Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000. By Geoff Eley. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; pp. xxii + 698. £25).

Geoff Eley's comprehensive chronological account of the rich array of movements, parties and personalities constituting the Left in Europe over the last 150 years is an important book. As one of the first histories of the Left to be published after the fall of the Soviet Union, it is a valiant attempt to de-politicize a historiography dominated by Cold War polarity and political party bias. One of the book's major advantages is that the Left's achievements and failures are dealt with in a relatively unromantic way. Moreover, the book is innovative because it analyses and treats the Left as a whole. Several Communist or Socialist party histories have been written, but Eley's approach is significantly more ambitious, as he covers the entire, multi-layered phenomenon of the Left.

It is exactly the breadth of the book – its comparative nature, the long period it covers, the interweaving of social, cultural and political history, and the inclusion not only of political parties but of all Left movements – that allows Eley credibly to assess the Left's impact. The book's thought-provoking argument is that the Left's greatest contribution to Europe has been its advocacy of democracy. In the introduction, Eley argues that 'democracy did not result from natural evolution or economic prosperity. It certainly did not emerge as an inevitable by-product of individualism or the market. It developed because masses of people organized collectively to demand it' (p. 4). And those masses of people, he suggests, belonged to the Left.

Eley's exploration of the symbiosis between democracy and the Left creates a refreshing new chronology. The content moves away from a traditional focus on moments of revolution (1848, 1871, 1917-23, 1936, 1956, 1968) towards periods of 'transnational constitution-making' that include 1859-71, 1914-23, 1943-49, and 1989-92. In the first section (1860-1914), Eley describes how the rapid rise of Socialism and Socialist parties pushed forward the limited boundaries of Liberal democratic thinking. In the second section (1914-23), he illustrates how the Left's dynamism spread far beyond the narrow confines of Socialist parties and the Second International. His reading of this era is pessimistic. While the First World War radicalized Left militants and supporters, Socialism split into two camps. Neither the Socialists, who Eley suggests were not radical enough (citing the German SPD as a particular example), nor the 'dour revolutionary' Communists were able positively to exploit the post-war opportunity for significant democratic change.

Eley argues that the fruits of the Left's long struggle for democracy were only made concrete in Western Europe after the Second World War, a period he covers in the third section (1923-56). The broad Left anti-fascist alliances formed before and during the war

led to a new democratic momentum and a creative progressivism. The Left emerged with moral superiority. In Eley's view, this was translated into the establishment in Western Europe of the three pillars of social democracy in the immediate post-war era: Keynesianism, corporatism, and the welfare state. The story of the last section (1956-2000) is of how the struggle for democracy passed into new hands. Eley charts the altered physiognomy of the Left in the West. Parliamentary party Socialism linked to trade unions lost its hegemony over the democratic project, while blossoming single-issue movements such as feminism, anti-nuclear activities, and campaigns for gay and lesbian rights inherited the democratic mantle. In the East, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the establishment of democracies in the former Soviet Union suggested further democratic gains.

The book has many merits. Eley is best when he is describing and analysing individual movements or events. He is able to illuminate the particulars. Whether he is discussing Lenin's role in the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Polish Solidarity movement, the transformation of Marx's theories into diverse Marxisms, the dramatic unfolding of the uprisings of 1968 and the fascinating generational clash within the Left during this era, or the inability of Socialist parties to harness or understand feminism, he is both engaging and informative. For the reader desiring a fast-paced and colourful account of Left movements over the last 150 years, this is an ideal book. Moreover, Eley's bibliography is extensive and, although the book is based predominantly on secondary research, his synthesis of the vast existing literature is admirable.

Despite these positive points, the main argument of the book is disappointing. The chief weakness lies in the generalizations and conclusions that Eley draws. There is no significant attempt to understand why the Left developed in the way it did – for example, why certain countries became Communist or developed different types of Socialism. Thus, the major advantage of the comparative work, which is to get behind the particularities of countries or regions, is not exploited

Nor is the main argument of the book, which Eley hopes will give the work structure and coherence, either convincing enough or sufficiently elaborated upon. It remains unclear why the Left has been responsible for democracy. The Left has often had a profoundly undemocratic character (which Eley to his credit does not attempt to gloss over), whether in the Soviet Union or in much Socialist thought prior to the First World War. Also, surely, there have been many actors and movements belonging to other parts of the political spectrum that have profoundly influenced democratic development. While Eley has avoided the familiar traps of Left historiography – primarily a sterile debate about the Left's missed revolutionary opportunities, and the criticism of either Communism or Socialism, or both – perhaps he has fallen into a new trap of inserting the democratic present into the past. However, the book's argument is more insightful in analysing the Left's weaknesses. Of particular interest is Eley's description of the relationship between

Socialism and the Left, and how Socialism's dominance marginalized issues not easily contained within the class-political precepts of the socialist vision, such as: questions of local control and co-operative organisation; sexualities, family forms, and personal life; agrarian problems; questions of colonialism; and nationalism and the continuing conundrum of race.

In conclusion, the book contains a very solid description of the Left and is worth reading for this. Yet, it is disappointing that its arguments do not successfully break new ground, or convince the reader to look at the history of the Left in a radically different way.

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