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Rousse-Malpat, Audrey; Steinkrauss, Rasmus; Wieling, Martijn; Verspoor, Marjolijn

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# From ‘Grey Democracy’ to the ‘Green New Deal’: Post-war Democracy and the Hegemonic Imaginary of Material Politics in Western Europe

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/meh](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/meh)**Stefan Couperus**

University of Groningen, Netherlands

**Stephen Milder**

University of Groningen, Netherlands/Rachel Carson Center, Munich, Germany

Fascination – even nostalgia – for the post-war years, which is widespread in scholarship and the public sphere in Western Europe, makes the era a key reference point in efforts to understand the development of politics and society since 1945. In scholarship, the period’s resonance is readily apparent in the sparkling superlatives that have been used to describe it. In his seminal history of the short 20th century, Eric Hobsbawm describes the 1950s and 1960s as ‘golden years’.<sup>1</sup> This characterization emphasizes the stark contrast, especially in Western Europe, between the widespread affluence of the post-war decades and the preceding ‘age of catastrophe’, a period of 30 years that saw not only the great depression but also the two world wars. Already in the mid-1950s, West Germans began to refer to the prosperity their country had attained so soon after the devastation they faced at the end of World War II as an ‘economic miracle’ (*Wirtschaftswunder*). In France, the economist Jean Fourastie famously termed the period from the end of the war until the 1970s the ‘Thirty Glorious Years’ (*trentes glorieuses*), and similar characterizations can be found with regard to Italy and the Netherlands.

The same sort of superlative language has been re-appropriated to describe the progress of post-war democracy as well. In 1953, the German political scientists Christian-Claus Baer and

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1. E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, London 1995, 257–286.

**Corresponding author:**

Stefan Couperus, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands.

Email: [s.couperus@rug.nl](mailto:s.couperus@rug.nl)

Erwin Faul described the whittling down of the broad spectrum of parties present in the Weimar Republic and the emergence of two *Volksparteien* as the ‘German electoral miracle’ (*Deutsches Wahlwunder*).<sup>2</sup> More recently, Konrad Jarausch has referred to the emergence of a ‘stable democracy following the western model’ so soon after the downfall of the Nazi regime in West Germany as a ‘democratic miracle’, while Herrick Chapman has written on the ‘democratic rejuvenation’ of post-war France.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the similarities in the way they are described, however, there is a notable distinction between the way the economic and democratic successes of the 1950s and 1960s have been understood. Economically speaking, the post-war years were ‘golden’ because they were a time of exponential economic growth, full employment that necessitated the recruitment of workers from abroad, and the emergence of a new consumer society. Instead of frenetic expansion, however, it was plodding stability that made the era ‘Western Europe’s Democratic Age’.<sup>4</sup> As Martin Conway puts it, the democracy of the post-war years was a sort of ‘consociational democracy’ comprising multi-party governing coalitions and the corporatist institutions that ‘embedded employers and labour in a culture of reciprocal compromises’ and provided ‘predictability and inclusiveness’. Precisely on account of this staid model, however, post-war democracy also suffered from noteworthy shortcomings. Most significantly for Conway, ‘bureaucratic inefficiency’ and ‘a lack of transparency’ resulted in ‘the withering of active citizenship’.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, by the late 1960s, ‘many Europeans came to feel that the liberation had been a missed opportunity when Europe could have enacted a more radical reconfiguration of social and political power’.<sup>6</sup> Or as Tony Judt aptly characterizes the *Zeitgeist* in his seminal study, Western European democracy in the 1950s and 1960s was ultimately about ‘prosperity, compromise, political demobilization and a tacit agreement not to arouse the sleeping dogs of national memory’.<sup>7</sup>

This contribution takes up the curious relationship between the economic and democratic miracles and the discrepancy between the ways in which they are understood. Insights from environmental history – especially the ‘great acceleration’ concept – reveal the extent to which we cannot begin to understand the era without first recognizing that the post-war years constituted an exceptional moment in human history. In the remainder of this essay, we consider what the singularity of this period meant for the development of democracy in Western Europe after 1945 and also for the way in which we retrospectively make sense of the history of post-war democracy. On account of this unique context, we challenge the notion that post-war democracy ought to be understood as a general benchmark. Instead, we propose that it was a specific configuration that we term ‘grey democracy’. Conceiving grey democracy as a benchmark, we argue, thwarts a critical assessment of how democratic practices, values and institutions have become intertwined with imperatives of growth, natural resource-driven production, material affluence and open-market industrial capitalism. Thus, the way that scholars and the public understand

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2. C.-C. Baer / E. Faul (eds.), *Das deutsche Wahlwunder*, Frankfurt am Main 1953.

3. K. Jarausch / A. Bauerkämper / M. Payk, ‘Einleitung: Transatlantische Mittler und die kulturelle Demokratisierung Deutschlands, 1945–1970’, in: Eadem (eds.), *Demokratiewunder Transatlantische Mittler und die kulturelle Öffnung Westdeutschlands 1945–1970*, Göttingen 2005, 11; H. Chapman, *France’s Long Reconstruction: In Search of the Modern Republic*, Cambridge, MA 2018, 3.

4. M. Conway, *Western Europe’s Democratic Age, 1945–1968*, Princeton 2020.

5. M. Conway, ‘The Rise and Fall of Western Europe’s Democratic Age’, in: *Contemporary European History* 13 (2004) 1, 84.

6. Conway, *Western Europe’s Democratic Age*, 258.

7. T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, New York 2005, 277.

the 1950s continues to cloud our understanding of democracy's development and our visions for its future – even now, in the age of climate change awareness, where humanity's growing impact on the planet is widely known.

## The singular post-war moment

Like economists and scholars of democracy, environmental historians have opted to use a superlative in order to describe the post-war moment and to explain its salience for the present. Their moniker for the period, 'the great acceleration', is intended to express the notion that the decades after 1945 saw unprecedented growth in the 'the scope, scale, and intensity of mutual impacts on the human-environment system'.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the era was 'the most anomalous and unrepresentative period in the 200,000-year-long history of relations between our species and the biosphere'.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the very same markers that evidence humanity's growing impact on the environment – trends including increased energy and resource use, population growth, and urbanization – are closely linked to the economic boom that caused historians such as Hobsbawm to describe the post-war era as the 'golden years' in the first place. These, after all, were the changes that made growing incomes, improvements in quality of life, and more robust social safety nets possible across Western Europe.<sup>10</sup> These very same developments were constitutive of grey democracy.

The symbiotic relationship between carbon-driven economic growth and democratic consolidation in post-war Western Europe is readily apparent in many recent studies, but it has hardly been subjected to analysis. Even recent accounts of post-war democracy tend to avoid engaging critically with the carbonized, material substratum of democratic institution-building and thought.<sup>11</sup> Leading contributions to the 'crisis of democracy' debates of the late 2010s epitomize this approach. Colin Crouch's influential 2004 book *Post-Democracy*, which seeded the field for these debates, is a case in point. Crouch describes this period as the 'height of democracy's parabola in Western Europe' precisely because workers became actively involved with political processes; they went regularly to the polls, supported mass parties and devoted time and money to reading newspapers that engaged them at a high level.<sup>12</sup> And yet, the very same structures and assumptions that underpinned this style of democratic engagement were dependent on humanity's growing impact on the planet. This means that the world of mass parties, social democratic organizational life and party newspapers, all of which Crouch views with unmistakable nostalgia, was arranged around the extraction of natural resources from the earth and the crafting of those resources into industrial and consumer goods.

Recognizing the fundamental correspondence between the structures of post-war mass democracy and the great acceleration foregrounds humanity's impact on the earth in narratives of post-war democratization, revealing that the arrangements that underpinned what we refer to as grey

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8. K. A. Hibbard / P. J. Crutzen / E. F. Lambin / D. M. Liverman / N. J. Mantua / J. R. McNeill / B. Messerli / W. Steffen, 'Group Report: Decadal-Scale Interactions of Humans and the Environment', in: R. Costanza / L. Graumlich / W.L. Steffen (eds.), *Sustainability or Collapse? An Integrated History and Future of People on Earth*, Cambridge, MA 2006, 343.

9. J. R. McNeill / P. Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: A History of the Anthropocene Since 1945*, Cambridge, MA 2014, 5.

10. On the importance of population growth, urbanization and agricultural modernization for Europe's post-war boom, see Judt, *Postwar*, 324–359.

11. This is not to argue that modernization scholarship does not address the mutually constitutive relationship between economic structures and democratic institutions; instead, it is intended to illustrate the lack of critical engagement with that relationship from an ecological perspective.

12. C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge 2004, 24–25.

democracy were specific to the post-war moment. After all, democratic regimes across Western Europe were firmly grounded in shared material concerns. Corporatist structures held together capital, labour and the state in the consociational planning of economic modernization, industrial production and mass employment. These same arrangements pre-empted potential challenges to the socio-economic and political equilibrium.

The necessary condition for this, obviously, was a continuous and robust supply of natural resources, the most notable of which was coal.<sup>13</sup> National governments thus prioritized the recovery and expansion of coal mining. This was spurred by international collaborations and American aid and ultimately secured by the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, which took control over the Ruhr to make war 'not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible'.<sup>14</sup> In France and Belgium, the centrality of coal to post-war recovery and prosperity begot the infamous *la Bataille du Charbon*, in which the two governments competed to increase coal production. In the United Kingdom, meanwhile, Prime Minister Clement Attlee lauded the nationalization of the coal industry in 1947 'as one of the great days in the industrial history of our country'.<sup>15</sup>

The predominant imaginary of democracy was essentially informed by this logic: democracy needed to instantiate social and economic stability, and such stability was best achieved by promoting ongoing 'extractive and productive effort'.<sup>16</sup> Despite the unprecedented environmental impacts of these efforts, environmental concerns were absent from this equation. Though it cannot be claimed that ecological critiques were absent altogether, social conscience lacked 'any paradigm capable of recording, on an epistemic and political level, the specific form of the geo-ecological regime that was contemporary to them'.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the social imaginary of democracy, or the mental pre-configurations that shaped collective understandings of democracy, was essentially grey. Democracy was not about popular sovereignty or social (let alone environmental) justice; instead, it was imbued with the promise of family cars being driven on grey tarmac, delivered by the perpetuated extraction and transport of dark-grey coal, exemplified by the uninterrupted emission of grey smoke from the nations' industries. This grey imagery's influence was constantly reinforced by the visual conflation of concrete, car-oriented spatiality, family life and industrial affluence, seen for instance, in the propaganda for British new towns or new residential neighbourhoods' across Western Europe.<sup>18</sup>

More than just restoring the extent to which the structures underpinning post-war democracy depended on the unprecedented growth in human impacts on the earth, the notion of grey democracy also illuminates the unique social arrangements that this understanding of mass democracy fostered. By focusing so closely on the way mass parties functioned amid economic growth, we overlook the fact that then, as now, many were left out. What Geoff Eley has referred to as the 'post-1945 settlement', that is, a set of 'protective and enabling resources' comprising 'improved housing and nutrition, medical services and public health, universal secondary education and places at university, social services and income support, full employment and the welfare state', was indeed constitutive for post-war democratic politics, but these resources were hardly available

13. T. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London 2011, 28.

14. K.K. Patel, *Project Europe: A History*, Cambridge 2021, 89–93; Quote from: Schuman Declaration, 9 May 1950. Retrieved from: [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950\\_en\\_](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en_)

15. D. Day, *The Bevin Boy*, London 1975, 92.

16. P. Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom. An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, Cambridge 2021, 172.

17. *Ibid.*

18. See, for instance, W. Durth / P. Sigel, *Baukultur: Spiegel Gesellschaftlichen Wandels*, Berlin 2009; R. Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement*, Chicago 2016.

to all.<sup>19</sup> While the term ‘full employment’ aptly describes the situation in industrial work, where young men were certain to find jobs, it hardly accounts for the widespread exclusion of women from such workplaces. Neither does it open a framework to analyse the recruitment of migrant workers into such workplaces, let alone to study how those same workers were excluded from the catalogue of ‘protective and enabling resources’ that the post-1945 settlement delivered to the native-born, white male worker. Indeed, the consequences of the sort of extreme extractivism epitomized by the Franco-Belgian *la Bataille du Charbon*, which resulted in strikes and the employment of German prisoners of war and foreign ‘guest workers,’ who worked in appalling conditions, barely registers in accounts of grey democracy.<sup>20</sup>

## The tenacity of a problematic benchmark

Even today, amid widespread movements, to mitigate anthropogenic climate change and to address the social and political exclusion of women and people of colour, grey democracy continues to serve as a benchmark for visions of a more democratic future. Nostalgic longings for the models of the post-war years, and plans for restoring the economic growth that made them possible, are essential to scholars’ recipes for the reconsolidation of democracy. Yascha Mounk, who has written extensively on recent trends towards democratic ‘deconsolidation’, describes the mid-20th century as ‘the period of democratic stability’.<sup>21</sup> This stability was, in Mounk’s base analysis, the direct product of economic growth that increased household incomes and thus led voters to accept the system.

It is not only from such an overtly nostalgic perspective, however, that the years after World War II become a sort of baseline for our understanding of high-functioning democracy. In *Democracy Rules*, Jan-Werner Müller argues that democracy must periodically revisit its fundamental principles.<sup>22</sup> Though his argument reserves ample space for rethinking and innovating these fundamental principles today, they are, in essence, reminiscent of pre-existing analyses of the erosion of post-war democracy, and the subsequent invocation of the post-war democratic constellation as the gauge for well-functioning democracies. Similarly, Nadia Urbinati argues that ‘new forms of directness’, such as social media and citizen assemblies, which are on the rise in contemporary democracies, harm the ability of intermediary institutions to mitigate, moderate and consensualize opposition, as practised in post-war democracy.<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Hopkin, for his part, urges the re-deployment of the successful confluence of post-war ‘capitalist growth’ and ‘democratic fairness’ as a directive for tackling ‘anti-system politics’ today.<sup>24</sup> In a similar prescriptive vein, Isser Woloch extols the progressive ‘post-war moment’ that laid the groundwork for agendas of social security and progress in France, Britain and the United States.<sup>25</sup> In all these and other references, the innate symbiosis of the post-war democratic model and the Great Acceleration is an unmentioned given.

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19. G. Eley, ‘Leaving the Borderlands ... but for Where? 1968 and the New Registers of Political Feeling’, in: B. Davis / F. Brühöfener / S. Milder (eds.), *Rethinking Social Movements After '68: Selves and Solidarities in West Germany and Beyond*, New York 2022, 26.
  20. G. Coppieters, *De Belgische Kolenslag, 1944–1951. Het mirakel dat er geen was*, Brussel 2021; B. Mattéi / E. Desbois / Y. Jeanneau, *La foi des charbonniers: Les mineurs dans la Bataille du charbon 1945–1947*, Paris 2014.
  21. Y. Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy. Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It*, Cambridge, MA 2018, 15.
  22. J.-W. Mueller, *Democracy Rules*, London 2021.
  23. N. Urbinati, ‘A Revolt Against Intermediary Bodies’, in: *Constellations* 22 (2015) 4, 477–486, here 480.
  24. J. Hopkin, ‘Thirty Glorious Years’, *Aeon*, 2 October 2020, Retrieved from: <https://aeon.co/essays/postwar-prosperity-dependent-on-a-truce-between-capitalism-and-democracy>; J. Hopkin, *Anti-System Politics: The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies*, Oxford 2020.
  25. I. Woloch, *The Postwar Moment: Progressive Forces in Britain, France and the US After World War II*, New Haven 2019.

The seminal position of anthropogenic climate change among the challenges facing contemporary societies makes it particularly remarkable that the post-war democratic model, which enabled the Great Acceleration and ushered in unprecedented environmental degradation, is so frequently revisited as the salve for the perceived ailments of democracy. In fact, the grey democracy model is so pervasive that it silently underpins even the most ambitious initiatives for climate change mitigation. The genealogy of the 'Green New Deal', a phrase that has been uttered by politicians and activists from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Ursula von der Leyen and become synonymous with a will to take serious action on climate change, exemplifies this point. After all, the Green New Deal concept unabashedly harkens back to the 'new deal era', a period that Crouch likens to Western Europe's post-war moment as the height of democracy's parabola in the United States, precisely because it saw the same sort of democratic arrangements. By making 'green jobs' or a 'green collar economy' the solution to both crises of employment and climate change, the program reveals myopia involved in using the post-war model as a benchmark for today. In other words, even solutions to anthropogenic climate change, which is itself a dire problem borne of the great acceleration, are conceived by returning to post-war logics, rather than by imagining a different or more democratic future.

Almost paradoxically, then, nostalgia for the 1950s and 1960s is tethered to an equally rosy view of the future: one in which unprecedented growth will return by other means, and humanity will extract a new set of resources, from lithium to cobalt and copper without so much as considering the consequences for the earth. Widespread blindness to the fact that this sort of Green New Deal will mirror grey democracy, especially in its assumption that boundless prosperity must underpin democracy and in its inevitable exclusion of much of humanity from that very affluence (as Iva Pesa's contribution to this Forum shows), is evidence of grey democracy's continued stranglehold over our capacity even to imagine alternative futures.

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