learned a century earlier, namely that peaceful political change meant accepting democracy, with all the compromises and disappointments it entails. Joschka Fischer is the most popular politician and most important figure on the left in Germany today not because he embodies some anarchic radical spirit of the 1960s, but rather because he has figured out how to pursue a viable progressive agenda from inside the system.

None of this is to deny that there have been times in the past when mainstream left parties working toward incremental rather than revolutionary change temporized, stumbled, or failed to advance their agendas. One cannot, however, read Eley's book without heightened respect, not so much for the left's radical visionaries and *luftmenschen*, but rather for the unsung activists and foot soldiers who struggled relentlessly to secure a string of minor victories that eventually yielded the democratic political systems we take for granted today. *Forging Democracy* is a valuable reminder not only of the heroic struggle it took to bring about political freedom in Europe, but also of how crucial was the role of the left—of workers, the poor, and the underprivileged more generally—in its achievement. Ironically, it was the part of the left that we now think of as least heroic, radical, and glamorous that deserves the lion's share of the credit. ●

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