

Transatlantic Democracy in the 20th Century. Transfer and Transformation

Veranstalter: Prof. Dr. Paul Nolte, Freie Universität Berlin/Historisches Kolleg München
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The assertion of democracy in Arab countries is currently a major topic in Western media discourse. The dynamics of „Western“ democracy itself, however, is often underestimated, as it is rather presented as an a-historical set of institutions and practices against which non-Western developments are being measured. Has transatlantic democracy, as we had come to understand it during the Postwar decades, already sunken into history, or does it remain a contested issue, as historian Mary Nolan recently suggested?¹ For the evaluation of current research on the history of transatlantic democracy in the 20th century, PAUL NOLTE (Berlin) organized a conference at the Historisches Kolleg, Munich, sponsored by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. In his introductory talk, he challenged different previous narratives of the history of democracy, arguing that they are teleological since in all of them democracy ultimately prevailed.² Nolte advocated a more complicated history of transatlantic democracy in the 20th century, which takes into account the increasing divergence between the United States and Europe since the 1980s. It was characterized for example by the institutional set-up of the European Union instead of following the model of the United States of America, the new emphasis on European historiography in Europe, and the turn of U.S. scholars towards Asian and Arab areas de-centering Western perspectives. Instead of Colin Crouch's pessimistic diagnosis of a „Post-Democracy“ that fundamentally challenges the very status and meaning of democracy, Nolte suggested speaking of „post-classical democracy“.³ He highlighted four different transformations that democracy underwent since the 1970s. It has become a participatory democracy (Benjamin R. Barber) marked by phenomena like student protests

and human rights movement⁴, a consumer democracy where consumption serves as a vehicle of protest, an advocacy democracy characterized by individuals or groups who act on behalf of others and a judicial democracy shown by the emergence of courts for the pursuit of individual and group rights. Therefore, the conference aimed at the historicization of transatlantic democracy in the 20th century by conducting a „historical archeology“ of the „pre-history of post-classical democracy.“

The presentations of the conference offered a bundle of related topics that need further research. A recurring question during the conference concerned the divergence or convergence of the transatlantic relationship over the course of time. VOLKER R. BERGHAHN (New York) suggested that in the period before 1914 the political and economic systems of Germany and the United States remarkably diverged. Berghahn pointed out a parallelism in the evolution of the political system and the economic constitutionalism in the two countries. Both experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization during the 19th century. American democracy had started as an elite project, but shifted to be more expansive in the period before 1914, whereas the political system in Germany by contrast failed at this very moment. In the U.S., the economic constitution was shaped by the end of the 19th century by anti-trust legislation against monopolies. Both Democrats and Republicans pushed these policies as a response to the democratic mobilization from below. In Germany, on the other hand, the economy was organized in cartels and syndicates, which expanded during the boom of the 1890s. Besides, on a political level, the multiparty system made it necessary to build coalitions in Germany, which Berghahn interpreted as constituting cartels like the „Kartell der schaffenden Stände“. It was only the „Wettbewerbs-sicherungsgesetz“ asserted by Ludwig Er-

¹Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890-2010*, Cambridge 2012.

²Paul Nolte, *Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart*, München 2012, p. 15.

³Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge 2005.

⁴Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy. Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley 1984.

hard in 1957 that provided an economic constitution for Germany.

PHILIPP GASSERT (Augsburg) argued against an alleged divergence between Europe and the United States, particularly since the 1960s. On the contrary, political and cultural conflicts did not deteriorate but strengthen transatlantic relations. Following Georg Simmel, he identified conflict as a means to integrate societies and to accept two sides as legitimate counterparts. The transatlantic community was built on an official level, for example along the joint fight against Communism led by Dwight D. Eisenhower and Konrad Adenauer. On a more informal plane, the peace movements, whose leaders always were opposed to anti-Americanism, played a major role in cultural community building.

Against the backdrop of the very different trajectories of Western democracies, HANS-JÜRGEN PUHLE (Frankfurt am Main) identified a growing convergence on both sides of the Atlantic since the 1950s. As major transformations Puhle highlighted the repercussions of the economic crisis during the 1970s, the ensuing de-legitimization of Keynesianism and rise of neo-liberalism, the increasing globalization and its discontents, the breakthrough of populist democracies as well as the intensification of European integration and institution building. According to his analysis, these changes amount to what Puhle called „threshold 21,“ the great transformation of Western democracies in the past decades. Was it a Western convergence, indeed, or rather part and parcel of larger processes of globalization? This remained a contested issue throughout the conference.

Another important topic was the language of democracy, and the employment by contemporaries of the very term „democracy“. THOMAS WELSKOPP (Bielefeld) investigated the usage of the concept of democracy as an ideological weapon in the U.S. before and during the First World War. Although President Woodrow Wilson wanted to „make the world safe for democracy“ in his declaration of war in 1917, his administration had established an illiberal system by the end of the war in the U.S. that had little to do with the concept of democracy as we know it to-

day. Wilson reaffirmed John Crowley’s concept of an active state, which was meant to represent and protect democracy as well as strengthen the role of the government against particular interest groups. In circumvention of the term state, which remained associated with German despotism, the term democracy took hold. According to Welskopp, it served as a symbol of America’s active and belligerent side, and gave a boost to American patriotism that was needed for the successful war efforts.

VOLKER DEPKAT (Regensburg) compared the discussions on democracy in Western Europe and the United States after World War II. He pointed out that democracy served as a self-description that helped build European identity and linked multiple discourses on both continents such as on freedom, capitalism, everyday ways of life, and civil society. While democracy in West Germany was seen as the lesser of two evils and as a trigger for discussions on what went wrong in the 1920s, in the U.S., the belief in the internationalization of the ideology of democracy was still very strong. The discussion on democracy on both sides of the Atlantic swelled to new heights in the 1960s with the German imperative „Mehr Demokratie wagen“ as well as with the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. However, democracy remained a contested term among Americans as well as Europeans.

Hence, it became clear during the conference that a more basic „Begriffsgeschichte“, e.g. a conceptual history of democracy in the 20th century, is needed. For this matter the semantic fields of democracy and the relation of democracy to terms such as freedom and rights demand further investigation. STEFAN-LUDWIG HOFFMANN (Berkeley) analyzed the intersections both of the rise of the human rights discourse and the re-assertion of democracy during the 1990s. It was not until the Yugoslav war in the 1990s and particularly until the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 that a parallel to Auschwitz was drawn and with the military intervention of NATO, human rights served as a legitimation to take sides. With the establishment of a new moral hierarchy through the human rights discourse, national sovereignty was reduced. From now on, every state outside this order

was perceived as an outlaw state. Hoffmann concluded that the erosion of sovereignty and the enthusiasm for human rights hardly made the world safer for democracy.

For a sharper analysis of democracy, this notion has to be distinguished carefully from other concepts such as liberalism and capitalism. The relationship of democracy to populism was in the center of JAN-WERNER MÜLLER's (Princeton) talk. He defined populism as a process in moments of crisis, particularly in the case when the established party system is at stake. Populist politicians and parties claim to represent one single common good, and they tend to pit the pure, innocent, hardworking people against both the social „top“ and „bottom.“ Thereby, as opposed to democracy, populism does not need participation or popular mobilization. Müller claimed that in postwar Europe, a „constraint democracy“ emerged, which is marked by the postwar elites' deep distrust in popular and parliamentary sovereignty due to the experiences prior to the war. Therefore, several institutions were established as constraints for democracy. However, this model of democracy implicitly presents a standing invitation to other political actors to speak in the name of authentic popular sovereignty.

Also, the question of periodization in the history of transatlantic democracy loomed large throughout the conference. Although traditional political caesura around 1918, 1945 and 1990 continue to be valid up until today, on a socio-cultural level, the decades of the 1890s, 1920s and 1960s/70s much rather witnessed swift changes. WOLFGANG HARDTWIG (München) took a close look at the practices of democracy in the German Kaiserreich around 1900. He examined democracy as a process that aimed at the people's participation, egalitarianism, and the dissemination of opportunities in life („Lebenschancen“). Around 1900 a sophisticated and increasingly powerful public sphere emerged. However, in the mainstream German political public, democracy was not a sought-after model. On the contrary, the aim was a well-functioning Prussian constitutional monarchy. Thus, the scope of the discourse on democracy remained limited. The government used existing con-

flicts between German parties and dramatized them in the politics of „Reichsfeinde.“ Consequently, opting for democracy in the Kaiserreich was equal to being oppositional. Paradoxically, however, this anti-democratic politics fostered a politicization of the people, and eventually their fundamental democratization.

Another issue raised during the conference was the overall scope of the history of democracy. Current research is mostly centered on the United States, with a lack of Canadian or Mexican perspectives. Also, it remains unclear whether the conceptual counterpart ought to be Europe as a whole, or rather a single European country. Since approaching an overall European perspective is difficult due to language barriers alone, the research of KIRAN KLAUS PATEL (Maastricht) on the transfer of democracy concepts between Sweden and the United States proved to be a good starting point. Patel showed how Franklin D. Roosevelt turned to Sweden as a source of inspiration for a new concept of democracy that was apt to reorganize the crisis-torn economy. FDR showed particular interest in Marquis Childs' book „Sweden: The Middle Way,“ in which the author suggested to overcome the depression with a focus on business-owned and democratically organized cooperatives. Also, practices from other countries, such as the German Reichsarbeitsdienst that became a model for the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, were selectively adapted.

The contingency and fragility of democracy also was recurrently emphasized during the conference. Throughout the modern history of democracy one can observe many moments in which its ambivalences became apparent since it could be perceived as either being „weak“, because of its improbability, or as being „strong“, as an expression of an anthropological desire for freedom. Based on the approaches of moral history, TILL VAN RAHDEN (Montréal) took a closer look at the West German embracement of democracy as a way of life in the postwar era. As Germans were skeptical about the democratic future of their country and had not been used to democracy so far, they exhibited a certain clumsiness. Along the same lines, van Rahden argued for more openness of social scientists to-

wards the humanities for the understanding of democracy as „an unlikely, strange, and fragile institution.“ He proposed a shift away from an analysis of the content of content, i.e. „democratic ideas in democratic polities“, to an analysis of the democratic content of aesthetic forms, styles, and manners.

Approaches in the history of democracy should not only entail contributions of social history of politics and cultural history, but also intellectual history, as presented by RICCARDO BAVAJ (St. Andrews). He illustrated the different usages of the term democracy and its contestation during the Interwar period in Germany, based on an analysis of contemporary scholars' usage of the term democracy, e.g., in the work of Hugo Preuß and Franz Jung. Bavaj criticized recent Weimar research for still being based on a model of „liberal, pluralistic democracy“ and for neglecting thoughts of right-wing and left-wing „anti-liberal democrats.“ As a „democratic minimum“ he defined democracy, beyond a specific set of institutions, as the rule by the people, political equality, and mass participation of citizens. In order to make analytical distinctions in Weimar intellectual discourse, he employed Michael Makropoulos' differentiation between concepts of democracy annihilating and tolerating contingency, so as to avoid the usual distinction between democratic and anti-democratic thought. Bavaj also made use of Oliver Lepsius' distinction between democratic constructivists and essentialists: Democratic essentialists stipulate the people's will a priori, whereas constructivists allow for its introduction through political processes.

According to SEAN WILENTZ (Princeton), „democracy in America is really the spectacle of Americans arguing over democracy and what democracy ought to be.“ On a more concrete level and as a means to grasp the character of U.S. democracy in the contemporary period, he took a look at the presidential elections in 2012. The results of the recent election signaled the rejection of the politics of austerity, as it has been pushed forward by Mitt Romney and the Republicans, as well as the victory of expansive Keynesian politics that Democrats and Obama stood for. Wilentz argued that through the radi-

calization of the Republican Party, and their move to the ideological right, the long period of more moderate conservative political domination since Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s was over. He also judged the current Republican policies as highly different from the much misunderstood Republican policies of the Reagan era, especially the „Reagonomics“ as regressive Keynesianism.

The conference offered fruitful insights and promising starting points for further research. One way to move beyond the history of the West and the paradigm of „transatlantic democracy“ might be to shift analysis towards other world regions such as Africa or the Arab world and gain insight from alternative genealogies of democracy.

Conference Overview:

Paul Nolte (Berlin/Munich) – Introduction: Why the History of Transatlantic Democracy is Becoming More Complicated

Volker R. Berghahn (New York) – Political Democracy and the Shaping of Economic Constitutionalism before 1914: A European-American Comparison

Wolfgang Hardtwig (Berlin/Munich) – Democracy in Germany around 1900: A Survey and Reappraisal

Thomas Welskopp (Bielefeld) – „Democracy“ and the Germans: A Political Concept as in Ideological Weapon in the U.S. before and during World War I

Kiran Klaus Patel (Maastricht) – How America Discovered Sweden: New Deal History in a Global Perspective

Riccardo Bavaj (St. Andrews) – Pluralizing Democracy in Weimar Germany

Jan-Werner Müller (Princeton) – Populism and Democracy in 20th-Century Europe

Till van Rahden (Montréal) – Clumsy Democrats: Forms, Style and Passions in Postwar Politics

Volker Depkat (Regensburg) – Discussing Democracy in Western Europe and the United States, 1945-1970

Philipp Gassert (Augsburg) – Conflict as a Moment of Integration: Transatlantic Protest

Movements since the 1960s

Hans-Jürgen Puhle (Frankfurt am Main) –
Trajectories and Transformation of Western
Democracies: 1950s-2000s

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