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## Concluding remarks

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## Concluding Remarks

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The main idea in bringing together the essays in this collection was to explore a new avenue in democracy studies. The primary hypothesis was that democracies are continually defined and redefined, particularly in the context of contentious politics. Research on historical conceptions of democracy should therefore shift its attention to the relationship between democracies and their domestic contenders—democracies and their adversaries. In such struggles between (nominal) democracies and their adversaries, perceptions of what does and what does not constitute a democracy necessarily come to the surface and implicit assumptions about what ‘democracy’ entails are questioned and reconsidered.

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As this volume shows, definitions of democracy are always intertwined with discussions about a perceived adversary. Defenders and adversaries do not hold immutable positions, but develop an evolving rhetoric and conceptualisation of what democracy is—and what it should be—in response to one another. The essays illustrate that there is not, nor has there ever been, a consensus on the conceptualisation or the institutional practice of democracy—neither among nominally democratic states nor among their adversaries. These conceptualisations and practices, instead, have regularly—and often violently—been contested across a broad range of periods and places. Not only emerging and evidently fragile democratic states—such as the Weimar Republic in the 1930s or Bosnia-Herzegovina at the turn of the twenty-first century—but also seemingly established and resilient democracies—such as the United States in the mid-nineteenth century or Germany in the 1990s—periodically face internal challenges to the often unwritten and implicit boundaries of their democratic principles and institutions.

These challenges can come from ethnic minorities, who feel a majoritarian system legitimises and even encourages their marginalisation, but also from ideologically inspired groups, who either oppose the very concept of equal representation on principle or feel that the current institutions do not adequately embody the democratic ideals they claim to represent. What all these challengers share is a willingness to either resort to, or at least theoretically justify or promote, political actions that go beyond the sanctioned legal order of the state.

A certain historic development can be discerned from the various case-studies discussed in this volume. In the first phase of expanding democratic participation in Europe and the United States—the widening of suffrage eventually leading to the introduction of universal suffrage—there was no agreement on the concept of democracy or legitimate action. Different groups each perceived one another as ‘adversaries’ of the democratic state they envisioned and strove to protect. Lacking a consensus on the conceptual, institutional, and procedural definitions of democracy, various groups within the democratic state saw themselves as the true defenders of democracy, arguing that their opponents were anti-democratic and therefore adversaries of democracy. Strikingly, for contenders as well as for defenders of democracy, the use of physical force was an accepted form of democratic expression, as the chapters on 1920s and 1930s Europe demonstrate. The rise to power of anti-democratic forces in the Soviet-Union, Italy and particular Germany

inspired a fundamental discussion about the way democracies could and should deal with such anti-democratic forces. This discussion resulted in a new ‘synthesis’: following World War Two, a consensus emerged that the use of force in a democracy should be a monopoly of the state and that a democratic state should be allowed to withhold democratic rights from anti-democrats. The seed for this development is found in the chapter on the discussions in the Dutch social democratic movement in the 1930s.

As the Cold War structured the self-image of Western democracies, the situation seemed relatively clear-cut. Violence was no longer perceived as an acceptable form of democratic expression. In addition, the consensus in many Western democracies was that in order to safeguard themselves from attacks by ‘extremists’, ‘fifth columns’, or other anti-democrats, democracies had the right to, essentially by force, exclude such contenders from the system. Adversaries of democracy had no right to participate in the democratic process and as such they could be denied certain constitutional rights.

This position became more difficult to maintain when in the 1960s a fundamental critique emerged of the level of democratic rights the system gave to its citizens. Ethnic minorities and left-wing ideologues started to challenge the democratic state from an ideological point of view, some of them becoming embroiled in violent conflict. This sparked a debate on what a true democracy was and what means were legitimate in the struggle to attain it. The challenges by the IRA and the RAF discussed here showed the central role of the populace in determining the outcome of these discussions. This showed up more subtly in the conflict in Germany over nuclear transports in the 1990s, where contenders argued that government policy did not reflect the will of the people, and protest and civil disobedience, including violence against material property, were therefore deemed acceptable.

The ‘defenders of democracy’, the established political and ideological elites within the existing democratic state, had difficulties adapting to this new situation. Whereas in the early Cold War, ‘adversaries’ clearly identified themselves as members of communist organisations and readers of communist periodicals, the ‘adversaries of democracy’ in the latter part of the Cold War were youths, students, minorities, and activists of various kinds. They sometimes employed violent methods, thus placing themselves outside the democratic order, but just as often worked perfectly within the boundaries of the democratic, legal state. The Dutch security

service—as an extension of the state—found it rather difficult to clearly distinguish between legitimate democratic opposition and anti-democratic groups and individuals. Holding on to their traditional anti-communist outlook, they adhered strictly to an ideological criterion: adversaries of democracy were those people who had the intention to replace the democratic system by something else, in other words those who adhered to anti-democratic ideologies (i.e. communism). Dutch politicians were more pragmatic and tended to see a broader range of disrupting forms of activism—whether it stemmed from squatters, anti-nuclear activists, or peace movement demonstrators—as anti-democratic, unfamiliar as they were with the new mix of system critique and forms of protest.

That the growing activist role of citizens in the democratic process was not always successfully incorporated in the democratic system, is best illustrated by the rise of social movements in Turkey. The Islamic movement eventually gained power after a long period of marginalisation by the secular elite. However, following an initial period of democratisation and openness, they in turn created an exclusivist system which left almost no room for dissenting forces. This seems to have heralded a new phase of democratic functioning, in which the blurring of lines between democrats and anti-democrats has become the defining characteristic. Not just oppositional groups became less easily defined as democrats or anti-democrats, but also those in power. Not only in what are increasingly becoming to be seen as authoritarian democracies, but also in new fragile democracies such as in Bosnia Herzegovina and Moldova, where ethnic local and national elites use the democratic system to advance their own interests. The losers in this wider process are often those who are meant to be represented by democracy. This is clear for those who live in these fragile democracies, but also applies to groups in well-established states like the United Kingdom, where Loyalists in Ulster perceive themselves as victims of a democratising process that has emancipated their political competitors. The notion that there are also ‘losers’—or at least those who perceive themselves as such—in a democratising process is also evidenced by the fierce response by much of the white population in the southern United States to the outcome of the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement and more recently to the election of Barack Obama.

Although the contributions to this volume cover a wide range of chronological and geographical case studies, they share a number of thematic elements that point towards a more nuanced conceptual framework for understanding when democratisation (and de-democratisation) occurs.

The first element is that the definitions of democrats and anti-democrats are not as straightforward as they often seem. They become particularly problematic when those who come to power through democratic means, can themselves be regarded as anti-democratic by broadly shared norms of either their own national tradition or the broader international community.

As the lines between democrats and their adversaries blur, measures taken to defend democracy become almost entirely dependent on the way those in charge define democracy and its adversaries. Underlying these differing notions, is the question whether democracy is a set of practical guidelines or a principle. It is clear that communists see liberal democracy as a bourgeois form of democracy, but their idea is still that it should be replaced by a better more inclusive, proletarian, form of democracy. Things become more complicated when those defending liberal democracy argue among themselves about what democracy stands for, both as a concept and as a set of institutional arrangements or legitimate action. For example, in the 1930s, conservative forces adopted the notion of disciplined democracy as they came to see authority and stability as the main objective of the democratic process. This notion resulted in excessive attention for the perceived threat of left-wing opposition who threatened their entrenched economic interests, instead of to the more direct threat of right-wingers who supported law and order and existing hierarchies, albeit at the expense of political freedoms. This occurred again in the 1980s, when the Dutch security service allocated most resources to following the, by then largely irrelevant, Dutch communist organisations. This utilitarian approach to democracy as a way to maintain stability and entrenched inequalities, has become prevalent again in the twenty-first century in many countries, including Turkey, Russia, Hungary, and Poland. Such an emphasis also recently led to the mistaken approach taken by the German police in reaction to the killing of migrants by an extreme right-wing group, in the so-called ‘Doner Morde’.

In such a system, democratic legitimisation becomes entirely focused on the outcome of elections, no matter how much they were manipulated in favour of the party in power. The concept of the will of the people provides a democratic veneer for anti-democratic action and in some cases even for autocratic rule. Against this dominance of pure majoritarianism, in which democracy is seen as a tool and any undesirable idea may be labelled as anti-democratic, stands the progressive conception of a

moral democracy, in which democracy is a set of principles to be adhered to. This dichotomy connects directly to what Margaret Canovan has termed democracy's 'inescapable ambiguity', caught between the 'redemptive' (idealistic) side and the 'pragmatic' (practical) side of politics.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that those holding real power, whether as a formal government or as an economic, social, or military elite, can to a large extent determine the definitions of what is democratic and what is not. A key element in contesting this notion, is the definition of 'the people' who are to make up the political community—the 'demos' underlying the 'democratia'. This is particularly important when the electorate is divided by sharp ethnic distinctions, and often manifests itself in relation to separatist regions where a local majority can express a wish to be independent, but also played a significant role in the post-civil war United States, where 'the people' became defined along racial lines. In a more contemporary setting, the discussion may revolve around the extent to which those elected to office can represent the will of the people in response to changing circumstances, as in 1990s Germany in relation to nuclear transports, or in the context of an increasingly exclusivist definition of the nation in authoritarian democracies. Defining the constituency is thus a key element in setting the boundaries of both the body politic, as well as the scope of what may be considered legitimate political action. It is here that these essays show their collective strength: shifting the focus from 'democrats' debating among themselves what democracy entails, to the democracy–adversary relationship, illuminates that definitions of democracy (the demos, the system) result from interactions between different groups that all employ a rhetoric based on some notion of democracy in order to discredit or fence off other groups. It also shows that the outcome of this conflict influences how democracy is then conceptualised and institutionalised.

The second element that connects the contributions to this volume, are debates about the extent to which forms of protest in general and the use of physical force in particular can be seen as forms of democratic expression. The essays illustrate that the use of force has long been an established part of democratic expression by all parties involved. In the wake of the American Civil War, southern white conservatives used rhetoric of local self-rule and good-government, to justify widespread political terror against the recently emancipated black population and their white allies, as an unfortunate but necessary response in the tradition of the American Revolution. Later, in Europe, events in the Weimar

Republic, in particular, inspired a discussion about which forms of protest were legitimate. The question whether violence or other undemocratic means could be used in defence of democracy had become extremely pressing in the context of increasingly bloody street violence between political groups of all hues. Eventually most political parties—Dutch social democrats being one of the first in the late 1930s—reached a consensus that violence should really be a monopoly of the state. Some conservatives, as a result, even came to consider every form of protest outside elections as essentially undemocratic.

A similar logic has led some governments to see social movements and other forms of opposition outside elections as a security threat, instead of as a form of improving upon or strengthening a functioning democracy, the Dutch government *vis-à-vis* ‘the movement’ in the 1980s being a case in point, as is the Turkish state throughout. The debate about acceptable means of protest has however never ended. In the 1990s, some politicians in Germany supported the use of force against objects as a legitimate expression of protest and discussed whether the state’s monopoly on the use of violence only applied to violence against people. In the current climate inspired by the threat of terrorist attacks, such a tolerant approach to the use of force by citizens has again faded, increasing the scope of action for governments to use undemocratic means to curb what they define as anti-democratic forces.

The historic cases presented here offer a qualified warning for the future. The events in Weimar, in particular, illustrate that anti-democratic forces, if left unchecked, may overwhelm the institutions of a democratic state. Democratically minded individuals and groups are left with almost insoluble dilemmas in such cases, having to choose between submitting to overtly anti-democratic forces or resorting to undemocratic means themselves in order to stop them. Inspired by events in the interbellum, prohibiting anti-democratic parties became a common feature in many countries in the post-Second World War period, most notably in Germany, but also elsewhere: including Belgium, the Czech Republic, The Netherlands, Latvia, and Spain. However, other democracies have shown that democratic states can overcome significant internal challenges, by either accommodating or delegitimising their opponents. Few would now remember Germany in the 1990s as a state on the brink of collapse, however much political dust the nuclear transports may have raised at the time.

Most cases in which democracies were faced with adversaries fall somewhere in between. Challenges resulted in significant disruption

and potentially undemocratic countermeasures by the states in question, but without overwhelming the fundamental institutions in the long run. Britain and Germany were severely rocked by the ethnic and ideological terrorist threats to their legitimacy in the 1970s and 1980s, but succeeded in isolating or incorporating these movements to such a degree that the events are gradually receding from living memory. White supremacists in the South were well-able to fight back federal attempts to provide political and legal equality for the black population after the Civil War, leading to an entrenched system of segregation. But in the 1960s the Civil Rights Movement nevertheless successfully claimed what had been denied them almost a century earlier. It might do well to remember that for all the political furore engendered by the process and results of the 2016 presidential elections, the United States is in many respects far more democratic today than at any time prior to the Second World War.

A historical overview such as this, provides no clear-cut answers as how to deal with forces that threaten democratic institutions either rhetorically or through violence, even when democrats *can* be clearly separated from anti-democrats. What nearly all these cases share, is a sense of the inextricable dilemma, which first became apparent in the 1930s for those who stand for a truly pluralist democracy. On the one hand, they risk giving anti-democrats too much room to manoeuvre and thus an opportunity to eventually overthrow or corrupt the democratic institutions. On the other hand, they risk curtailing fundamental democratic liberties—in the name of protecting that very democracy—to the point where they become meaningless, and force democratic opposition to use undemocratic means. Processes that to an outsider might appear as progress or an expansion of democracy, whether the enfranchisement of the former slaves after the Civil War or the peace process in Northern Ireland, often also involve a loss of power and prestige for other groups. These may experience a genuine—if not legitimate—sense of loss of political power or influence, and thus challenge the process of democratisation in the name of their own democratic rights.

Fragile states, with relatively brief histories of democratic participation and weaker democratic institutions, may find themselves torn between a desire for greater political participation and the risk of instability this may engender. The consociational model, although functioning to some extent in Northern Ireland, did clearly not result in a modern functioning democracy in Bosnia, but it is nevertheless an evident improvement

over the years of civil war that preceded it. More resilient democracies such as Britain and Germany in the 1970s faced similar dilemma's, as they had to calibrate the extent to which they might curtail democratic liberty for the sake of securing their populations from terrorist violence. They seem to have largely solved this by either isolating them, in case of the RAF, or by incorporating them, in case of the IRA, in the political system, while placing their violent means outside the order of political legitimacy—not just in a formal legal sense, but also by increasingly narrowing the circle of social support from which they might have benefitted.

Recent developments in many democratic systems do however give cause for concern. The attempts by various democratically elected regimes to eliminate opposition and their institutional safeguards, make clear that it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between democrats and anti-democrats, both in their aims and their means. In the absence of a fixed and agreed definition of democracy, who may be considered 'democrats' and what may be considered 'democratic means' becomes entirely dependent on one's point of view, and the distinction between democrats and their adversaries fades into a blurry overlap—as to some extent it always has been. One group's claim that another group is anti-democratic cannot be understood without taking into account this group's broader views, traditions, and specific interests. In other words, definitions of democracy and its adversaries are almost always up for debate. We could learn from this that it is crucial to keep on questioning, discussing, and scrutinising the democratic and adversarial claims people make. Once this debate stops, trouble begins.

## NOTE

1. Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies* XLVII (1999), 2–16.