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## Religion and politics: revisiting interwar democracy and dictatorship

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COMMENTARY

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## Religion and politics: revisiting interwar democracy and dictatorship

A fundamental theme in Michael Mann's work is the origin of political regimes. From pre-historic times to the contemporary world and spanning centuries of human history, Mann's books deal with the immense variety of regimes into which societies have organized themselves (Mann, 1986, 1993 and 2012). In this short piece, it is not possible to review Mann's whole work on this subject. Instead, I will focus on his most recent argument, on the origins of modern democratic and fascist regimes in interwar Western Europe (Mann, 2012).

It was mainly after World War I that most European societies experienced for the first time in their history the attempt to consolidate mass democratic regimes (exceptions are Switzerland in 1848 and France in 1877). Mass democracy is recent phenomenon, of the 1920s and 1930s, characterized by the *simultaneously* attempt to consolidate institutions like universal suffrage, parliamentary control of executives, basic freedoms (expression, association), corporatist consultation between workers, governments, and employers, and mass delivery of welfare services.

Still, post 1918 democracy became consolidated only in some countries. In Great Britain, France, Ireland, Scandinavia, and the Benelux countries

democratic institutions were maintained and deepened. But they failed in Spain, Portugal, Austria, Germany, Italy, and the new nations of central-eastern Europe. Moreover, where democracy failed it was replaced by rightist ultra-nationalist mass regimes. What explains this variation? Mann argues that the combination of the political crisis of collapsing limited liberal regimes (e. g. Spain) and multinational territorial empires (e. g. Austria-Hungary) with the poverty and devastation caused by the war and the great depression generated polarized civil societies that ultimately doomed the consolidation of democracy.

In the cases that failed, civil society was violent and anti-liberal. First, important segments on the left (left wing parties and unions) became dominated by revolutionary extremists, who between 1918 and 1922 sought to repeat the example of the Russian revolution. These were the cases of the failed revolutions in Germany, Hungary, and Austria, and the cycles of workers' radicalism in Spain and Italy. In the countries where democracy consolidated, socialist movements were dominated by reformist groups and doctrines, willing to ally with centrist parties, whether these were liberals/agrarians (Scandinavia), republicans (France) or religious (Belgium, Netherlands). Second, the political right was also partly dominated by extremist anti-democratic movements: paramilitary, war veterans, students, and middle-class professional organizations. In the societies where democracy survived these movements were of a quite small scale.

Still, the mere existence of these movements was not enough to bring down democracy. For this to happen, it was necessary that traditional elites (landowners and businessmen), represented in conservative and liberal parties, as well as in the State (military officers; higher civil servants) tolerated and actively used right-wing movements in their strategies for keeping power. First, they used paramilitary groups as agents of labor repression in factories and in the countryside. Second, they brought fascist parties to government, and this was possible only when the political culture of traditional elites itself was deeply anti-democratic.

In fact, these patterns of civility – or lack of it – did not suddenly appear in the interwar period, but somehow continued earlier historical developments. The degree to which elites and civil societies were more or less civil or liberal was already established at least since the 1880s-'90s (Mann, 1993). The war only accelerated trends that came from before. In the cases where democracy consolidated, traditional elites were already habituated to some degree of party and political competition before 1914. In these countries strong parliaments allowed elites to build parties able to reach the masses, thus gradually conceding rights to workers and the popular classes in general. On the contrary,

in countries like Germany or Spain, conservatives and liberals were unable to establish party and electoral links with the masses before 1918. These were elites who were used to holding on to power through clientelistic networks and/or sheer repression. When the war terminated their regimes in 1918, they could not effectively compete with socialists and other pro-democracy groups in free elections. Accordingly, their solution not to lose power was to invite fascists to the government (Germany) or by sponsoring right-wing military coups (Spain).

Traditional elites were also carriers of very different nationalist ideologies since the late 19th century. In those countries where democracy triumphed, nationalism was permeated by liberal (United Kingdom) and even pacifist ideas (France) (Mann, 2012, p. 33; Mann, 1993, p. 580). Conversely, German nationalism, represented in organizations like the Pan-Germanic and Naval Leagues, was racist and militarist (Mann, 1993, p. 74). In sum, in Western Europe between the 1880s to the 1930s two very different civil societies emerged: one peaceful, liberal, and democratic; the other reactionary, militaristic, and authoritarian.

According to Mann, these patterns of civil society correspond to distinct historical-geographic areas. The European northwest is liberal and democratic. The south, center, and east are authoritarian. And what was typical of the northwest was that for several centuries considerable economic and religious freedom (Protestantism) had already existed, which, according to Mann, facilitated the spread of liberal-constitutionalist ideas (Mann, 2012, pp. 326-327).

Here Mann's argument is less convincing. There are several cases which cannot be accounted for by his argument. Just to name a few, Ireland, for instance, both an economically peripheral area and one with a catholic population *did* democratize in the interwar period. And it was in the protestant and economically highly developed areas of Germany where support for Nazism was stronger.

Still, the importance Mann gives to religious factors in his explanation of regime types is very valuable. As others have noted (Gould, 1999; Gorski, 1993; Rokkan and Lipset, 1992), political cleavages between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were structured mainly around religious conflicts. As Mann himself notes for the case of England, the nineteenth-century House of Commons spent more time debating religion than issues related to economics or class (Mann, 1993, p. 85).

But the specific link through which religion related to regime building is still unexplored. I would argue that it was not necessarily their theological content or the degree of church dependency of the State authorities. There

are cases of successful democratization in both catholic (France, Ireland) and Protestant countries (Denmark). And state-protestant church fusion was high in countries where democracy took root (Sweden, England) and where it did not (Germany). In this respect, Mann's work offers many clues and historical examples that seem to converge on the following idea: in the cases where democracy took root, national churches established after the reformation had an important liberal sector, with important segments of religious elites favoring the defense of parliamentary powers and the interests of common folk as opposed to elites.

In England, for instance, the civic campaigns against slavery in 1807 and 1833 were led by radical evangelicals, defenders of a theology of the equality of the souls (Mann, 2012, p. 31); and the liberal movement itself, responsible for the strengthening of the parliamentary powers and the extension of suffrage in 1832, was based on a network of working and middle class dissidents and Methodists (Mann, 2012, p. 299). In Scandinavia, pro-democratic liberal and agrarian parties were also rooted in the dissident churches to official Lutheranism (Mann, 2012, p. 302). And in France, well before the 1789 revolution, enlightenment and rationalist principles had deeply penetrated the catholic hierarchy. Many archbishops declared not to believe in God and the lower clergy was known to stimulate among parishioners feelings of anti-hierarchy and anti-privilege (Mann, 1993, p. 178). In fact, recent research has shown how these ideas have contributed to the start of the revolution itself (Van Kley, 1996).

In Germany, on the other hand, a highly conservative and pro-absolutist Lutheranism was consolidated (Mann, 1993, p. 235; see also Gorski, 1999). Later it would serve as the basis from which reactionaries and right wing nationalists would build modern conceptions of German national identity. As Mann argues, German nationalism linked Lutheran religious feelings with loyalty to a strong and militaristic state (Mann, 1993, pp. 243-244, 323).

What seems to be contained – but not yet fully develop – in Michael Mann's work is the idea that long-run legacies of state-church relationships created representative institutions (e.g. parliaments or strong executives), notions of political legitimacy and of national identity which would serve as a legacy that would interact with the challenges of early twentieth-century democratization. Specifically, different patterns of civil society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are the product of the degree to which state-church relationships between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries democratized – or failed to do so – the different sources of social power and inequality (economic, ideological, military, and political; on the sources of power see Mann, 1986, pp. 1-33). The more state-church relationships of conflict and cooperation directly and

indirectly led to parliamentarized regimes, weak militaries, more equitable property structures, and ideological pluralism and dissent, the greater would be the chances for the development of a democratic and liberal civil society between the 1890s and the 1930s.

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