

## BOOK REVIEW

# Book Review: *Parliamentarism. From Burke to Weber* by William Selinger, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 246 pages. ISBN: 9781108475747

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Parliamentarism is not just about parliaments. This book by William Selinger investigates the theoretical debate of the 18th and 19th centuries in France and England about a government's best shape. It shows how a group of thinkers obsessed with protecting individual liberties forged the parliamentarism framework as an alternative to Montesquieu's separation of powers. From Burke to Weber, some authors, who often were also parliamentarians themselves, preferred a central and powerful representative assembly to a system of checks and balances. With the decisive contribution of Benjamin Constant, they progressively elaborate an analytical framework in which parliament as a political institution is only one piece of the puzzle. Three elements are also needed to avoid authoritarianism or chaos and secure deliberation.

First, the likely excess of power from the executive can be bounded through providing the head of state a limited if not neutral role. The head of state is in charge of symbolic politics and institutional decisions such as formal prime minister nomination – but no more. A constitutional monarchy is ideally fit for that, but parliamentary republic can also accommodate with weak presidents, as the French Third Republic did. The right to dissolve the legislature possessed by the head of state constitutes a strong instrument against the legislature instability and the temptation of its minorities to lead it. Thanks to that, public opinion acts as a virtual referee in the parliamentary game.

Second, ministers should be closely under the control of the parliament, something that requires that they often come to it and even that they sit in it as members. Ideally, parliamentarism is a regime where some members of the parliament convince their fellows that they are able to lead the country; they are held accountable for all their actions by these fellows and they lose their positions immediately if they lose that confidence. In a period of constitutional instability, Constant especially stressed that the struggle over ministerial office among representatives would be an incentive for regime opponents to play the parliamentary game.

Third, the aggregation of preferences between MPs calls for settling parties. Parties can both limit corruption of parliamentarians and voters as an instrument of government by

ministers and articulate parliamentary politics and public opinion through offering an identifiable spectacle framed by major ideological orientations. The external support and interest in parliamentary game, mediated by parties, should contribute to insure cabinet stability. The support of public opinion can also avoid the governing fraction to remain in office through patronage – a system that limit competitiveness among MPs.

Selinger develops remarkably clearly this analytical framework through an in-depth investigation of key French and English authors namely: Burke (who is significantly re-evaluated), de Lolme, Necker, de Staël, Constant (who is opposed to Montesquieu), Tocqueville (who thought that the American divided system could not fit his home country), Mill, and Bagehot. Weber closes the series pointing to his support for the working parliament style. Selinger convincingly makes the point that contemporary thinkers focussed on democracy lost ground vis-à-vis this intellectual tradition. The main obsession of theoreticians of parliamentarism was not public participation but protecting liberties. For them, the representative nature of the assembly is certainly important as it justifies the parliament power, but this representativeness is not necessarily based on universal suffrage. The conciliation between the liveliness and decisiveness of parliamentary politics and a moderate and non-chaotic direction of the state is more at stake. To that end, legislatures are not faced with vetoes from other institutions as in the Montesquieuan framework. Instead, the competition between factions is settled within legislatures and finds through that means a way of being regulated. Selinger shows how this subtle analysis was progressively forged by the concrete experiences of these thinkers faced with the progressive erosion of absolutist regimes.

Let us be clear: this book constitutes an exceptional contribution to the history of political ideas. It does not focus on more-or-less forgotten thinkers to highlight their significance but, instead, comes back to classical ones to show the lost consistence of their debates, proposals, and solutions. For a French reader, his approach may not appear as novel as Selinger claims because, from 'le moment Guizot' to the rediscover of Tocqueville, the institutional debate of the first 19th century has been investigated in-depth by a variety of French historians and philosophers over the last decades (Furet, Jaume, Laquière, Manent, or Rosanvallon, to name a few). Yet the great merit of the book is to show the liveliness and cross-influence of the complementary French and English debates across the channel for a few decades. Following an approach borrowed from conceptual history, Selinger sees these thinkers of parliamentarism as the actual founders of liberalism, regretting that 'Since the Second World War, the relationship between liberalism and parliamentarism has gradually disappeared from the historiography of modern political thought' (p. 15). Therefore, the view that liberalism would be necessarily suspicious towards political institutions is literally cut into pieces: there were times where liberal thinkers believed that a powerful parliament was the solution to protect liberties and that conflict should be organised *within* it rather than *between* institutions.

The intellectual depth of the parliamentary framework developed by Selinger sheds a crude light on contemporary democratic deficits. From the viewpoint of classical parliamentarism, the fact that many policies have been sanctuarised from legislatures through independent agencies is a mistake. As Selinger regrets himself, 'instead of moderating representative assemblies through the influence of constitutional monarchy and parliamentary government, we have let them instead been increasingly *displaced* by constitutional courts and administrative agencies' (p. 17). The subtle solution of parliamentarism, which consists in organising vibrant debates *within* parliaments to select capable decision makers, to properly control public policies, to express the greater possible diversity of opinions, and to inform the general public has not been put aside but limited in many ways. Debates are still organised but their decisiveness is far more reduced than one century ago. Selinger's book helps understanding

the Gramscian dimension of such process: legislatures have lost ground regarding the actual functioning of political regimes in part because they became marginal in the intellectual debate. They may have constituted an implicit reference within it, as in Schumpeter's influential conception of competitive democracy according to Selinger (p. 206), the coherency of the parliamentary matrix (with the four above-mentioned points) dislocated but itself. And what is kept now of Schumpeter for instance is more the electoral opposition between two candidates during election time than their permanent confrontation in parliament.

If we share Selinger's view that the contemporary problems of democracies call for an overall empowerment of legislatures, especially as a safeguard against populism, his book helps understanding yet why classical parliamentarism has declined. As said, the major obsessions of its founders were liberty, debate, and stability rather than equal and universal participation. As a result, the functioning of parliamentary democracy has been (and still often is) a major source of deception for many democrats – and not only for neo-Schmittian ones. But, more importantly, it results from the focus of parliamentary theorists that they have been ill equipped for answering to the problems caused by mass democracy on parliaments. The electoral legitimacy soon contributed to empower prime ministers. The neutral role of the head of state became either impracticable in case of direct election (as in most semi-presidential regimes, see France) or inconsequential vis-à-vis powerful prime ministers (as in most parliamentary ones, see the United Kingdom). The existence of populist leaders in contemporary parliamentary regimes indicates indeed that neutral heads of state are not sufficient to guarantee a regime's stability.<sup>1</sup> Political parties act less as agents structuring parliamentary deliberation than as instruments of discipline for backbenchers. The historical conjunction of citizens' votes according to party brands and of party control by a small professional elite has fed the growing presidentialisation of politics to the profit of heads of government. There are therefore reasons to believe, with Bernard Manin,<sup>2</sup> that parties took the place of parliaments during the 20th century as core loci of representativeness: the principles of representative governments that these thinkers elaborated survived but, to a large extent, out of parliaments. To summarize, the very mode of selection of parliaments contributed to their marginalisation. That is something that early theorists of parliamentarism have probably under-perceived and which questions the practical conditions (rather than the theoretical merits) of any call for (re)parliamentarizing contemporary democracies.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>1</sup> Although neutral presidents may contribute to as indicated by the role played by the Italian one after Salvini's resignation in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Manin, B. (1997), *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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