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FREEDOM'S TRIUMPH?

The Defeat of Democracy in Luciano Canfora

THE STUDY OF democracy is usually left to political scientists, sociologists or contemporary historians, for whom its antique origins form little more than a picturesque backdrop to the story of its twentieth-century triumph. In their accounts, its heartlands tend to be North Atlantic: the United States, Britain and France. As for the term itself, 'democracy' is standardly defined as a set of electoral procedures and representative institutions, legitimating political rule. Within this field there is room for a variety of views: the liberal wing of orthodoxy pines for greater voter participation, while the hard-headed right rejoices at apathy; but both consider a regular electoral cycle to be a minimum condition. There is also a common historical narrative: from modest, property-owning beginnings, democracy was successfully extended to incorporate first working men, then women. Twinned with 'freedom', it defeated fascism in Europe and, after 1945, confronted its enemy, totalitarianism, in the Communist East. From the mid-1970s a third wave of democratization washed away the dictatorships of Europe's southern fringe—Greece, Spain, Portugal—before sweeping most of the world after 1989.

Luciano Canfora's *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology* breaks with this tradition in nearly every respect—conceptual, geographic, historical.¹ Canfora himself is not a political scientist but a classical philologist, trained at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa in the 1960s; a fiercely independent intellectual, originally of the PCI, and more recently of the PdCI, one of the small groups to emerge from its collapse, for which he ran as candidate in the European parliamentary elections in 1999. In a prolific oeuvre, his writings include studies of Demosthenes

and Thucydides, a foundational analysis of the narrative principles of classical historiography, a striking biography of Julius Caesar, and three books on Togliatti, of whom he remains a great admirer; not to speak of many reflections on contemporary politics. Notable among his skills has been historical and textual detective work, yielding a set of remarkable demonstrations—among them, that Giovanni Gentile was, contrary to official legend, killed on orders of the PCI leadership in 1944; that the celebrated papyrus attributed to the geographer Artemidoros of Ephesus (second to first centuries BC) is almost certainly a forgery, probably by a nineteenth-century Greek adventurer; that a letter sent in 1928—supposedly by Ruggiero Grieco, a member of the PCI leadership in exile—to Gramsci, awaiting his trial in prison, was a provocation of the fascist police. Far from separating classical rigour from political commitment, he has directly theorized their connexion. His most recent work, *Filologia e libertà*, is devoted to the argument that, historically, a passion for precise textual truth has always required a rejection of canonized authority, and an independence of mind that freedom of thought alone can assure.

Democracy in Europe combines these backgrounds in an intriguing and highly original work. Conceptually, Canfora flatly rejects the standard view of democracy as a set of institutions and electoral procedures. Endorsing Norberto Bobbio's view that 'the essence of democracy is egalitarianism', he argues—anathema to the mainstream perspective—that it 'may reassert itself within the most diverse political-constitutional forms'.² Following Aristotle, Canfora proceeds to define democracy as 'the ascendancy of the *demos*', that is, the rule of the poorer, non-property-owning classes.³ On this basis he proposes a historical narrative of democracy's fortunes in Europe radically at odds with conventional accounts. In place of a progressive widening and deepening, Canfora sees only brief moments of localized and immediately embattled democratic breakthrough, among them the early 1790s in France, the decade following 1917 in Germany and Russia—a high-water mark—and the late 1940s in France and Italy. For the most part, though, Canfora's story is of the failure of democracy, in his sense, and of how ruling elites have managed the egalitarian threat of broadening

¹ Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology*, Oxford 2006. Henceforth, DE.

² DE, pp. 228, 250.

³ DE, p. 250.

suffrage to ensure their own freedom of action. The post-1950 period is represented as a grim political landscape, featuring the erosion of democratic-egalitarian aspirations in both eastern and western Europe, and the final triumph of what Canfora calls the ‘mixed system’—‘a little democracy and a great deal of oligarchy’, combining ‘the electoral *principle*’ with the reality of bourgeois class ascendancy—as the formula for contemporary political rule.⁴

Geographically, too, Canfora reverses the standard argument. The people’s democratic republics of central and eastern Europe are given serious critical consideration as ‘experiments in democracy’.⁵ Indeed, the western welfare-state system is seen as a pale imitation of the eastern model, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc as coterminous with the defeat of political egalitarianism. The United States is mentioned only for its role in stabilizing property systems on the European continent. Instead it is France that emerges as the political nation *par excellence*: birthplace of the idea of genuinely universal suffrage, and proving ground for the methods by which it would be neutered from 1850 on. French political history occupies the lion’s share of Canfora’s book.⁶

Zeus’s all-seeing eye

Democracy in Europe is therefore a frontal attack on intellectual orthodoxy as well as continental self-esteem. Unsurprisingly, it has provoked strong reactions. The book was originally commissioned as part of a multinational ‘Making of Europe’ series under the direction of the French historian, Jacques Le Goff, alongside Peter Burke’s *European Renaissance*, Jack Goody’s *European Family*, Charles Tilly’s *European Revolutions* and a string of other illustrious titles, all of which were to be produced across five languages by top-flight European publishers: Blackwell in Britain, Seuil in France, Crítica in Spain, Laterza in Italy and Beck in Germany. The editors at Beck, however, flatly refused to publish Canfora’s contribution, apparently on the basis of a scandalized reader’s report by the historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler, epitome of right-thinking, who declared it ‘nothing more than a Communist pamphlet, superseding in dogmatic

⁴ DE, p. 216.

⁵ DE, p. 188.

⁶ The absence of the United States may also be a consequence of the European focus of the series.

stupidity even the products of the DDR'—an absurdity, given the book's unremittingly heterodox approach.⁷

Rather than a substantial engagement with his argument, however, Canfora's German critics contented themselves with a series of misleading cavils designed to impugn the Italian's intellectual integrity by tarring him with Stalinism. The most concrete charge is that *Democracy in Europe* provides an orthodox Soviet interpretation of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. But as Canfora convincingly demonstrates in his pamphlet, *L'occhio di Zeus*, replying to critics, this is based on a wilful misreading. In fact, after analysing the Pact in the context of France and England's refusal to join a tripartite alliance with the USSR against Hitler, Canfora goes on to link it to the nationalist involution of the Soviet experiment and discusses at some length the 'trauma' that it caused. It may be that his comparison of the Hitler–Stalin agreement to Roosevelt's recognition of Vichy France, and to the cynical East–West partitioning of Europe agreed at Yalta, also served to irritate his German critics. But what is most striking about the latter's overheated reaction is their complete failure to interrogate the work's conception of democracy, its comparative architecture or its overall structural coherence. *Democracy in Europe* has thus had a peculiarly unbalanced reception: though generating a mass of commentary, its central theses remain virtually unanalysed. This is unfortunate, for Canfora's historically well-grounded interpretation of democracy is a useful corrective to the standard view. The problems with his argument, meanwhile, touch on issues of central intellectual and political importance, not least for the left.

Admittedly, one obstacle to a full understanding of Canfora's book is the organization of the text itself. *Democracy in Europe* pans from fifth-century Athens to Berlusconi's Italy over some 250 dense, lively and polemical pages, combining historical account with interpretation, in a way that defies conventional comparative schemes. Some places and periods are treated in minute detail, others barely touched upon. After a fascinating philological analysis of the meaning of democracy in ancient Greece, the account moves to France, charting the course of universal suffrage from 1789 to the second Napoleon. Backtracking to 1815, Canfora next discusses the emergence of liberalism across Europe as a whole. He then returns to France, to follow the political developments of

⁷ Quoted in Canfora, *L'occhio di Zeus: Disavventure della 'Democrazia'*, Bari 2006, p. 15.

the Third Republic from the Commune to 1914, and the consolidation of liberal parliamentary regimes across Europe prior to World War One.

The period of 1914–45 is treated as a unitary whole—a thirty-year convulsion of the continent—within which Canfora analyses the crises of Belle Epoque parliamentarianism, the socialist and fascist responses to it, the Great War and the advent of the Soviet Union. After reconstructing the installation of the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, Canfora addresses the ‘progressive’ and ‘people’s’ democracies—Italy and Czechoslovakia, pre-1948, as comparative cases—which, he argues, arose from a strategy of ‘antifascism’ in both parts of Europe. The historic defeat of this post-fascist ‘antifascism’ is signalled by De Gaulle’s declaration of the Fifth Republic, type case of the ‘mixed constitution’, in which ‘the “people” express their views but those who matter are the property-owning classes’.⁸ In Canfora’s view, contemporary European governments are essentially oligarchic regimes decked out with electoral machinery, designed to legitimate elite rule while disqualifying anti-systemic minorities through executive privilege, majoritarian mechanisms—first-past-the-post systems, single-member constituencies, et cetera—control of the mass media and outright coercion. By the end of this vigorous, stimulating text, many readers may be suffering a sense of literary-historical whiplash.

People’s rule

An initial assessment must begin with the key term of Canfora’s analysis: democracy. What does he mean by it? Disconcertingly, his Prologue opens with a rousing evocation of the popular-dictatorial role of Garibaldi as revolutionary democrat, going on to note that, in the Greek political language of the Roman period, *demokratia* and its derivative, *demokrator*, could imply ‘rule over the people’. Thus, ‘Appian writes, of the conflict between Caesar and Pompey, that the two fought “vying for *demokratia*”’, while Sulla, Caesar’s predecessor as ruler of the Roman Republic, is described elsewhere as a *demokrator*—effectively, a dictator. The ‘uncomfortable closeness’ between the two terms, Canfora suggests, requires us to look beyond accepted doctrine and recall the elements of class that underlie political systems; *kratos*, he reminds us, denotes ‘the violent exercise of power’. In Athens, democracy was the term used by

⁸ DE, p. 227.

opponents of government by the *demos* ‘precisely with the aim of highlighting its violent character’ and the ‘excessive power exercised by the non-property-owning classes when democracy reigns’.⁹ In his first chapter Canfora provides a striking reading of Pericles’s famous praise for the Athenian system in the Funeral Oration. Far from the complacency with which this is usually misquoted—not least in the Preamble to the 2003 draft European Constitution—Canfora sees a subtle distancing act in Thucydides’s account: Pericles explaining that, although the word ‘democracy’ was used to describe the administration of the city, as relating to the many, not the few, Athenian private life was, in fact, characterized by ‘freedom’. ‘We can reinterpret these words as much as we like’, Canfora concludes, ‘but the essential point is that Pericles is presenting “democracy” and “liberty” as antithetical.’¹⁰

The fullest explicit discussion of the term comes in the book’s penultimate chapter, “Towards the “Mixed System””. Canfora writes:

Democracy . . . is indeed an unstable phenomenon: the temporary ascendancy of the poorer classes in the course of an endless struggle for equality—a concept which itself widens with time to include ever newer, and ever more strongly challenged, ‘rights’.¹¹

For the Italian philologist, then, democracy is not a constitutional or political system, but a—historically, short-lived—shift in the distribution of social power: a ‘form of relations between classes’ that is ‘biased towards the “ascendancy of the demos”’.¹² Its basic aim is material equality. In a 2007 interview with the *Tageszeitung*, Canfora explained that his concept referred to the Aristotelian view: ‘Democracy is the rule [*Herrschaft*] of the propertyless, oligarchy the rule of the rich’.¹³ The history of democracy therefore involves the study not of constitutional or political systems, but of moments of popular ascendancy, quickly absorbed by anti-democratic forces.

Paradoxically, the origins of this seemingly radical usage lie in the harshest critiques of the political form. Canfora’s account of democracy is

⁹ Respectively, DE, pp. 5, 8, 22.

¹⁰ DE, p. 8.

¹¹ DE, p. 228.

¹² DE, p. 250.

¹³ Thus for Canfora democracy is a form of *rule*, or dominion, ‘not a form of government [*Regierungsform*] or a type of constitution [*Verfassungstyp*]’. Interview with Ulrich Gutmair, *Tageszeitung*, 15 December 2007.

deeply indebted to anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic thinkers. This is obvious enough from his initial discussion of the origins of the term among anti-democratic upper classes in classical Greece. But it is also strongly influenced by a specifically Italian tradition of elitist political theory, and particularly the work of Gaetano Mosca, 'a great analyst of the forces at work in society'.¹⁴ Like Mosca, Canfora sees contemporary democracy as largely a set of empty ideological claims. In his sense, liberal-capitalist societies are clearly anti-democratic because they are profoundly unequal, and their 'democracy' is essentially a political formula used to justify elite rule. I will argue that this definition of democracy as class equality, 'the temporary ascendancy of the poorer classes',¹⁵ is based on a conflation of social and political power. But to see why, it is first necessary to look at the turning points of *Democracy in Europe's* narrative in greater detail.

1789 and after

For Canfora, 'the 1789 Revolution was the matrix that shaped the entire subsequent history of Europe'; but its consequences were far from straightforward.¹⁶ The use of elections and parliaments as mechanisms of government would soon be separated from the substance of democracy as equality, and European regimes would harness universal suffrage, the classic technique of democracy, to legitimate elite rule. The concept of universal suffrage was first embodied in Robespierre's Constitution of 1793, which did away with indirect voting and censitary conditions. (Canfora dismisses earlier English and American experiments with suffrage as limited by race or religion, in contrast to the abolition of slavery by the Jacobin Convention.) Thermidor immediately snuffed out this attempt. From then on, successive constitutions 'contained severe restrictions on the right to vote', until the Revolution of 1848.¹⁷

The democratic breakthrough of 1848 had paradoxical results, however. The French election in April of that year, the first by universal suffrage in Europe, produced a 'moderate' Assembly that would attack workers' living standards and drown their June uprising in blood. Louis Napoleon then swept to electoral victory in December 1848. Canfora provides an incisive definition of Bonapartism: 'demagogic, seductive, almost irresistible class inclusiveness directed at the less politicized masses, yet at

¹⁴ DE, p. 228.

¹⁵ DE, p. 228.

¹⁶ DE, p. 20.

¹⁷ DE, p. 67.

the same time firmly anchored in a relationship of mutual assistance with the property-owning classes'. He sees little difference between uncle and nephew: both are embodiments of reaction in 'modern, pseudo-revolutionary forms'.¹⁸

Louis Napoleon's victory became a model for the rest of Europe. 'The second emperor of the French', writes Canfora, 'taught bourgeois Europe not to fear universal suffrage but to tame it'.¹⁹ To summarize: it was not the French Revolution that brought parliamentary rule to Europe, but the Revolution emasculated by Bonapartism. The key innovation of Louis Napoleon, according to Canfora, was to show how universal suffrage could be manipulated by boundary changes, majoritarian single-member constituencies, political pressure from prefects or governors, the help of the press and so forth, to ensure the election of local notables. Appropriately controlled, universal suffrage could become a useful support for propertied rule.

Canfora adduces a wide array of historical evidence to back this claim. First, where universal suffrage has existed, other mechanisms have always been in place to ensure that powerful working classes could not threaten the established order by changing political personnel through the ballot box. Coercion was one means: in France, the ruthless elimination of the Paris Commune. In pre-1914 Germany, militarist hegemony—the effects of the drill—and the restricted power of parliament made outright repression less necessary. In Italy or the United Kingdom, where relatively powerful parliaments co-existed with organized working-class movements, electoral corruption and restricted suffrage, or an undemocratic majoritarian system, lasted well into the twentieth century.

The establishment of electoral representation, then, far from indicating a shift of power towards the poorer classes, is perhaps the surest sign that such a shift has not occurred. This is underlined by a consideration of the rulers who granted suffrage: Bismarck in Germany, Giolitti in Italy—where the extension of the vote served to shore up a weak and isolated political class—and, though not discussed here, Disraeli in Britain. All these figures seem to fit the Bonapartist pattern of a 'strong leader' supported by electoral consensus. They granted universal suffrage for—in Canfora's sense—clearly undemocratic ends.

¹⁸ DE, pp. 81–2.

¹⁹ DE, p. 101.

The next stage of the analysis focuses on the 1914–45 period of the ‘European Civil War’, interpreted as a three-way struggle between socialism, fascism and a ‘third element’, liberal democracy. Canfora places responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War firmly on the latter: ‘Since the governments that clashed in that memorable August were all parliamentary, it can be confidently asserted that the “third element” has the dubious but considerable distinction of having sparked off the hell of the twentieth century.’²⁰ The Great War would bring what Canfora terms the ‘second failure of universal suffrage’; but its immediate aftermath saw Italy hold its first effective universal-suffrage elections in December 1918, while Germany elected a new constituent assembly in January 1919.

Rather than producing real democracy, however—bringing the property-less to power—universal suffrage in both cases ended in fascism: ‘the classes that supported the parties in government’ gradually ‘lost faith in “parliamentary democracy”, and chose fascism instead.’²¹ This re-emergence of the Bonapartist formula, more murderous now than ever, had far-reaching consequences. Not only did it crush the movements for substantive democracy in Germany, Italy and Spain; Canfora argues that the pressures it brought on the Soviet Union—where constituent-assembly elections had been held in November 1917, and which had initially pioneered a form of multi-party soviet democracy—twisted that country’s development as well, with the moral and material complicity of the remaining Western liberal democracies.

An important role in the eventual outcome of the ‘European Civil War’ is played by what Canfora calls ‘antifascism’. He sees this as a political movement that sought to go beyond the old parliamentary regimes and to redress the failings of liberalism, which had ‘given birth to fascism in the first place’.²² Antifascism was therefore also a struggle for substantive democracy in Europe, which would produce both the welfare states and the people’s democracies of the post-war period. Canfora argues that the Soviet example played an important part in this: the ‘antifascist’ constitutions of Italy (1948) and Germany (1949) are said to have incorporated elements from the 1936 Soviet constitution—formally a model juridical construct, however travestied by the purges and show trials coeval with it. Thus Article Three of the Italian Constitution instructs the

²⁰ DE, p. 157.

²¹ DE, p. 158.

²² DE, p. 174.

Republic to remove all 'economic and social obstacles that, limiting the actual liberty and equality of citizens, impede the full development of the human individual and the effective participation of all workers in the economic, political and social organization of the country.' In addition, antifascism's role in liberating the countries of central and eastern Europe ensured, Canfora argues, that their post-war governments had a degree of real mass support.

The moment of 'antifascist democracy' also proved short-lived; it would soon be beaten back by the consolidation of the 'mixed system'. The model for this form of rule was De Gaulle's Fifth Republic, whose important innovation was the reintroduction of a majoritarian system, designed to eliminate the PCF as a viable political alternative. By the end of the twentieth century, the mixed system had undermined progressive democracies across the continent. It strengthened the executive, undermined proportional representation and selected politicians according to criteria of wealth, to ensure the rule of oligarchies unaccountable to legislative control. Democracy in its European homelands has thus been reduced to the electoral legitimation of elites. As Canfora writes:

The postscript has been the victory—and it promises to be a lasting one—of what the Greeks called the 'mixed constitution', in which the 'people' express their views but those who matter are the property-owning classes. In more modern terms, it is the victory of a dynamic oligarchy that is centred on great wealth but capable of building consensus and securing legitimacy through elections, because it keeps the electoral mechanisms under its control.²³

The result has been the defeat of democracy in the substantive sense by its antithesis, in Pericles's terms: freedom. Not freedom for all, of course, 'but for those who are "strongest" in competition, be they nations, regions or individuals'—for 'every obligation that favours the less "strong" is precisely a limitation on the freedom of others'.²⁴ In citing the Funeral Oration, the drafters of the European Constitution's Preamble had inadvertently uttered 'not a piece of edifying rhetoric but rather what *truly* needed to be said: that freedom has won—in the rich world—with all the terrible consequences this has, and will continue to have, for the rest'.²⁵ Postponed to some future era, democracy

²³ DE, p. 227.

²⁴ DE, p. 251.

²⁵ DE, pp. 251–2.

will be invented all over again—though perhaps not, Canfora adds, by Europeans.

Class and party

Such is the main argument of *Democracy in Europe*. How should it be evaluated? One of the strengths of its perspective is the way that it can account for the ebbing of substantive democracy conjointly with the spread of electoral representation—a conundrum to which standard political-science studies have provided no definitive answer. Canfora's scathing description of the electoral oligarchy of the 'mixed system' is a bracing corrective to self-celebratory European accounts. His analysis of the post-war role of 'antifascism' is a useful reminder of the egalitarian aspirations at stake in the construction of the welfare state, and his discussion of the tortured history of universal suffrage, above all in France, is never less than compelling. Yet there are some important conceptual problems with his account. As I indicated above, Canfora's definition of democracy as the rule of the propertyless is based on a conflation of social and political power, and thus tends to de-emphasize the specificity of both. Aristotle, to whose authority Canfora often appeals, seems to have been much clearer about this. For Aristotle, democracy is a political regime in which the status of citizenship is shared across classes; it does not depend on the elimination of class differences, but rather on the construction of a political status that is independent of them.

Canfora's notion of democracy implicitly conceives of the *demos* as a monolithic body; hence a single leader—Garibaldi—can be the expression of its political will. Yet the propertyless, not excluding small property holders, come from numerous different sectoral, geographical, cultural and ethnic backgrounds and experiences, and have historically built a range of political parties to articulate their needs. Even the most benighted people's democratic republic recognized the need for a tame peasants' party, alongside the ruling Communists. Yet the role of parties is a notable absence in *Democracy in Europe*. Strangely, too, Canfora shows little interest in the novel forms thrown up by moments of proto-socialist democracy: the improvisations of the Paris Commune, where judges and police chiefs were directly elected and recallable; the multi-party soviets in the early days of Bolshevik power.

While Canfora's insistence on the many parallels in developments on both sides of the Iron Curtain may be salutary, there were important differences in the political experience of the two parts of the continent that are not given adequate recognition here. Taking Czechoslovakia and Italy as his paradigms, Canfora sees both imperial powers, Washington and Moscow, using a mix of material aid and the threat of force to establish friendly political regimes in their zones of influence, in the immediate post-war period. Here, he argues,

there was an implied principle that was a logical corollary of the division into spheres of influence. This ran as follows: elections will be held as soon as possible, to give representative governments to the countries involved; in any case, if the division into areas has any sense, the elections will be won by the parties that are sympathetic to the power with hegemony in that area.²⁶

The processes by which Klement Gottwald in Czechoslovakia and Alcide De Gasperi in Italy came to power were fundamentally similar. Both won relatively free elections in 1946, Gottwald's KSC receiving a plurality of 38 per cent, while De Gasperi's Christian Democrats won 35 per cent (compared to a combined 39 per cent for the PCI and Socialists). Both won again in 1948, in contests that were far more compromised. In Czechoslovakia, Canfora singles out the food aid received from the Soviet Union (in competition with the Marshall Plan), which raised the prestige of the Communists after the political battles of February 1948 and resignation of the non-Communist parties, and the manipulated elections four months later, 'openly geared to produce a unanimous result'. Canfora considers that the Communists' victory was validated by their undoubted support among the working class, a real mass base if not a majority of the electorate; nevertheless, the decision by the KSC—and, initially, its allies—to 'force the electoral mechanism in such a way as to "preventively construct" an election victory' was not, at that point, 'something they were obliged to do'.²⁷ In Italy the Marshall Plan was, of course, used as a political tool to increase the prestige of the Christian Democrats. Recent documents have shown that the Americans were quite prepared to intervene in the event of a Communist victory at the polls in 1948: a CIA report detailed contingency plans in which Italy would be partitioned and a guerrilla war unleashed.

The similarities are suggestive. Both countries were under the influence of an imperial power, which presented itself as a liberator. Yet there

²⁶ DE, p. 187.

²⁷ DE, pp. 195–6.

are fundamental differences between the two that Canfora does not acknowledge openly enough. Unlike the opposition to Gottwald, the PCI maintained a massive organizational presence throughout the post-war period, however harried and vilified it was. No organized opposition on this scale was ever permitted in Czechoslovakia, or any other part of state-socialist Eastern Europe—one reason why de-Stalinization took shape not as political pluralism but as reform within existing Communist parties. The second point, obviously, is that the central and eastern European regimes lacked any electoral legitimation. In Italy, regular elections did occur, and Italians could at least express dissatisfaction with their rulers, even if the largest party, the PCI, was effectively banned from taking power. To acknowledge this fact is crucial for any understanding of the contrasting political outcomes in Europe's two Cold War wings. Canfora recognizes this point obliquely, writing that a 'long-term weakness' of the people's democracies was the conviction that popular endorsement, once achieved, 'was valid *for an indefinite period*, and that there was no need for the periodic checks and renewals of legitimacy so skilfully carried out in the West'—'it was believed that social programmes would consolidate regimes. This clearly did not happen'.²⁸ And again, in his analysis of Titoism and the break-up of Yugoslavia:

The bitter, almost suicidal nature of the clash was, among other things, one of the consequences of the vision that sustained the birth of 'people's democracies': that consensus is obtained once and for all, that the consensus that matters is that of the 'politically active mass'—and that, in any case, it is valid for an entire historical phase.²⁹

He does not comment on the relative scarcity of nationalist mobilizations in Western Europe over the same period, those that did occur being largely confined to the Atlantic and Mediterranean fringe. Yet it is at least plausible to suggest that the transcendence of such conflicts was closely connected to the triumph of electoral democracy in that zone. Thus, while Canfora's comparison effectively evokes a certain kind of parallel between East and West, his conception of democracy as representing an egalitarian shift in the distribution of class power may prevent him from grasping the political specificity of each experience. The strength of the political orders of the advanced-capitalist West, and the peaceful character of their inter-state relations, is inextricably linked to the fact that, in contrast to the East, elections—however 'managed' or 'manipulated'—legitimize their political elites. No rethinking

²⁸ DE, p. 188.

²⁹ DE, p. 197.

of democracy, however radical and heterodox, should obscure this basic fact and the fateful consequences that flow from it.

Swindle laws

What of Canfora's critique of electoral 'manipulation'—principally focused on majoritarian voting systems—and 'management', largely laid at the door of the mass media? The latter charge is familiar enough. Canfora argues that consolidated media ownership distorts the political field and helps to form a de-politicized and easily led electorate, not necessarily through explicit propaganda but through an omnipresent consumerism and the worship of wealth. The 'genius and irresistibility' of this new method of 'opinion forming', he writes, 'lie in the fact that it never manifests itself in a directly political way'.³⁰ One does not have to be familiar with television in Berlusconi's Italy to sympathize with this argument. Turning to electoral 'manipulation', *Democracy in Europe* mounts a sustained attack against the first-past-the-post system, to which Canfora ascribes the ascendancy of the Tories in England, the destruction of the Socialists under the Fascist regime in Italy, and the elimination of the Communists under De Gaulle. Majoritarian electoral rules, he argues, are inherently biased toward the parties of the establishment and easily subject to corruption; first-past-the-post systems have long been linked to powerful landed classes and restricted suffrage; proportional representation was a central demand of European Social Democracy, and right-wing forces abolished it where they could. This is particularly clear in the history of Canfora's country; many of Italy's stormiest political conflicts have pitted Right against Left over precisely this issue. One need only recall the importance of the 1924 Acerbo law for consolidating Mussolini's control, or De Gasperi's failed attempt to institute a majoritarian system through the *legge truffa*—'swindle law'—of the early 1950s. Although one could point to the occasional counter-example—the victory of the Left in Spain in 1936, for instance—there is no doubt that first-past-the-post regimes have historically favoured conservative forces.

For Canfora, majoritarianism not only produces skewed representation but introduces a further, political restriction of suffrage: instead of 'one man, one vote', it creates the categories of 'useful' versus 'wasted' votes,

³⁰ DE, pp. 225–6.

consigning the latter to oblivion. Ultimately, this leads to the atrophy of political forces outside a central, two-party consensus. Canfora scathingly outlines the ways in which the French Communist Party has become ‘an annex’ of the Socialists under the Fifth Republic’s two-round electoral system, condemning PCF voters to ‘servant status’; they would soon choose ‘either to vote *directly* for the party that would benefit from their votes anyway, or not to vote at all.’³¹

Yet there is a contradiction between Canfora’s definition of democracy as the ascendancy of the *demos*, entailing a degree of egalitarian unity, and his argument for PR, which he defends on grounds of pluralism and the quality of political culture. Thus: ‘the “fragmentation” of political groupings is not a disease: it is a natural process, and can be enriching’.³² Canfora’s attack on majoritarian mechanisms implies that political systems should represent, as closely as possible, the real structure of their underlying societies; in that sense, then, democracy would reflect inequalities, rather than—as his concept demands—necessarily transcending them. Indeed, Canfora’s emphasis on electoral processes and the power of the media suggests a further problem at the heart of his critique, at least if we are to take egalitarianism seriously. For the argument that systemic electoral manipulation is the central political ill of advanced capitalist democracies leads to the obvious corollary that effective, undistorted universal suffrage with proportional representation would in itself have revolutionary implications. Indeed this seems to be Canfora’s view when he writes, glossing Marx’s analysis in *The Class Struggles in France*, of a vision of ‘the intrinsically destructive effects of universal suffrage’, which ‘continually calls into question the state’s “present” power and presents itself as the sole source of authority and power.’³³

State forms

The implication is clear. Universal suffrage, if only allowed effectively and freely to operate, would eliminate the state. *Pace* Althusser, in this respect at least, the very youthful Marx is a better guide than the middle-aged one. For Marx, with great prescience and precision, had already identified the central problem of parliamentary democracy in *On the Jewish Question* as the separation of ‘*bourgeois* and *citoyen*’—‘the member

³¹ DE, p. 216.

³² DE, p. 219.

³³ DE, p. 92.

of civil society and his *political lion skin*: in other words, the structural separation of political life from social life in general.³⁴ Only from this perspective does it become clear that the act of voting itself, as an isolated individual expression of preference, far from 'questioning' state power, re-affirms the very separation between the political and economic spheres that is at its base. To recognize this leads beyond the question of electoral manipulation.

What explains Canfora's tendency to elide the difference between East and West, and the related limitation of his critique of Western parliamentary institutions? Two main reasons suggest themselves: one intellectual and cultural, and the other political. Canfora's conception of democracy as the ascendancy of the poorer classes is based on an elision of the difference between political and social power that is deeply rooted in Italian political culture. Indeed one might argue that a characteristic feature of the Italian tradition of social theory is its lack of a robust conception of social structure, or of political economy, as distinct from political rule. The historical reasons for this are obvious enough, since wealth and political power are probably more closely fused in Italy than in any other advanced capitalist society. In this context the problem of democracy appears inseparable from broader questions of inequality. But there are also more specifically political reasons for the shortcomings of Canfora's analysis. For *Democracy in Europe* exemplifies an impasse that the left has never been able adequately to overcome. The problem could be put like this. Any society beyond capitalism would have to build upon the historic achievement of parliamentary democracy in Western Europe, and yet would require a fundamental institutional break with pre-existing state forms that could not take an exclusively electoral form.

Canfora's approach obscures this painful dilemma in what would once have been called Eurocommunist fashion. For by defining the struggle for democracy as a struggle for social equality, he avoids directly confronting the question of their relationship. From this point of view, the main task of socialism is to fulfill and extend democracy: to create, in Togliatti's phrase, a 'progressive democracy'.³⁵ (Indeed Canfora has warm

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, London 1974, p. 221.

³⁵ Togliatti never gave more than a vague definition of this concept. A typical formulation was the one offered in a 1944 speech in Rome: 'Progressive democracy is that which looks not toward the past but towards the future.' See the discussion of Aldo Agosti in *Togliatti: Un uomo di frontiera*, Rome 2003, pp. 287–9.

praise for Togliatti's restraining influence on the Italian Resistance, at the behest of the Allied coalition; analogously he blames MIR 'extremism' in Chile for Allende's overthrow.³⁶) Of course, the creation of a new and better type of democracy in contemporary Italy, and the rest of the world, would be a laudable enterprise. But for this also to be an egalitarian system would require a new *state* form, not just a parliamentary regime pruned of corruption and provided with a fair electoral system. The struggle for basic legality is a necessary one, but it should not define the strategic horizon of political transformation. 'Democracy' itself is an empty signifier, and has progressive (or conservative) meaning only if linked to a coherent social and economic project. To define it solely in terms of the 'endless struggle for equality'³⁷ is to obscure its intrinsic political polyvalence. 'Democracy Now' is a slogan that should be treated with great caution.

³⁶ DE, pp. 191, 165.

³⁷ DE, p. 228.