

# On Fragile Democracy: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

The concept of fragility provides an alternative means of approaching the history of democracy, which has often been seen as the ineluctable consequence of Europe's social and political modernisation. This is especially so in Scandinavia, as well as in Finland, where the emergence of a particular Nordic model of democracy from the early decades of the twentieth century onwards has often been explained with reference to embedded traditions of local self-government, and long-term trends towards social egalitarianism. In contrast, this article emphasises the tensions present within the practices and understandings of democracy in the principal states of Scandinavia during the twentieth century. In doing so, it provides an introduction to the articles that compose this special issue, as well as contributing to the wider literature on the fragility of present-day structures of democracy.

## *Keywords*

Scandinavia; democracy; legitimacy; neo-liberalism; state authority; popular sovereignty.

The fragility of democracy is one of the defining concepts of our time. The assumption that Europe, or more inclusively the West, had passed through a historic gateway somewhere around the middle years of the twentieth century, as a consequence of which any durable

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alternative to democracy would no longer be possible, now seems to belong emphatically to the category of things we used to believe. In the decades following 1945, it seemed undeniable that the increasing complexity of the so-called “advanced industrial societies” made the ascendancy of democracy inevitable.<sup>2</sup> No other political system – and certainly not the creaking structures of post-Stalinist Communism – was capable of arbitrating the conflicts which arose in modern societies between complex sectional interests, while providing both reliable governance and the necessary validation by the people.<sup>3</sup> In truth, the confidence that there was no viable politics outside of democracy was never as naive as it might appear in retrospect. The negative memories of previous democratic experiments – above all, that of Weimar – were simply too close for anybody to believe that democracy was an easy political system to operate.<sup>4</sup> But, encouraged by the wider spirit of technological innovation as well as the new tools of economic and social management, it seemed that the achievement of a modern synthesis of popular sovereignty, interest-group representation, and effective state authority was within reach.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1980s, and more especially over the last decade, this optimistic attitude has receded; and has been replaced by much less confident accounts of the current and future trends for democracy in Europe. The sovereignty of democratic polities has been undermined by the development of irresponsible forms of corporate power; electoral politics have been rendered volatile and unpredictable by the rise of various nationalist and “populist” political groups; and social cohesion has been fractured by the impact of neo-liberal policies of marketization, and the consequent loss of popular engagement with the core civic values of democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the term appears to have originated with Herbert Marcuse in his *One Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, London 1964. But it subsequently enjoyed quite wide usage, until it went out of fashion in the 2000s. The last use of it in the Bodleian Library catalogue is currently from 2010.

<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on how democracy provided a template for modern societies is very much associated with the work of a generation of political scientists who came to the fore in the 1960s. See, for a characteristic example, A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Explanation*, New Haven, London 1977.

<sup>4</sup> S. Ullrich, *Der Weimar-Komplex. Das Scheitern der ersten deutschen Demokratie und die politische Kultur der frühen Bundesrepublik 1945-1959*, Göttingen 2009.

<sup>5</sup> I have written about this in M. Conway, “The Rise and Fall of Western Europe’s Democratic Age, 1945-1973”, in: *Contemporary European History* 13 (2004) 1, 67-88.

The genealogy of the emergence of the neo-pessimism surrounding democracy still awaits its historians. But its broad contours can be located in the combination of the economic uncertainties generated by market liberalism, the difficulties encountered by the European Union since its eastward expansion, and the perceived retreat of liberal values provoked by authoritarian nationalisms, new forms of identity politics, and the more multi-cultural composition of society. Like all such narratives, that surrounding the contemporary crisis of democracy is highly selective. It links together events that lack a common causality, and ignores other forces – such as the emergence of new democratic cultures, often at the sub-national, community-based, or virtual levels – which do not fit within its dominant topos of decline and fall. But, whatever its shortcomings, this narrative has changed the terms of contemporary political debate, contributing to a wider unease about Europe’s political future, and generating a new literature surrounding the contemporary travails of democracy. Substantial works of comparative political theory, notably David Runciman’s *The Confidence Trap. A history of democracy in crisis from World War I to the present* (2013; revised edition 2018) have been accompanied by more instant, and probably ephemeral, works of alarm, notably A.C. Grayling’s *Democracy and its crisis* (2017).<sup>6</sup>

These changed perceptions of the present and near-future of democracy also offer, however, new perspectives on the past, prompting historians to engage with the complexity of its modern history. Rather than assuming that democracy constituted the default setting of most European societies, at least in the modern era, historians have been encouraged to analyse democracy as one political option or outcome among many, the reasons for the success or failure of which lay in a complex matrix of political, economic and cultural factors. There was no larger logic – of modernisation, of value change, or of popular will – to the victory of democracy over fascism, communism, or any number of variants of authoritarian politics; and the ascendancy of a particular model of representative politics in much of Europe west of Soviet-controlled Central and Eastern Europe during the second half of the twentieth century remained contingent and contested.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> D. Runciman, *The Confidence Trap. A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*, Princeton, Woodstock 2013; A.C. Grayling, *Democracy and its Critics*, London 2017.

<sup>7</sup> G. Eley, *Forging democracy: the history of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000*, New York, Oxford 2002; J.W. Müller, *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe*, New Haven, London 2011; P.

These new understandings of democracy, present and past, have also brought the issue of fragility to the fore. Until recently, the “fragility of democracy” was a concept that was applied predominantly to what were regarded as the fringes of the democratic world. A search in library catalogues and the titles of articles published in journals generates examples of the use of the phrase with reference to, variously, the Philippines, Ecuador, Brazil, Mongolia, and Tunisia.<sup>8</sup> But none that refers, say, to the recent history of Greece, Hungary, or indeed the United States. Much of that, one senses, will change over the coming years; but the conventional belief that democratic fragility was a problem limited to the states of the periphery, and more especially of the post-colonial Global South, serves to emphasise how for so long assumptions about the fragility, or conversely the strength, of democratic regimes have been rooted in implicit beliefs regarding the politics of economic and social development, the ascendancy of particular value structures, and perhaps above all the legacies of prior history. Thus, democracy flourished in those societies that could claim a long maturation of their collective identity, institutions and political experience; while, conversely, it was fragile in those societies, notably in post-colonial Africa and Latin America, where it was confronted variously by economic crises, military assaults on constitutional legality, revolutionary movements, and the demagogic politics of populism.<sup>9</sup>

There is of course much that is unsatisfactory about these assumptions, and perhaps it is only necessary to render them explicit to demonstrate their shortcomings. In particular, they rest on a particular Western understanding of democracy, which is neglectful of the ways in which societies of the Global South have generated their own discourses, and practices, of democracy, derived from an amalgam of local and imported ideas.<sup>10</sup> Moreover,

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Corduwener, *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe. Political Actors and the Formation of the Postwar Model of Democracy in France, West Germany and Italy*, New York, Abingdon 2017.

<sup>8</sup> D. Corkill and D. Cubitt, *Ecuador. Fragile Democracy*, London 1988; T. Batbayar, “Mongolia in 1993: A Fragile Democracy”, in: *Asian Survey* 34 (1994) 1, 41-45; G. Casper, *Fragile Democracies. The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule*, Pittsburgh, London 1995; S. Handlin, *State crisis in fragile democracies: polarization and political regimes in South America*, Cambridge 2017; H. Meddeb, *Peripheral vision: How Europe can help preserve Tunisia’s fragile democracy*, London 2017.

<sup>9</sup> See, for characteristic rhetoric, “Why monitors matter: Helping fragile democracies”, *The Economist*, 22 July 2017.

<sup>10</sup> E. Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania. Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization*, Cambridge 2015; A. Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya. Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge 1994.

these ways of thinking have distracted attention from the fragility of democracy within its supposedly core European territories. It is important in this respect to emphasise just how spotty was the record of democratic political regimes – or regimes which might have some reasonable claim to that label – until the second half of the twentieth century. If the direction of travel prior to 1914 in western and central Europe had appeared to be towards constitutional regimes based on an expanded male suffrage, the subsequent twenty-five years saw a marked shift away from the norms of parliamentary government and individual suffrage.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, democracy risked appearing by the end of the 1930s to have become an outmoded political model, which had been supplanted across much of Europe by variants of a modern authoritarianism, composed in different measures of state control, personalised dictatorship, military rule, and forms of collective or corporatist representation.<sup>12</sup>

The changed perceptions of democracy – present and past – therefore provide us with a new sense of its fragility. Metaphors of strength and weakness do of course have their limits, and it is perhaps unnecessary to add that, for historians at least, there is no objective measure as to *how* fragile any democracy was at any point in its history. Fragility serves in this respect simply as a useful means of reframing the questions that we tend to ask about democratic regimes. In particular, it replaces the organic with the material. Much of the language by which democracies are described has long been borrowed from the natural world, with the consequence that attention has been focused on the embedding of democracy in local political cultures, the growth of democratic practices, and the responsiveness of democratic regimes to changes in their environment. However, in common with any other modern form of political regime, democracies are essentially constructs, composed of mechanisms of representation and decision-making. Therefore, as political scientists have long argued, we should pay greater attention to their formal architecture, but also to the resilience of their structures, and their responsiveness to external impacts and internal stresses.

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<sup>11</sup> G. Capoccia, *Defending Democracy. Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe*, Baltimore, London 2005; M. Mann, *Fascists*, Cambridge 2004; G.M. Luebbert, *Liberalism, fascism or social democracy: social classes and the political origins of regimes in interwar Europe*, New York, Oxford 1991.

<sup>12</sup> It is of course tempting to compare the “end of democracy” literature of that era with that of today. For a characteristic example, see J. Streeck, *La Révolution du vingtième siècle*, Brussels 1942. For a wider discussion of the assumptions of the 1930s regarding the exhaustion of parliamentary regimes, see Z. Sternhell, *Neither right nor left: fascist ideology in France*, Berkeley 1986.

The advantages of a focus on the fragility of democracy are perhaps especially evident when applied to the history of Scandinavia in the twentieth century. It has become something of a commonplace to deplore the relative marginalisation of the four principal states of the Nordic region – from Denmark and Norway in the west, through Sweden, to Finland in the east – from accounts of European history of the twentieth century. Precisely because these states did not, on the whole, experience the extremes of political polarisation and regime instability which are often regarded as having characterised the wider experience of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, they have tended to be regarded by non-Scandinavian historians as little more than fortunate exceptions to a gloomy rule.<sup>13</sup>

Such assumptions are often based on a shallow understanding of the internal history of the Nordic states, especially in the crucial formative period from the First World War to the 1930s; but they have been reinforced too by the ways in which Scandinavian historians and political scientists have analysed the modernisation of their societies. The long periods of social-democratic political ascendancy from the 1930s onwards, the relative stability of their social and economic structures, and the construction of what at least in retrospect appeared to constitute a distinctively Scandinavian model of the welfare state have all encouraged a perspective on Scandinavian history which is both homogenising and teleological.<sup>14</sup> By emphasising the long-term development of democratic structures and the essential similarity of the states of the Nordic region, such accounts have tended to marginalise other factors, such as cleavages of political culture, the persistence of socio-economic conflicts, and tensions between state authority and popular sovereignty. If history is always in danger of being written by the winners, this might be thought to be particularly so in Scandinavia where the writing of contemporary history has often been closely associated with the governing elites.

Democratic identity has therefore become central to how the states of Scandinavia think of themselves. Beginning in the 1930s, a rhetoric of Nordic democracy developed, which

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<sup>13</sup> See the contribution of Mary Hilson to this collection.

<sup>14</sup> See the contribution of Jussi Kurunmäki to this collection.

presented the Nordic states as the heirs to long-standing processes of social egalitarianism and collective decision-making.<sup>15</sup> This historical legacy was overlaid after 1945 by state-led policies of social and economic reform, which led the states of Scandinavia to regard themselves as exempla of the distinctively modern benefits of consensual democracy, bureaucratic rationality, and comprehensive welfare provision. This was also the image that Scandinavia communicated to the world, notably through the Nordic espousal of languages of development, social justice and, rather belatedly, human rights, as expressed by their engagement with international organisations such as the United Nations.<sup>16</sup> But it was also one that the world projected back onto Scandinavia. In a number of influential books, such as Marquis Childs' *Sweden: The Third Way*, initially published in 1936, and reinforced in its several subsequent editions, foreign scholars – often strongly sympathetic to the values of social democracy – constructed what has proved to be a remarkably durable vision of the Scandinavian states as the model which the other states of Western Europe and North America should seek to emulate.<sup>17</sup>

The collection of articles contained in this special issue are therefore intended as a first step towards what we hope will be the larger project of normalising the Scandinavian experience of democracy, by placing it within the larger context of the fragile history of European democracy in the twentieth century. This does not, of course, mean that we wish to argue that the ascendancy of democracy in Scandinavia during the twentieth century was accidental. On the contrary, it was the product of a combination of external and internal factors, as well as the influence of more long-standing aspects of the political culture of the region. But to place the focus always on the outcome, rather than on the often contested process by which it was arrived at, risks distracting attention from the moments of tension, when events could have taken a very different turn. This was of course true of all of the four

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<sup>15</sup> J. Kurunmäki/J. Strang (eds.), *Rhetorics of Nordic Democracy*, Helsinki 2010. See also the influential collection of essays edited by J.A. Lauwerys entitled *Scandinavian Democracy. Development of Democratic Thought and Institutions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*, Copenhagen 1958.

<sup>16</sup> See the useful overview provided in H. Hagdtvet Vik, S. Jensen, L. Lindkvist and J. Strang, "Introduction: Histories of Human Rights in the Nordic Countries", in: *Nordic Journal of Human Rights*, 36 (2018) 3, 189-201.

<sup>17</sup> M.W. Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way*, London 1936; F.G. Castles, *The Social Democratic Image of Society. A study of the achievement and origins of Scandinavian Social Democracy in comparative perspective*, London et al 1978. See, for critical reflections, M. Hilson, *The Nordic Model. Scandinavia since 1945*, London 2008, 25-27; N. Blanc-Noël, "A recurring mantra in French political debate: reference to the Nordic model", in: *French Politics* 16 (2018) 2, 213-230.

states during the Second World War, when only Sweden was able to avoid foreign invasion by pursuing a rather precarious and at times tortuous policy of neutrality.<sup>18</sup> But it was also true in the aftermath of the First World War, when both Sweden and Finland experienced radical political change. In the case of Finland, this resulted in a civil war, the disruptive legacies of which manifested themselves through political polarisation and social conflict until well after 1945. In these circumstances, democracy was less a point of consensus than a focus of dispute, which was instrumentalised by the forces of right and left to advance their very different partisan purposes.<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that, in seeking to present a more conflictual and less homogenous perspective on Scandinavian democracy, a number of the contributors to this collection have chosen to foreground the case of Finland. Indeed, the conventional present-day assumption that Finland formed part of the Nordic region in the twentieth century was, in many respects, the somewhat accidental consequence of the westward reorientation of the country brought about by Bolshevik success in the Russian civil war after 1917, and the integration of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union as a consequence of the Second World War. Had these external events, or indeed Finland's wars against the Soviet Union, taken a different course, so the geographical and political orientation of the country would have been markedly different.

The diversity of understandings of democracy was not, however, limited to the Finnish exception. As other contributions to this collection seek to emphasise, the ways, and often even the very linguistic formulae, by which Scandinavians thought about democracy varied considerably across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps significantly, democracy has rarely been a stand-alone term in Scandinavian political discourse. Partly because of the absence of a well-defined other against which democracy could be defined, it has long been intermingled with a wide range of associated concepts, notably the people

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<sup>18</sup> On the evolution of historiographical attitudes to the experiences of the Nordic states during the Second World War, see notably the essays in S. Ekman/N. Edling (eds.), *War Experience, Self-Image and National Identity. The Second World War as Myth and History*, Södertälje 1997, and H. Stenius/M. Österberg/J. Ostling (eds.), *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War*, Lund 2011.

<sup>19</sup> This emerges strongly from the contributions to this collection by Pasi Ihalainen and by Johanna Rainio-Niemi. On the history of Finland, see also D.G. Kirby, *Finland in the twentieth century*, London 1979.

or folk, the community, and the nation. Each of these carried its own nuance, enabling in turn the construction of visions of democracy which, though often overlapping, placed different and often contradictory emphases on popular sovereignty, state power, and structures of representation.

These plural conceptions of democracy were reinforced by more partisan political differences. The broadly four-fold division of Scandinavian electoral politics (as well as the Communists) during much of the twentieth century between parties which, with local variants as to their labels, represented the conservative, liberal, agrarian, and socialist and subsequently social-democratic political traditions has given rise to different conceptions of the structures and purposes of democracy. Each of these political camps placed different emphases on the role of the state (as embodied by the monarch, or in Finland the office of the president), the importance of individual freedom, and the social underpinnings of democracy. These in turn reflected the more profound fractures generated by the diverse legacies of monarchical state-formation, Lutheranism, and popular movements for social and linguistic emancipation, as well as the trade unions and co-operative organisations, each of which contributed to a democratic culture within which divergent accents can be identified. Diversity was not of course in itself a source of fragility; indeed, the different ways in which democracy has been articulated within Scandinavia across the modern era has helped to reinforce the sense of a democratic consensus, with each tradition bringing its own definition of democracy to the articulation of the larger whole. But such diversity also created fault-lines of ideological principle, which were sharpened by the hard realities of partisan or class interest.

The plurality of these understandings of democracy was evident in the ambivalence about the role that the people should occupy within democracy. Central to the conception of democracy in all of the Scandinavian states had long been the idea of rule by the people; what in Denmark was expressed through the term, *folkestyre*, as it was emerged during the movement for popular emancipation, and mass education in the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>20</sup> See notably the contribution of Jeppe Nevers and Jesper Lundsby Skov to this volume, as well as J. Nevers, "Democracy and European Integration: A Transnational History of the Danish Debate", in: J. Kurunmäki/J. Nevers/ H. te Velde (eds.), *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History*, New York 2018, 281-299.

people, and not the monarch, or importantly the people's elected representatives in parliament, were therefore the ultimate sovereigns of the nation. This remained evident during the twentieth century in the continued use of referenda to decide issues of significance for the entire community, such as constitutional reforms or, most strikingly, whether Denmark and Norway should join the European Community during the 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

However, as the rejection of Norway's membership of European membership by relatively small margins in the referenda of 1972 and 1994 indicated, the direct sovereignty of the people could have unintended outcomes, which disrupted the more continuous and professional business of government. The sovereignty of the people rested on an increasingly idealised image of a homogenous and unitary people, concerned both with the welfare of their local community and with that of the wider nation, which was at odds with the reality of a more urbanised, diverse, and segmented society, in which sectional and individual interests often took precedence over that of the national collective. The consequence was a democratic culture which sought to glorify the role of the people while holding them at a certain distance from the professional business of government. Thus, though the Swedish people voted by a majority of more than 80% in 1955 to continue driving on the left of the road, the state nevertheless decided a few years later to implement a change to driving on the right to bring Sweden into line with European norms.<sup>22</sup>

This tension between popular sovereignty and the safe guardianship of the affairs of the nation was, of course, not unique to Scandinavia. It was central to the anxiety about rule by the people which characterised much of Europe in the era after 1945: the people were the sovereigns of the nation but, as the electoral success of Nazism in Germany and of other populist parties elsewhere in Europe during the inter-war years had appeared to have proven, the people were not always the best judges of the interests of the nation. Instead, it was the state – and more especially its formal and hierarchical principles – which had to act as the essential organising institution of the nation. This was this mentality which led some,

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<sup>21</sup> See J. Nevers and J. Lundsby Skov in this collection.

<sup>22</sup> L. Lewin, *Ideology and Strategy. A Century of Swedish Politics*, Cambridge 1988, 232.

such as the German émigré from Nazism, Karl von Loewenstein, to advocate what he termed a “disciplined democracy”, in which popular sovereignty would be constrained within an institutional and legal framework.<sup>23</sup> As the contributions of Johanna Rainio-Niemi and Johan Strang to this volume demonstrate, von Loewenstein’s ideas also had an audience among more conservative circles in the Scandinavian states, even if the emphasis was less on the constraining force of law as on the need to ensure that popular sovereignty was balanced by respect for appropriate constitutional procedure.<sup>24</sup> Nor were such concerns restricted to those on the political right. Social democrats too were concerned to ensure that that the people inhabited democracy in the right spirit. Rather than simply assuming that the people would follow the correct path, social democrats were concerned to educate and lead people towards a more enlightened understanding of the need to reject the emotional lure of the political extremes, and subordinate their individual interests to those of the wider community. The task of “building democracy”, which was so central to the language of mid-century social democracy, was thus more about constructing a place for the people within democracy than it was about enabling the people to rule. By creating broadly-based political coalitions, cross-class alliances of material interest, and corporatist structures of socio-economic decision-making, the potentially disruptive power of the popular will would be tamed, and directed towards more constructive purposes.<sup>25</sup>

Concerns over the potentially disruptive role of the people within democracy were matched by anxiety over the power of the state. The functional expansion in state authority that was common to almost all European societies in the second half of the twentieth century was heightened in the case of the Scandinavian states by the central role that the state assumed in the provision of a wide range of social and welfare services.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, the state became the provider of democracy, transferring it from the political sphere into the fabric of daily life: a democracy of material practice and social rights which was more concerned with the efficient and equitable distribution of goods and services than with the empowerment

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<sup>23</sup> K. Loewenstein, *Political Reconstruction*, New York 1946, 126-129; M. Lang, *Karl Loewenstein. Transatlantischer Denker der Politik*, Stuttgart 2007, 238-245; Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 147-148.

<sup>24</sup> See the contributions of J. Rainio-Niemi and J. Strang to this collection.

<sup>25</sup> Hilson, *The Nordic Model*, 41-46.

<sup>26</sup> H. Finer, *The Major Governments of Modern Europe*, London 1960; Hilson *The Nordic Model*, 87-115; O. Ruin, *Tage Erlander. Serving the Welfare State, 1946-1969*, Pittsburgh 1990.

of the people.<sup>27</sup> However, as Johan Strang's contribution to this collection well demonstrates, there were always those, notably from liberal backgrounds, who feared that the ascendancy of so-called legal-realist ideas, which privileged the authority of the state over discourses of individual rights, risked undermining democracy, by turning formerly autonomous citizens into the dependent consumers of state services.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the traditions of localist self-government that constituted such a strong emotional reference point within the rhetoric of Nordic democracy became a means of opposing the actions of the modern state. The centralising logics of public services and state regulation came to be perceived by these critics as in effect an anti-democratic force which – borrowing from the language of neo-liberal ideologists elsewhere in Europe and North America – would lead in time to a totalitarian apparatus of social control. Such ideas help to explain the increasing political opposition that state-led projects of social reform encountered, such as the anti-tax movements of the 1970s, the neo-liberal governments in Denmark in the 1980s, and the attacks on state policies of regulation voiced by the populist parties of more recent years.<sup>29</sup>

This societal resistance to the expansion of state authority indicates how the project of a modern democracy could also become in effect the generator of its own fragility. The model of citizenship which took shape within the democracies of Scandinavia was that of a particular modern western moment: universalising, homogenising, and always inclined to categorise people on the basis of their birth, gender, professional and family background, and their wider social status. This was a model that was very successful during the middle decades of the twentieth century, reflecting the way in which, in Scandinavia as elsewhere in Western Europe, democracy was associated with the provision of civic universalism, political equality, and social welfare, within the framework of a gradated social hierarchy. However, with time, the underlying principles of this model of democracy came to be

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<sup>27</sup> F. Sejersted, *The Age of Social Democracy. Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, Oxford 2011.

<sup>28</sup> See the contribution of Johan Strang to this collection. See also the nuanced analysis of these ideas provided in J. Strang, "Scandinavian Legal Realism and Human Rights: Axel Hägerström, Alf Ross and the Persistent Attack on Natural Law", in: *Nordic Journal of Human Rights*, 36 (2018) 3, 202-218.

<sup>29</sup> H-G Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, Basingstoke 1994, 4-5; Hilson, *The Nordic Model*, 80-81. See also more generally P. Mirowski/D. Plehwe (eds.), *The Road from Mont Pèlerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, Cambridge MA, London 2009.

increasingly at odds with new aspirations, both cultural and material, new forms of personal and collective identity, and the broader reality of a more heterogeneous society.

This was a challenge which presented itself within all European democracies across the final decades of the twentieth century, but it had a particular acuity in Scandinavia, where democracy had rested since the nineteenth century on an imagined ideal of a homogeneous society: white, predominantly rural, and conservative in social ethos if not in politics. The increasing cultural diversity of societies, notably as the consequence of immigration from outside of Scandinavia, as well as the emergence of forms of identity politics based notably but not exclusively on issues of gender and sexuality, generated new languages of self-expression as well as new forms of individual and collective choice. These had an ambiguous relationship with the established democratic model of society. On the one hand, new social movements, such as the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, and the women's movements of the latter twentieth century, were themselves the products of the democratic development of Scandinavian society, the origins of which could be traced back to the heritages and traditions of pre-existing organisations, such as the co-operative movement, which had long flourished in a localist and relatively egalitarian society.<sup>30</sup> But, on the other hand, these new movements, began to unravel the virtuous inter-connectedness of citizens, associations and the nation which, as Henrik Stenius has strongly argued, has long characterised the development of citizenship in the Nordic region.<sup>31</sup> In particular, new forms of citizenship, which were more individual and more assertive, no longer necessarily supported the democratic order but challenged it in the name of new languages of freedom and of rights.

Once again, there was little that was specifically Nordic about the consequent tensions between regime and society. Indeed, the sense of a disconnect between the institutions of the democratic order – notably the established political parties, parliaments, and state institutions – and the wider society has been a prominent feature of politics in many

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<sup>30</sup> See Mary Hilson's contribution to this volume, and also M. Hilson, "The Nordic Consumer Co-operative Movements in International Perspective, 1890-1939", in: R. Alapuro/H. Stenius (eds.), *Nordic Associations in a European Perspective*, Baden-Baden 2010, 234-236.

<sup>31</sup> H. Stenius, "Nordic Associational Life in a European and an Inter-Nordic Perspective", in: R. Alapuro/H. Stenius (eds.), *Nordic Associations in a European Perspective*, Baden-Baden 2010, 29-86, esp. 79.

European states during the late twentieth century, and the early years of the subsequent century. Europeans, it seems, have ceased to feel entirely at home with the democracy which they had inherited from the founding decades of the mid-twentieth century, and which no longer seems well adapted to the world which they inhabit. This has had a series of consequences, in Scandinavia and elsewhere, with which we are all familiar: the decline in political participation, the increase in electoral volatility, the emergence of new parties which define themselves against the established political order, and the development of new realms of democratic participation and practice outside of the formal political process.<sup>32</sup>

Taken together, these trends might be said to constitute the contemporary “crisis of democracy” with which this Introduction opened. But what might seem to be a peculiar present-day crisis might also be seen in the light of the articles in this collection as one of the forms of fragility to which all democracies have been vulnerable across the modern era. Democracy has not been an unchanging phenomenon in European history, but a series of different and rather discontinuous ways of conducting politics, each of which has always contained particular sources of tension and conflict.<sup>33</sup> Democracies have survived, and flourished, through adapting to the changing fabrics and tempers of their societies, and have often done so very successfully. But this tension between change and adaptation has often generated an underlying fragility of structures, and of legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens.

Thus, as this collection of articles seeks to demonstrate, fragility is not exceptional, but has been inherent to the practice of democracy in modern Europe. The degree of fragility has of course varied in different contexts. Viewed in comparison with the acute problems of economic crisis, governmental weakness, ethnic conflict and military insubordination which characterised many of the democratic regimes of eastern and southern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, the challenges faced by the Scandinavian democracies – Finland once again

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<sup>32</sup> J. Strömbäck, “Swedish Election Campaigns”, in: J. Pierre (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*, Oxford, New York 2016, 276-277. See more generally Corduener, *Problem of Democracy*, 166-167; J.W Müller, *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia 2016.

<sup>33</sup> I have discussed these issues of the “discontinuity” of democracy in M. Conway, “Democracies”, in: M. Conway/P. Lagrou/H. Rousso (eds.), *Europe’s Postwar Periods – 1989, 1945, 1918*, London et al 2019, 121-136.

partly excepted – during the twentieth century were much less substantial, and were indeed overcome within the template of regime continuity. But of course realities are subjective, as well as objective, and what is striking about modern democracy was that it was often *felt* to be fragile: a complex structure, the survival of which depended on mobilising the combined resources of institutional intelligence, competent leadership by the political class, the technical skills of bureaucrats and social engineers, and a comprehending and sober-minded citizenry.<sup>34</sup>

Seen in this way, the perception of the fragility of democracy has often exceeded its observable reality; what David Runciman has termed a preoccupation with the prospect of failure.<sup>35</sup> This, however, has a particular relevance to the contemporary Nordic states, where the anxieties provoked by the success of new political forces might seem disproportionate to the relatively modest challenge they present to the established political regime. What in another country or region might appear to be little more than the social tensions and anti-elite rhetoric common to the more volatile politics of all European societies in the twenty-first century has often been presented – especially in the foreign media – as heralding the demise of the long-admired model of Scandinavian democracy.<sup>36</sup> But perceptions matter too in the history of democracy; and, in this respect, the somewhat alarmist response to the changing patterns of politics in the Nordic states might seem to indicate a belated recognition that Nordic democracy too is characterised by the forms of fragility which have long been visible elsewhere in Europe.

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<sup>34</sup> R. Aron, “Les institutions politiques de l’occident dans le monde du XXe siècle”, in: R. Aron et al, *La démocratie à l’épreuve du XX siècle*, Paris 1960, 26-27; D. Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism. The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*, London, New York 1996, 132; M. Conway, “Democracy in Western Europe after 1945”, in: J. Kurunmäki/J. Nevers/H. te Velde (eds.), *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History*, New York 2018, 231-256. This was an attitude which, understandably, was widely shared in the early Bonn Republic. See notably V. Depkat, *Lebenswenden und Zeitenwenden: deutsche Politiker und die Erfahrungen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2007.

<sup>35</sup> D. Runciman, *The Confidence Trap*, xii.

<sup>36</sup> See, for characteristic examples, *The Financial Times* 17 Aug. 2018, ‘Populism tests Sweden’s status quo’; *The Observer* 26 Aug. 2018, ‘Sweden’s far right flourished because the elite lost touch with the people’; *The Economist* 7 Sept. 2018, ‘Why Sweden’s election promises to change the country’.