

CHAIRE GANSHOF van der MEERSCH 2005 - 2006

Europe's Democratic Age 1945-73 An exploration of a world that has disappeared

Martin Conway

Opening Lecture: Belgium. The state that got left behind. (2 hours)

Based on my forthcoming study of Belgium in the post-1944 years, this lecture and discussion will examine the reasons which underlay the Belgian “exceptionalism” of the post-war decades. At a time when the other states of Europe were experiencing a remarkable renaissance after the disruptions of the war years, the Belgian state moved in the opposite direction. Having been throughout the first hundred years of its existence, one of the most successful of the nation-states created during the nineteenth century, Belgium became embroiled in a complex web of constitutional, political and socio-linguistic disputes. Though these were apparently overcome by 1950-51, they re-emerged at the end of that decade, and led to the almost continuous cycle of constitutional reforms and regional demands which have characterised Belgium since the 1960s.

This lecture, aimed at a wider public as well as the students of the Institute, is therefore intended as a historical explanation of the reasons for this Belgian peculiarity.

Session One: Europe's Democratic Age. The Making of Politics in a New Key (4 hours: two lectures and discussions)

Between 1943 and 1949, Western Europe (a term which has no logic other than the Soviet occupation of territories further east) underwent the most dramatic political realignment in its twentieth-century history. In seven years, the marked trend over the previous decades towards forms of authoritarian and fascist rule was replaced by a remarkably stable structure of limited representative democracy. The reasons for this sudden democratic transition were wide-ranging, and go much deeper into the changing political and socio-economic fabric of Europe than the fact of Allied victory or the constraining presence of the US military forces. Europe had, it seemed, moved into a new political order. This session will debate the reasons for this change, placing particular emphasis on changes in class relations, the reinforced authority of the state and the emergence of an inclusive coalition-based parliamentary politics.

Session Two: A Lost Culture. Being Western in the post-war era (2 hours: one lecture and discussion)

The post-war decades have become, in retrospect, the iconic era of modern European culture. Overshadowing alternative periods of creativity, such as the 1890s or the 1920s, the 1950s and 1960s have become an era which exerts enormous fascination for contemporary Europeans in the spheres of literature, art, music and film. This session will therefore explore the nature of creative production in that era, paying particular attention to the ways in which the cultural production of the era reflected preoccupations not always reflected in the somewhat bland politics of the era.

Session Three: Social Continuities (2 hours: one lecture and discussion)

Much historical and political-studies writing on the 1950s and 1960s starts from the premise of rapid socio-economic change. Statistics are assembled to demonstrate how Europeans were moving more often, changing class identities, and developing new social and cultural values. This session will start from an opposite premise: that the solidity of Western Europe's democratic age can only be understood in terms of what did not change in Europe's social structure in that period. The largely ghettoised nature of the working class, the primacy of rural and small-town interests and the limited pathways to social mobility all remained prominent elements of the "European model". This session will therefore examine the reasons for this continuity, and its impact both for the political stability of the era and the subsequent growth of social and cultural tensions.

Session Four: Rescue or Reprieve of the Nation-State? (2 hours: one lecture and discussion)

The "rescue" of the nation state has become one of the central tenets of historical writing on the immediate post-war decades. This session will cast a critical eye on that debate, arguing that much of it has focused too much on the frontiers between the nation-state and forms of European integration. This has distracted attention from the prominent role played by subsidiary institutions in the post-war era, which in turn reflected the "self-limiting" scope of state actions in the 1940s and 1950s. In these decades, the national states did less but did it more effectively. This applies particularly to spheres such as welfare provision and socio-economic planning where the former centrality of the state gave way to a much more multi-party structure of decision-making. Corporatism is one term which can be used to define that process, but it is one which privileges one form of social negotiation (collective industrial relations) over the many other spheres in which women, professional groups and rural interests also acquired influence over state policy. This session will therefore examine the new social contracts of the post-war era, examining the degree to which both national and "European" institutions were influenced by that culture of social negotiation.

Session Five: What changed? Understanding the European Political crisis of the 1970s (2 hours: one lecture and discussion)

The end of the 1960s has emerged in recent years as a major focus of historical research. One of the most striking conclusions of that research has been the episodic and rather insubstantial nature of the forms of protest which emerged around 1968. Far from marking some definitive breakdown of the post-war socio-political order, the protests of those years appear to have reflected the cultural and generational tensions created by a period of unprecedented rapid economic growth. Much more substantial and profound was the political change which occurred in almost all states of Western Europe during the early 1970s. The economic difficulties of these years merged with other more long-standing processes of social and political change which for the first time threw into question the nature of the post-war order. And in doing so, it also undermined the democratic hegemony so evident since the end of the 1940s. On left and right new voices emerged which questioned the supremacy of democratic norms and sought to advance alternative models of society.

Session Six: Post-war or New Peace? Making sense of Europe's Democratic Age (1 hour discussion and debate)

This concluding discussion will look back over the course and analyse the post-war era in terms of a distinctive mid-century period in European history. Reflecting the whole structure of the course, it will emphasise how *different* the Europe of the post-war decades was from the Europe of today.

24 November 2005