The party's over

Jan-Werner Müller

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Buy*Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* by Peter Mair
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The word 'party' – as in 'political party' – is in bad odour across the West, though for different reasons in different places. In the United States, everyone from the president down seems to lament the polarisation of politics and the rise of partisanship. But then hostility to parties is nothing new in American history; 'if I could not go to heaven but with a party,' Jefferson wrote, 'I would not go there at all.' Europeans tend to be less in thrall to the ideals of the one indivisible nation. They worry about the opposite problem: that the parties are all the same. So there's a problem when parties have distinct ideologies, and there's a problem when they don't. What, then, do we really want from them?

Peter Mair's *Ruling the Void* offers some disturbing answers to this question. We remain in the dark about the strategies Mair might have recommended to address the crisis of Western democracy – he died of a heart attack in 2011 before his book was finished – but his brilliance as a political scientist comes through clearly, as does the magnitude of the challenge posed by the passing of the 'age of party democracy'.* Modern democracy, Mair tells us, simply cannot work without parties, so that when parties cease to play their proper role, democracy itself is at stake.

The evidence Mair marshals to demonstrate the decline of parties is overwhelming. Although turnout isn't progressively lower in every successive election, record troughs occur more often and in more and more places. Surveys confirm that the number of people who identify with a particular party is falling, while party membership is dwindling dramatically. Indifference, Mair argues, goes together with inconsistency. Voting has become more volatile, and although we can't be sure what voters are thinking, it's plausible to assume that taking politics less seriously translates into experimenting more freely with one's ballot. That said, rising volatility could also indicate the opposite: that citizens think more carefully about their choices; that they don't blindly follow a party allegiance they may well have inherited from their parents. For Mair, though, this is a problematic development. Parties used to be based on distinct social identities. In other words, they truly represented distinct sections of the population. Partisanship didn't detract from, but increased, the legitimacy of the political system. Parties were not one mechanism among others that made 'mass democracy' acceptable: they were the principal means of transmitting popular will and opinion from civil society to the state. Crucially, they remained anchored in the former. Hence the importance of what Mair calls 'representational integrity': politicians could not simply go in search of support from the people as whole or adopt what Mair terms 'the politics of "what works"'. The question was not 'what works?' but 'what works for us?' And that self-interest on the part of multiple constituencies was precisely what made democracy work as a whole.

Mair's most original argument is that the decline of parties, of party government, and hence of party democracy as a whole can't be blamed on either the people or the politicians. It's been a matter of mutual withdrawal, with politicians and citizens sharing equally what Mair calls an 'anti-political sentiment'. In 2000 Tony Blair could say with a straight face, 'I was never really in politics,' while a member of his cabinet trumpeted the 'depoliticising of key decision-making'. In practice, such talk meant that politicians were trying to cut loose from their own parties. Gordon Brown, when he was chancellor, once dismissed a proposal from the trade unions to restore the link between pensions and average earnings; in the face of overwhelming support for the proposal at the Labour Party Conference, Brown declared that it was 'for the country to judge': 'I'm listening to the whole community.' Manuel Valls, France's new Socialist prime minister, felt compelled to start his term in office by making it clear that he wasn't a socialist at all.

Mair asks how this pervasive disdain for politics sits with the near universal affirmation after 1989 that liberal democracy was the only legitimate political system. One answer is that democracy is continually being redefined in such a way as not to require 'mass engagement', let alone intense partisan commitment. One political theorist after another has come out in favour of 'deliberative democracy', in which citizens arrive at 'rational' policies through respectful debate and on the basis of expert advice. People are asked to be impartial and to refrain from clinging to what John Stuart Mill called 'fractional truths' – i.e. anything like a party line. More widespread still is the tendency to divide democracy into an electoral part, and something else. That something else can be a vigorous civil society, a lively public sphere or, most plausibly, the rule of law, and not only is it taken to qualify democracy as truly liberal, it also turns out to be more important than anything to do with parties and elections, which are dismissed by the American journalist Fareed Zakaria as 'mass plebiscites'. 'What we need in politics today,' he said (to his credit), 'is not more democracy but less.'

The minimal function of elections is to make it possible to remove a government when it is no longer wanted. However, even this depends on the existence of clear-cut political choices. It is this basic aspect of democracy that is in question today. Hence the proliferation of concepts such as 'post-political democracy' and, in particular, 'post-democracy', a term coined by the British social scientist Colin Crouch which is often taken as a manifestly correct diagnosis of the current situation in Europe. The idea is straightforward: you can change the people at the top, but you can't really change the policies (by contrast, in Russia or China, according to the Bulgarian social scientist Ivan Krastev, policies can be switched, but you can't get rid of the elites). Mair shows that the effects of 'partisanship' on policy have declined in recent decades. Parties, he says, nowadays present themselves as 'responsible' (in the way they handle the financial markets, above all); but they are neither representative of nor, for that matter, responsive to voters.

Some of these diagnoses are undoubtedly informed by the deep political disappointment caused by New Labour, which Thatcher claimed as her greatest achievement. A supposedly left-wing party became even cosier with the City than its right-wing predecessor had been. But the phenomenon wasn't unique to

Britain: it was under Clinton in the US and the Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder in Germany that financial markets were comprehensively deregulated.

There are two dangers to be avoided when discussing these matters. The first is idealising a past of clear-cut policy choices. Did it really matter that France and Italy had the largest Communist Parties in Western Europe if, with the brief exception of France in the early 1980s, they could never get into power, given the constraints of the Cold War? In the past, parties offered both an identity and a set of alternatives, but voters didn't really exercise choice because their identity determined the way they voted. Parties might have been representative, but they weren't necessarily responsive; as the Hungarian political scientist Zsolt Enyedi has pointed out, they expected deference from their followers. A further constraint on party government outside Britain with its first-past-the-post system was that citizens voted for parties but always got coalitions, with the result that programmes were invariably watered down. It should also be said that in the supposed golden years of representation by party, the concerns of whole constituencies – women and non-heterosexuals for example – weren't properly represented at all.

The other danger is idealising the old party ways. Am I really a bad democrat for thinking that party meetings take up too many evenings? Isn't individualism – belonging to a party of one, as Thoreau put it – a greater democratic virtue than party loyalty? Some activists may lament the passing of an age when 'party democracy' meant thrusting leaflets at indifferent passers-by. But don't most of us actually prefer to stay at home and watch *House of Cards*, while the governing class gets on with governing? Political scientists have a new concept with which to dignify such apparent apathy: 'audience democracy'. The idea is that we should keep an eye on things as best we can, and check the governing classes when they become too wayward. Aren't Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, the various Pirate Parties and Iceland's Best Party (which started out as a parody but then won the election for mayor of Reykjavik) symptomatic of a condition in which we expect more from the political class but are ourselves prepared only to glance at Grillo's blog and maybe vote for him? There is a compelling case for thinking that something has gone badly wrong when we see ourselves as being ruled by unaccountable, supposedly apolitical experts, but the only prospect of rescue is afforded by populists who promise to hand power back to the people. The former give us identical policies everywhere and no politics; the latter, you might say, give us politics and no policies.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the European Union. As Mair makes clear, the purpose of European integration was from the start to create a 'protected sphere' – protected, that is, from the vagaries of representative democracy. After the political catastrophes of the mid-20th century, Western European elites (except in Britain) concluded that popular sovereignty should be treated with deep distrust. After all, how could one have any faith in the people when the people had brought fascists to power or collaborated with fascist occupiers? There were profound reservations even about the idea of parliamentary sovereignty. Hadn't legitimate representative assemblies handed power over to Hitler in 1933 and to Marshal Pétain in 1940? As a result, parliaments in postwar Europe were systematically weakened, while non-elected institutions – constitutional courts are the prime example – were given more power.

All this proved acceptable so long as the elites were trusted – and so long as the decisions taken in the 'protected sphere' didn't have dramatic effects on people's everyday lives. Neither condition holds true any longer. As Mair points out, it isn't just individual politicians but the political class as a whole that become a matter of contention in many parts of Europe. Four years of Eurocrisis have left us with technocracy on the one hand and populism on the other. The two positions seem completely opposed, but in fact they have one attitude in common: the technocrats think there's only one rational solution to every policy issue, hence there's no need for debate; the populists believe there is an authentic popular will and that they are the only ones who can discern it, hence there's no need for debate. Both sides are opposed to the pluralism that comes with party democracy. Occasionally, populism and 'expertocracy' unite in a single person: Silvio Berlusconi and Austria's Jörg Haider promised to run their respective countries like a company.

A peculiar mismatch has come about between the scope of elections and what is really at stake in them. There are legitimate disagreements over the architecture of the EU, and over the sorts of policy that should and should not be devised in Brussels, but voters, according to Mair, choose the wrong elections to make themselves heard on these issues. They voice their dissatisfaction with the EU in European elections, although the European Parliament plays no part at all in negotiating EU treaties, which determine the shape of the Union as a whole. The 751 MEPs do have a say in particular policies (some believe that the European Parliament, often held up for ridicule, has a much stronger record of amending legislation than national parliaments, which simply rubber-stamp government policy), yet voters express preferences about policy in national elections, even though national governments have steadily been losing power to the EU – according to some estimates, far more than half the legislation in EU member states now comes from Brussels.

Turnout has dropped at each successive European election since the first one in 1979. But there is a feeling that the upcoming election may buck the trend. Few EU citizens would deny, in 2014, that Europe matters. And if they are willing to come out of what Mair calls comprehensive withdrawal, politicians seem ready to meet them halfway. The European Parliament has felt it necessary to spend money on a lavish ad campaign with the slogan 'This time it's different' in an attempt to get people to the polling booths. And the supranational 'party families' in the Parliament have nominated 'leading candidates' for the presidency of the European Commission, promising that the job will go to the person who gathers most votes. The hope behind this proposal is that politicisation, even at the cost of polarisation, will prove the royal road to legitimacy. As the Finnish EU Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the Euro, Olli Rehn (not a man known for mixing passions and politics), said recently, European elections should be 'emotionalised'. Citizens might feel less resentful if they can put a face to Brussels bureaucracy. But that isn't the lesson from recent history in the US, where elite-led polarisation and personalisation are seen to have damaged the legitimacy of the political system as a whole, leaving the impression that politics is about huge egos bickering. And it is far from clear that a choice of personnel really amounts to a choice of policy, when the substance of EU policy is largely determined by treaties which aren't agreed

by the European Commission or the European Parliament, but by member states. Even putting aside the question of treaties, the Eurozone is steadily narrowing the scope for autonomous political choice. Take Germany's insistence that all Euro countries put 'debt brakes' into their constitutions, making deficit spending virtually impossible. The European Commission cannot alter any of this; in fact, its task now is essentially to check that the rules are being observed and where necessary to interfere with national budgets. In these circumstances, getting to choose a president of the Commission might seem merely a cosmetic change.

Mair's conclusion is that the EU is a house that party politicians built which has no room for politics, while national governments are ever more likely to pretend they are merely the branch office of Brussels. (After all, if Brussels has already decided, you don't take the blame; never mind that you were there at the negotiating table.) In this situation, what Mair calls the Tocqueville syndrome becomes acute: if political elites are either inaccessible or impotent, why put up with them? Tocqueville was writing about the fall of the aristocrats in the Ancien Régime, who could no longer justify their privileges once they had lost power to a centralised monarchy. The worst of the economic crisis might be over, but the political crisis in Europe is only just beginning.