



## Contesting Illusions. On the Past, Present and Future of Democracy in Europe and European Integration

Thijs Bogers

To cite this article: Thijs Bogers (2016) Contesting Illusions. On the Past, Present and Future of Democracy in Europe and European Integration, Journal of European Integration, 38:1, 107-113, DOI: [10.1080/07036337.2015.1101956](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2015.1101956)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2015.1101956>



© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 20 Jan 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 618



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---

REVIEW ARTICLE

---

# Contesting Illusions. On the Past, Present and Future of Democracy in Europe and European Integration

Contesting democracy: political ideas in twentieth-century Europe,  
Jan-Werner Müller, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013,  
ISBN: 978-0-30-019412-8

The passage to Europe. How a continent became a union,  
Luuk van Middelaar, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2013,  
ISBN: 978-0-30-018112-8

Which European Union? Europe after the Euro Crisis,  
Sergio Fabbrini, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015,  
ISBN: 978-1-10-750397-7

Jan-Werner Müller, Luuk van Middelaar and Sergio Fabbrini together contest prevailing illusions concerning the past, present and future of democracy in Europe and European integration. Their works offer an invaluable body of work through which the history and present-day predicaments of European integration can be properly understood. Through their particular and unique ways wherein they present their analyses, each author convincingly straightens out what had become murky presentations of the historical and contemporary state of affairs. Together, their works provide in an oversight concerning two trajectories that have come to dominate European history. The first concerns European democratisation, both at the level of the nation state and at the level of the EU. The second concerns European integration. The works by Müller, Van Middelaar and Fabbrini together show how both trajectories influence each other but ultimately develop independent of each other. However, only by generating an oversight of the trajectories together can each be fully understood.

## A New Narrative of the History of Political Ideas in Twentieth-century Europe

In *Contesting democracy: political ideas in twentieth-century Europe*, Jan-Werner Müller ambitiously sets out to offer a new perspective on European political ideas throughout the past century. The end result does not fall short from Müller's ambitions as he treats the reader to a ground-breaking analysis. The attractiveness of *Contesting democracy* lies foremost in the novelty of Müller's approach. Müller does not limit his inquiry to either ideological innovation among professional intellectuals or to institutional innovation within the political realm. These two fields have been scrutinised exhaustively in isolation from each other. Müller's inquiry, rather, centres on the interaction between ideological and institutional innovation. By doing so, in his own words, he seeks to 'grasp the political thought that mattered politically' (Müller 2013, 3). To that end, 'we ought to be concerned with what happens *in between* more or less academic political thought on the one hand and, on the other, the creation (and destruction) of political institutions' (Müller 2013, 2–3). Resulting from this novel approach is an extensive overview of the interplay between ideas and political change.

Müller's choice of individuals whose ideas he discusses follows from his novel approach. Next to academics and politicians, Müller also calls attention to many so-called 'in-between figures' such as bureaucrats, jurists and others whose ideas can be seen to have been translated into political behaviour. Among those whose ideas Müller brings to the fore are various obscure and forgotten figures. By discussing those who had disappeared from collective memory, *Contesting democracy* deviates from any canonical understanding of the history of twentieth-century European political ideas.

By centring his analysis on the ideas that were translated into political behaviour, Müller debunks prevalent interpretations as caricatures of historical reality. Two main conclusions follow in this regard from Müller's query. First, Müller emphasises that the European twentieth century was 'an age, in short, when political argument was crucially about contesting the meaning of democracy' (Müller 2013, 5). Rather than presenting the twentieth century as an age wherein democracy was advocated by some, welcomed by many and perfected by all, Müller convincingly shows how democracy was continuously contested, albeit from viewpoints that varied over time. By doing so, Müller aptly dismisses the notion of Europe as having been highly favourable to liberal democracy by default, as an 'illusion.' From this, it follows that the totalitarian and numerous authoritarian regimes, which exemplify twentieth-century European political history, cannot be regarded as mere aberrations. Rather, the continuity of the history of twentieth-century European political ideas lies in the fact that democracy has been contested throughout.

Second, Müller stresses that Christian Democracy rather than Social Democracy has been the formative ideology of post-war Europe. According to Müller, Christian Democracy should be seen as nothing less than 'the most important ideological innovation of the post-war period, and one of

the most significant of the European twentieth century as a whole' (Müller 2013, 130). The fact that the influence of Christian Democracy has previously not been rightly assessed is ascribed by Müller to the lack of a known ideological protagonist who can be said to have formulated its main ideas. Also, politicians and thinkers advocating Christian Democracy did so through the use of traditional jargon. Because of this, the post-war order was mostly perceived as being a return to earlier times rather than as a period wherein society was undergoing a fundamental reshaping through innovative social engineering.

One of the main institutional innovations of the twentieth century which can be ascribed to Christian Democracy, according to Müller, is European integration. Christian Democracy brought about amity between the different confessional factions in Western European nations. As a result thereof, Catholics were integrated into the ruling class. Being averse to national sovereignty, Catholics welcomed the idea of supranational European integration. Also, the Catholic suspicion of popular sovereignty was translated into the manner wherein European integration was pursued. Top-down governance, on both the European and the national level, was seen as an effective way to pre-emptively buttress unabated popular sovereignty. Also, the achievements of European integration, it was believed, would ultimately convince Europeans of its necessity.

Throughout *Contesting democracy*, Müller makes use of a rich amount of quotes and anecdotes from the people whose ideas he discusses. Rather than serving the end of window dressing his text, Müller's use of quotes and anecdotes is consistently instrumental to his query. It is also testament to the impressive and detailed oversight which Müller has acquired concerning twentieth-century European political ideas. On occasion, Müller does not shun the use of unorthodox tools to convey the sense of a time. Twice he does so by alluding to a scene from a film by Federico Fellini. Immediately, the reader is made to feel the peculiarities of the time in which the scene was set and which Müller wants to convey.

Rewriting the history of political ideas in twentieth-century Europe is not a small task, but Jan-Werner Müller has excelled at it. Müller presents the rich tapestry which was the history of twentieth-century European political ideas. By doing so, Müller makes insightful how different ideologies that are connected to each other through various intellectual deviations have led to the darkest episodes of twentieth-century European history. Thereafter, Müller convincingly shows how Europe's current political makeup results from the avid wish to steer clear of the darkness forever. *Contesting democracy* is a must read for anyone who seeks to truly understand the political architecture of present-day Europe.

### **The History of European Integration Relieved of all Necessity**

One of the main insights concerning Europe's twentieth-century history which becomes apparent through reading Müller is that the post-war political constellation has survived various episodes of heavy contestation. Although both the revolutionary decade of the 1960s and the neoliberal

paradigm have drastically altered society, they have kept Europe's political constellation intact. Against this backdrop, European integration has occurred throughout different passages, according to Luuk van Middelaar. In *The passage to Europe. How a continent became a nation*, Van Middelaar rewrites the history of European integration. He motivates his choice for the term 'passage' in the book's title by remarking that it 'helps to avoid well-worn terms such as "integration" and "construction", but it also serves to introduce a temporal dimension' (Van Middelaar 2013, xvi). Throughout *The passage to Europe*, the reader becomes witness to various crucial moments in time, wherein the interplay of events furthered European integration.

Like Müller, Van Middelaar too bases his narrative on the insights generated not just by the usual suspects like politicians and intellectuals but also by diplomats, judges and civil servants. Van Middelaar shares with the reader how different moments in the history of European integration were experienced by those whom figured in them. By doing so, he conveys what meanings were given to the events under scrutiny. Van Middelaar has been rightly acclaimed for writing a book which is highly accessible to a large audience. He has not deferred to the use of a technical vernacular to present his narrative. It is no surprise, then, that *The passage to Europe* has been published in eight languages to date.

Van Middelaar starts his narrative by offering a novel division of Europe's political dynamism into three different spheres. The outer sphere is comprised of the nation states, which are driven by self-interest. The inner sphere is comprised of the community, which is driven by a belief in the advancement of a European project. Lastly, there is the intermediate sphere, wherein member states act whilst increasingly being aware of a common interest. According to Van Middelaar the intermediate sphere has served to further European politics: 'When the members act together, as a single entity, they are the motor of "Europe"' (Van Middelaar 2013, 12). When member states interact with each other they come to recognise their affiliation to both the inner and outer sphere, thereby generating self-awareness as being a unique entity.

In the second part of the book, Van Middelaar presents the history of European integration in response to various external events. Through these events which triggered moments of crisis, from the Suez Crisis to the 11 September attacks in 2001, Van Middelaar demonstrates how a sense of community followed from the challenges of the times. As the course of history is contingent, the future of European integration too cannot be planned but depends on whatever challenge the times thrust upon it. In the third part of the book, Van Middelaar scrutinises the different strategies which have been employed to ensure legitimacy for the EU. Especially for the intermediate sphere, the search for a public became challenging as the member states could not relinquish their national identity.

The great added value of Van Middelaar's *The passage to Europe* lies in the fact that he presents the history of European integration as being bereft of necessity. By doing so, Van Middelaar contests the understanding of the EU as an entity whose position of power follows from what it promises to

become in the future. Rather, according to Van Middelaar, the EU's 'power, long unimagined, resides in an intermediate status, half-old and half-new, that is gradually coming into its own, making a connection between events originating in the outside world and a joint response to them' (Van Middelaar 2013, 309). By viewing the current EU not as the outcome of a blueprint that needs finishing, but rather as the outcome of consecutive momentary interplays of events, it becomes apparent that true integration occurs when the old and the new order interact with each other.

### A New Perspective on European Integration

Van Middelaar's often poetic vernacular stands in sharp contrast with Sergio Fabbrini's rather mundane presentation of his analyses. In *Which European Union? Europe after the Euro Crisis*, Fabbrini contests dominant views on the EU and ultimately brings forward a convincing alternative. The first of three dominant views of the EU which Fabbrini discusses is that which sees it as an *economic community*. This view is advocated by the so-called *sovereignist coalition*; those member states whom reject any undermining of national sovereignty due to European integration. The sovereignist coalition, which is spearheaded by the United Kingdom, sees the EU foremost as a body which addresses economic challenges that affect member states together. Economic cooperation between member states will leave their national sovereignty intact, it is supposed. As such, the sovereignist coalition presents the EU as yet another regional economic organisation very similar to, for instance, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Through a comparative institutional analysis between the EU and organisations like NAFTA, Fabbrini sets out to determine if the economic community view is tenable. The analysis leads Fabbrini to conclude that the EU differs wholly from other regional economic organisations. The main point of difference between the EU and the regional economic organisations under scrutiny is that the former has had an impact on its member states which has remained absent for the latter. Although the sovereignist coalition does not favour it, '[n]o other existing regional organization has gone so far as the EU in deconstructing the Westphalian principle of national sovereignty' (Fabbrini 2015, 123).

Where the economic community view of the EU is in denial concerning the impact of EU integration on national sovereignty, the other two views Fabbrini presents accept it as an empirical reality. However, those views of *intergovernmental union* and *parliamentary union* differ from each other concerning where collective decision-making throughout the EU finds its legitimacy. In short, the intergovernmental union view centres on the notion that national sovereignties are pooled in institutions like the European Council and the Council of the European Union. Whereas in the parliamentary union view, legitimacy is deferred to decision-making bodies like the European Parliament and the European Commission.

The post-2009 euro crisis has proven to be a litmus test for the intergovernmental union view. A test which, according to Fabbrini, it has failed to pass as '[o]ver the course of the crisis, the intergovernmental union has been transformed so deeply that a highly centralized, intrusive and convoluted organization has grown up in the euro-area' (Fabbrini 2015, xxx). Decision-making in the ECOFIN Council and the European Council has not proceeded on the basis of consensual coordination between member states, as would be in line with the intergovernmental view. Rather, those bodies have become dominated by the more affluent and larger member states, specifically France and Germany. Fabbrini laments the institutionalisation of a hierarchy between member states and also concludes that those supposedly intergovernmental bodies have failed to adequately manage the euro crisis.

Fabbrini points out that throughout the euro crisis, EU officials have come to favour a thorough advancement of European integration. To that end, the EU needs to become a parliamentary union, meaning that it needs to copy the institutional structure of a nation state. However, by comparing various parliamentary federations, mainly Germany and Canada, Fabbrini concludes that the EU as a federal project is unattainable. According to Fabbrini, pivotal 'genetic, institutional and structural conditions have been lacking in the EU' (Fabbrini 2015, 184).

As the three dominant views on the EU each fall short in their representation of empirical reality, Fabbrini sets out to 'investigate whether a new perspective on the Union can be identified and a new political order for Europe can be devised' (Fabbrini 2015, 184).

Fabbrini does not proceed to do so by simply presenting a blueprint of this alternative perspective based on sentimental considerations. Rather, Fabbrini proceeds by analysing the democratic models of both nation states and unions of states. By generating an understanding of the democratic models of established states, Fabbrini is able to analyse which of the existing models applies to the EU. The democratic models of nation states are categorised by Fabbrini into competitive and consensus democracies. As the institutional structure of the EU differs from nation states, its democratic models do not apply to the EU.

The democratic model of unions of states is categorised by Fabbrini into compound democracies, by which he means a democratic model which is based on interstate rather than partisan cleavages. Fabbrini sets out to compare the EU with two democratic unions of states, namely the USA and Switzerland. Based on his comparison, Fabbrini concludes 'that the EU is a compound polity prevented from operating fully as a compound union' (Fabbrini 2015, 255). What is primarily lacking is a constitutionalisation of the separation of powers. This brings Fabbrini, in the last chapter, to prescribe a way forward for the EU, wherein it can overcome the current stalemate between the different and competing perspectives on what it should amount to. The constitutionalisation of a separation of powers between redesigned supranational and intergovernmental bodies would enable the EU to become a compound union. Pivotal for the *compound union* view of the EU to succeed is, according to Fabbrini, political leader-



ship. Only if politicians take the lead and declare their commitment to the compound union view will an institutional restructuring be possible.

Throughout his query, Fabbrini demonstrates great care in the manner, wherein his analyses lead to his conclusions. His conclusions are consistently convincing due to the fact that he starts his analysis from empirical reality rather than from personal preferences. Fabbrini is able to present his compound union view as a highly alluring alternative view on the EU which saves it from the stalemate it is currently enduring between the existing views. The manner wherein Fabbrini presents his query however makes for repetitive reading. Due to his meticulous but above all repetitious reasoning, Fabbrini appears to have underestimated his audience. Although it is certainly not due to its content, *Which European Union?* runs the risk of failing to captivate its reader.

After having read the works of Müller, Van Middelaar and Fabbrini, the fog surrounding many prevalent presentations of the past, present and future of democracy in Europe and European integration has cleared. How the trajectories of European democratisation and European integration interact with each other but ultimately remain independent from each other, has been made insightful. The works of Müller, Van Middelaar and Fabbrini are deserving of attention by anyone interested in democracy in Europe and European integration.

## References

- Fabbrini, S. 2015. *Which European Union? Europe after the Euro Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 Müller, J.-W. 2013. *Contesting democracy: political ideas in twentieth-century Europe*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.  
 Van Middelaar, L. 2013. *The passage to Europe. How a continent became a union*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Thijs Bogers  
*Department of Political Science and Public Administration, VU University  
 Amsterdam, The Netherlands*  
[t.j.bogers@vu.nl](mailto:t.j.bogers@vu.nl)

© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as  
 Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2015.1101956>