

## BOOK REVIEW

### A Lost Momentum of Parliamentary Democracy?

**Christoph Gusy (ed.) 2008.** *Demokratie in der Krise. Europa in der Zwischenkriegszeit.* Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsges, 440 pp. ISBN 978-3-8329-3666-2

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Studies on the overturning of democratic institutions in Europe by authoritarian regimes during the 1920s and 1930s have had an extremely serious tone for a long time. In other words, the events and processes resulting in this overturn have frequently been considered more or less unavoidable or at least beyond the powers of the local political agents.

Such explanations have also provided a kind of political excuse for the surrender of the parliamentarians in the democratic regimes without any determined and efficient struggles. The Rankean style of historiography, restricting analysis to what really happened – *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – and rejecting any speculation with unrealised possibilities as ‘unscientific’, has provided a further albeit tacit legitimisation of the *ex post* justification of the events as inevitable. Such a view on the history writing was also, for example, part of the fierce opposition to Hannah Arendt’s argument, at the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, against the excuse for non-resistance that in practice equals a form of support for the powers not resisted. Also the obvious dangers of anachronism in such *de facto* determinism have been ignored or marginalised for long among the historians.

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In recent years, remarkable reappraisals of the history of Weimar Republic have appeared, as we can see already from some book titles. Kurt Sontheimer's *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik* (1962) is a prominent volume which in a conspiratory manner accuses politicians and intellectuals on the left and right for having played to the hands of the Nazis. Some years ago Bielefeld constitutional lawyer Christoph Gusy edited an extensive volume with the provocative title *Demokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik* (2000). In it a remarkable number of younger German historians, political scientists and constitutional lawyers illustrated the presence of the democratic style of politics in the Weimar Republic and avoided the perspective of its sad end. Also two other first rank studies, Marcus Llanque's *Demokratisches Denken im Kriege* (2000) and Thomas Mergel's *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik* (2002), play with their title against Sontheimer's argumentation.

Similar tendencies of historical reassessment of both realised and unrealised possibilities can be found elsewhere, too. One of the most radical among them is Nicolas Roussellier's *Le parlement de l'éloquence* (1997), which revises our received view against the fatal instability and worthless *bavardage* of the French Third Republic.

To this series we can now add another volume edited by Christoph Gusy, namely a book on the crisis of parliamentary democracy in the 'inter-war' Europe. Fifteen mainly German scholars discuss Europe to the West of the Soviet border in the 1920s and 1930s. The starting point for their discussion is the notion that the post-war rise of parliamentary democracy was overturn by a right-wing dictatorship, in "at least 12 countries," as Gusy puts it in his preface (p. 5, see also the list of the countries on pp. 17-19). The point of the volume is to discuss both the failures and the relative successes of parliamentary democracy from a comparative perspective, partly in case studies on countries and regions, partly in more systematic and comparative contributions.

My aim here is to comment on the very idea of the post-war momentum itself – "*Stunde der parlamentarischen Demokratien*" (Gusy p. 15) – and its shifting fates in different European countries. Instead of the alleged necessity of the overthrow of parliamentarism, I shall discuss studies on parliamentarism's relative success and the political conditions of avoiding the right wing dictatorships. In this respect the volume is remarkably polemical against the famous *Sonderweg* thesis

on the exceptionality of German history, as we can see from the essays of historian Christoph Schönberger and jurist Hans Boldt, in particular. Boldt takes Max Weber's discussion from 1906 on the construction of 'unrealistic' possibilities as a condition for the understanding of both realistic and realised possibilities as his point of departure. Along similar lines, I shall discuss the volume's key thesis of the momentum of the parliamentary democracy itself.

The thesis of the volume can perhaps be formulated as a claim that it was in polities with definite type of histories and contemporary experiences the parliamentary government and practices could be retained. This holds despite strong tendencies of the period toward the increase of governmental powers and insisting on national unity. In *Demokratie in der Krise* the thesis is analyzed from different perspectives. Gusy, for example, discusses the incompetence of the parliamentarians in the new democracies to carry government positions as one of the reasons why the parliamentary regimes lost popular support (pp. 39-40). More interestingly, political theorist Marcus Llanque analyses, on a broad comparative basis, some today widely forgotten debates on the ambiguous relationships between democracy and dictatorship in West-European countries.

The weakness of the book, however, is its inability or unwillingness to connect the idea of the momentum of parliamentary democracies in the post-war constitutions to the broader parliamentary style of politics. The discussion on the 'crisis of parliamentary' democracy is restricted to the regime question, with minimal definition of the governmental responsibility to the parliament. The broader problematics, inherent in Edmund Burke's classical opposition between the character of the parliament as a "deliberative assembly" and the tendencies to render it to a "congress of ambassadors", is not posed at all. The complex and ambiguous historical relationships between parliamentarization and democratisation in the European countries are not discussed either.

The minimal definition of parliamentarism hides the remnants of presidential (Germany, Finland) or monarchic powers (Belgium), and even the increasingly powerful administrative apparatus in the post-war constitutions or constitutional reforms is only occasionally discussed in the volume. Florian Meinel's and Freya Anders's studies on the interwar constitutional law debates also largely miss the fierce debates between the 'monistic' and the 'dualistic' versions of

parliamentary government. Equally absent is the experience that in old parliamentary countries the front generation turned against the parliamentary 'talk-shops' and required efficient deeds, as Nicolas Roussellier analyses it in *Le parlement de l'éloquence*. Although in France the parliament retained its powers in the 1920s and 1930s, the rhetorical style of debating *pro et contra* was celebrated neither in the newly independent states nor in the old parliamentary regimes. Carl Schmitt's misleading critique of the deliberative parliamentarism in *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (1923) as an outdated 'bourgeois' ideal was an expression of the general mood of the time. In the current volume Schönberger's remark on "ein altliberales-deliberatives Parlamentsverständnis" (p. 271) sounds similarly anachronistic in the devaluation of the rhetorical dimension of the parliamentary style of politics.

In his extensive essay Peter Brandt presents Scandinavian countries, Finland with reservations, as examples of a successful transition to parliamentary democracy, without, however, analyzing their complex histories of democratisation and parliamentarisation. He insists on the role of the consensual basis of the regimes after the transition, earliest in Denmark and most manifestly in the Swedish *folkhem* thinking, as a condition for the success. Brandt discusses, in particular, the Norwegian Labour Party's slow resigning from revolutionary jargon in the 1920s, without questioning the result that the Norwegian majority parliamentarism tended to leave the parliament a merely ratifying role in the government's policies. The Swedish consensus since the early 1930s was based on the Social Democrats' strategy of reforms through administration, whereas proportional representation based on the party-lists made the parliament almost into a site of acclamation rather than that of fierce debates.

The lack of lively parliamentary debates and political culture enjoying thorough confrontation of opposed perspectives is the reverse side of the Scandinavian consensus on the acceptance of the parliamentary regime. Or, we could ask, whether the degrees of both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of debate and the dissensus in Nordic countries prior to the Social Democratic hegemony have been able to retain a minimum of parliamentary forms of politics? Anyhow, in an anti-rhetorical democracy the 'bavard' parliamentarians are regarded with suspicion while the ministerial bureaucracies, monarchs or presidents beyond the parliamentary control do not encounter simi-

lar suspicion. Such an anti-rhetorical democracy still characterises the Scandinavian political cultures.

In the comparative discussion on European polities and their problems with democracy and parliamentarism during the interwar period Andreas Wirsching and Martin Morlok offer new catchwords for interpretation. Morlok speaks about the significance of the constitutionalisation of the political disputes (pp. 412-413), although he tends to give the mutual respect principle of parliamentary politics a misleading consensual interpretation. More interestingly, Wirsching introduces the concept of a constitutional culture (*Verfassungskultur*) as a substratum for the written constitution. He also discusses, with a reference to Reinhart Koselleck, the temporal dimension of constitutional politics, especially the growing gap between expectations and experiences after World War I as a delegitimising element in the newly introduced parliamentary regimes (pp. 383-387).

The rhetorical vision on parliamentarism was, as Roussellier has discussed in his writings, not fashionable during the interwar period, despite interesting rhetorical literature still published at that time (I discuss some of them in my *The Politics of Limited Times*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008, chapter 4.). Nonetheless, I would like to suggest, partly in line with Wirsching's interpretation, although presenting the contrast differently, that the inherent link between time and speech can be formulated as the opposition between teleological or policy-oriented and procedural or polity-oriented styles of politics. Parliamentarism is an ideal type of the procedural style of politics, in which the how- and when-questions gain a priority over what-questions. In the newly independent states, the pressure on future-oriented thinking, in more or less radical essentialist or naturalistic terms, has been strong. In countries with weak and powerless parliamentary traditions under the preceding regimes, the accusations against procedural formalism and empty bavardage are particularly strong. In this sense the conditions for upholding even a minimal parliamentary regime, as Anders points out concerning the Czechoslovakian case, and as was also the case in Finland, might have deserved a closer attention.

I, finally, miss a chapter on the Inter-Parliamentary Union in the book. From the late nineteenth-century it served mainly as some kind of distinguished parliamentary gentlemen's peace project. The democratisation of parliaments and parliamentarisation of governments altered in the 1920s and 1930s the IPU's character into a 'de-

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bating society' of selected parliamentarians. In the twenties and thirties the IPU annual assemblies regularly arranged multi-lingual debates on the 'crisis of parliamentarism', the 'future of parliamentary democracy' or more technical problems of parliamentary practices. Both parliamentarians and well-known scholars, such as Harold J. Laski, spoke on these occasions and provoked partly fierce debates, which would deserve becoming detailed comparative analyses of the European parliamentarism after World War I.