Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*
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Much of what is now mainstream political science tends to be rather boring. Following the lead of American departments and journals, research on issues of real intrinsic interest, such as the changing character of political parties, seems to be stuck in endless attempts to model the choice between office-seeking and policy-seeking, the interaction between 'vote-maximizing' parties and 'utility-maximizing' voters, the organization of voter preferences or the dynamics of coalition formation—all in timelessly general property spaces, designed to lend themselves to representation by complex sets of formal equations.

There are, however, exceptions. Among the most remarkable of these, until his untimely death in the summer of 2011, was Peter Mair, professor of comparative politics at the European University Institute in Florence. Widely respected, especially on the European side of his profession, Mair preserved a keen understanding of both the history and the purpose of the study of democracy. Unlike many in the field, he never lost sight of the close relationship between mass political parties and democratic outcomes; his work always considered the development of the former firmly in the context of the latter, as the more important of the two. Moreover, his concern was unabashedly with popular democracy and the enfranchisement of ordinary people, rather than with the abstract rules of decision-making that have become the favourite subject of much of what today passes as democratic theory.

Ruling the Void is the latest and, sadly, the last of Mair's books. It completes an oeuvre that began with *The Changing Irish Party System* (1987), a still unsurpassed study of his native land, and continued with the landmark *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability* (1990), co-authored

with Stefano Bartolini, which focused on the striking long-term stability of Western party systems, albeit eroded by growing electoral volatility from the 1970s. This was followed by the elegant *Party System Change* (1997), and a series of collaborative collections. *Ruling the Void* was still unfinished when Mair passed away, although the core arguments were all in place. It is the merit of Francis Mulhern, a friend since student days, to have organized what there was into an immensely readable and coherent sequence, drawing on additional material to compose the long chapter on the European Union with which the book concludes. Mair's incisive style, in particular his ability to find clear and pointed formulations for what he had to say, is apparent from the opening lines:

> The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form.

In what follows, this premise is elaborated with the aid of an impressive array of empirical data, as Mair details the decline, from below, of voter turnout and party memberships, and—from above—the 'withdrawal of the elites' from democratic accountability. Though we cannot know what *Ruling the Void* might have looked like had Mair had time to finish it, we can be confident that the grand outlines would have stayed the same, characterized not least by the author's steadfast refusal to retreat from the big questions in favour of methodological purity. Particularly striking is Mair's deep appreciation for political parties as intermediary agencies between their voters and the political institutions of the state—two realms with very different dynamics and strategic contingencies. It counts among Mair's great achievements as a political scientist that he resisted specializing in either one of these, though both require command of highly specific bodies of knowledge and research methodologies. For Mair, it was precisely their mediation between these two fields of action that defined the role of political parties; it was the way their responses in both zones were determined and combined that interested him most.

What, then, is the message of this important book? Going beyond the standard format of comparative politics, Mair looks less at national differences between party systems than at commonalities and shared historical trajectories. The 'golden age' of representative democracy is briefly sketched. With the advent of universal suffrage from around the 1900s, the earlier 'parties of notables' were supplanted by mass-membership organizations with strong, hierarchical structures, unifying voters on the basis of shared social experiences and collective hopes for what the party would achieve in

government. The party's role was to translate its voters' interests into public policy, to recruit and promote political leaders capable of exercising executive power and to compete for control of the executive through national elections. The classic mass party, Mair writes, 'gave voice to the people', while also ensuring that the institutions of government were accountable. Mair describes the development of mainstream parties from around the mid-1960s towards what the social-democratic political scientist Otto Kirchheimer had described as a 'catch-all' model, seeking to scoop up votes far beyond their core constituencies and becoming 'primarily office-seeking parties, with the desire to occupy government winning priority over any sense of representational integrity'. The next stage, gathering steam from the mid-1980s and 90s, is what Mair and Richard Katz, again following Kirchheimer, have called 'government by cartel', characterized by the elimination of effective opposition—the situation that prevails 'when no meaningful differences divide the party protagonists, however vigorously they may at times compete with one another'. The last decades of the twentieth century thus witnessed 'a gradual but also inexorable withdrawal of the parties from the realm of civil society towards the realm of government and the state'. As Mair emphasizes, this 'withdrawal of the elites' has been paralleled by citizen disengagement, with steady falls in average turnout, decade by decade, and the 'passing of popular involvement' in political life. The process involved a downgrading of 'the party on the ground' in favour of 'the party in parliament', or in government, as leaders opted—to use another of Mair's memorable pairs of concepts—for 'responsibility' at the expense of 'responsiveness'. And while parties drew farther away from their voters, they have drawn closer to each other: 'What remains is a governing class.'

Mair is careful to avoid monocausal narratives—or, indeed, any unidirectional causal reasoning. He attributes the 'hollowing out' of democratic party government to cumulative changes in the constraints and opportunities parties confront in the realms between which they have traditionally mediated: their social bases, on the one hand, and the pay-off matrices of the political arena, on the other. These involve two general trends: individualization and globalization. The first refers to the erosion of the cohesive social environments that helped structure the original growth of mass parties— the world of trade unions, clubs, churches, business associations, farming groups, and so on—as well as the fragmentation of collective identities, including that of the industrial working class. Individualization in its various expressions is invoked to explain an increasing indifference and apathy among citizens with respect to collective interests and politics, amounting to a secular disintegration of the modern 'demos'. Globalization, meanwhile, stands for the declining ability of national governments to shape autonomous policies. The two trends have a similar effect on party government.

'Whether circumscribed by global or European constraints, or limited by their inability to identify a sufficiently large and cohesive constituency to offer a mandate for action', Mair writes, 'parties increasingly tend to echo one another and to blur what would otherwise be clear policy choices'. Moreover, faced with an eroding social base, party elites have sought refuge in the security offered by state institutions to politicians willing to agree to a 'sharing of office, programme and voters'. In the process, political decision-making has migrated to 'non-majoritarian' (i.e. elite) institutions, like central banks and regulatory agencies, which are insulated from 'majoritarian' redistributive pressures—pressures to which governments would in any case struggle to respond, once globalization had undermined the economic powers of nation-states, formerly the seats of popular democracy.

Mair's *Exhibit A* of a political system of de-politicized expert 'governance', specifically constructed to exclude parties, popular democracy and, with them, redistributive politics, is, of course, the European Union, as analysed in the book's final chapter. It is testimony to Mair's sharp analytical mind that he understood the political-economic logic of this entity so much better than the hosts of political scientists specializing in the study, not to say the celebration, of 'European integration', whose main achievement has been to discover a 'democratic deficit' in a political system in which the protection of collective decision-making from democracy was nothing less than the founding principle. The chapter leaves no illusions as to the possibility, tirelessly conjured up by the 'democratization' rhetoric of the 'more Europe' forces, of recasting the EU as a base of resistance against the disempowering effects of capitalist internationalization. As Mair points out, referencing Robert Dahl's reflections on opposition, 'we are afforded the right to be represented in Europe, even if it is sometimes difficult to work out when and how this representative link functions; but we are not afforded the right to organize opposition within the European polity':

> We know that a failure to allow for opposition within the polity is likely to lead either (a) to the elimination of meaningful opposition, and to more or less total submission, or (b) to the mobilization of an opposition of principle against the polity—to anti-European opposition and to Euroscepticism. And indeed, this development is also reaching down into the domestic sphere, where the growing weight of the EU, and its indirect impact on national politics, also helps to foster democratic deficits, and hence also limits the scope for classical opposition at the national level.

Mair concludes on a note of lucid reflection: by losing opposition, we lose voice, and by losing voice, we lose control of our own political systems; it is not at all clear how that control might be regained, he writes, and meaning restored to that 'great milestone' of democracy—opposition.

Ruling the Void is essential reading for anyone concerned with twenty-first century politics. Compelling as it is, however, there are a number of intriguing issues on which the book remains ambiguous. One is *why* mainstream political parties in the West severed ties to their social base and adopted the neoliberal *pensée unique*, from the 1980s onwards. Was it because changed objective conditions left them no choice, was it organizational opportunism—the attractions of technocratic power-sharing—or was it because their constituents had deserted them and were no longer available for collective mobilization? At one point, Mair states unequivocally that the withdrawal was mutual—'this is the conclusion that needs to be most clearly underlined'; but he does not explore the precise nature of this mutuality. Nor does he discuss the more general issue of whether there might be a relationship of causation between the two trends, or in which direction that might operate; whether each retreat has depended on the other, and how far they have been mutually reinforcing.

It is here, in particular, that one most wishes Mair could have had the time to respond to a number of questions that might have pushed his analysis farther. One concerns his key concept of globalization and what it stands for. That the growing internationalization of the capitalist economy from the 1980s onwards has made it more difficult for national governments to intervene on behalf of popular majorities is widely known. But pressures for the protection of capital accumulation against democratic interference are older than that; they suggest a deeper tension between capitalism and democracy which was only provisionally suspended during the few decades of post-war growth. Remaining on his home turf of political science, Mair refrains from venturing into political economy, even though the trends he describes—the transfer of economic policy to 'non-accountable', technocratic institutions; the elimination of egalitarian redistribution from Western governments' political agendas—suggest the rise of a new political-economic regime, after the victory of capital in the struggles of the 1970s. Mair's story about the hollowing of mass democracy would fit nicely with a more general account of the transformation of the post-war Keynesian growth regime—which was obliged to look for economic progress through redistribution from the top to the bottom—into a Hayekian one, which puts its hope in redistribution from the bottom to the top. More generally, it could be placed in the context of a basic dilemma for democratic politics under capitalism: the fact that egalitarian democracy may, in good times, help to manage the social tensions produced by the nature of the capitalist accumulation process, yet in the process may cause economic turmoil—capital flight and so on—that undermines the preconditions of successful government. In a situation like this, governing parties may feel they have little choice but to become 'responsible' and make their peace with the capitalist class, while protecting

themselves as best they can from pressures to be 'responsive' to their members and voters.

Another question is whether the major political parties would actually stand a chance today of organizing and mobilizing their constituents in ways that were taken for granted in the 1970s. Mair emphasizes the individualization and fragmentation of their social bases, which had become a general phenomenon by the 1990s and which weakened parties of the left in particular. But this may be just the surface of a more profound change in the way people relate to each other, indeed in the very nature of sociability and social structure—a change we may only now begin to understand, with the breakthrough of so-called social media. Individualization, as invoked by Mair and others, seems to be no more than a provisional concept for an increasing short-termism and volatility affecting social commitments in general, not just in civic and political, but also in private and family life, and certainly in labour and product markets; a trend portrayed by many as a gain in freedom rather than a loss of solidarity. What this augurs for politics may perhaps include 'voice', in Albert Hirschman's sense, but primarily 'exit', early and often, and very little 'loyalty' when it comes to the compromise and discipline in the service of shared values necessary for a collective vision of the good society.

In the order that seems to be emerging, social bonds are construed as a matter of taste and choice rather than of obligation, making communities appear as voluntary associations from which one can resign if they require excessive self-denial, rather than as 'communities of fate' with which one either rises or goes under. The new social media that have fast become almost indispensable tools of human sociability enable people to connect and associate with like-minded others on the most esoteric 'subjective' matters. As cyberspace trumps geography, the connection, elementary for traditional political mobilization, between shared interests and personal relations arising from physical vicinity is broken. One consequence is that social control among 'network members' is minimized; dropping out is easy, especially when people use pseudonyms—another facet of the new voluntarism of social relationships. Browsing the boundless supply of causes, tastes and lifestyles made available by the internet, one can freely decide to 'like' whatever one wishes; in contrast to old-school political parties, there is no pressure for ideological consistency or for adherence to a common programme. The analogy between the consumerization of political commitment and the new markets of hedonistic lifestyle capitalism, fed by individually customized products, is hard to overlook. Thus, as part of a national effort to boost voter turnout in the May 2014 European Parliament elections, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* offered its readers an online quiz—put together, incidentally, by the European University Institute in Florence—

under the title 'Which party best fits me?', rather than, as one might naively have expected, 'Which party best fits Europe?'. Meanwhile, all critical issues of European policy had been carefully sidelined by the two old Brussels hands who presented themselves as continental *Spitzenkandidaten* for the presidency of the European Commission. While pretending to compete with each other, they ran on essentially identical platforms. No better confirmation can be found for Mair's theses on 'government by cartel' and the brilliant analysis of EU politics offered in the final chapter of *Ruling the Void*.

Mair offers two explanations, as noted above, for his finding that mainstream political parties have withdrawn from their intermediary position between their constituents and the state. One is that objective political-economic circumstances have made it impossible for them to remain responsive to popular needs and demands, by binding them to policies unsuited to eliciting political and civic commitment. Secondly, he suggests that their social base may no longer be amenable to the kind of collective action that parties traditionally inspired. (If in the nineteenth century it was the *Lumpenproletariat* that was incapable of disciplined organization, today it may be the hedonistic middle class. An example of the desperate lengths to which the establishment parties now go to end the meltdown of their memberships would be the youth organization of the German CDU, which has launched a recruitment drive promoting the party colour, black—originally deriving from the black frocks of Catholic priests—under the slogan, 'Black is beautiful'; in English, of course. Activists throw parties at which they distribute, *inter alia*, black condoms.) What he fails to discuss, however, is whether these two trends, macro and micro, are in some way related. Several linkages could be contemplated, from the globalization of production systems and labour markets, eroding the class structures of advanced-capitalist societies, to the rise of consumer capitalism with its commercial individualization and privatization of need satisfaction (discussed in NLR 76). The disturbing conclusion may be that in today's capitalism, systemic legitimacy derives from individualized consumption in markets unlimited by jurisdictional borders, rather than from the political correction of markets within the framework of nation states or from democratic deliberation about collective interests in political communities. As individual consumer choice takes the place of political choice, the intermediation of interests by political organizations may come to be perceived as dispensable or, worse, constraining. Capitalist development may to an important extent, and indeed more than ever, have come to consist of market *Vergesellschaftung* overwhelming and superseding political *Vergemeinschaftung*.

Mair's account focuses mainly on Western Europe and the new democracies in the East, to the neglect of the United States. There, the trend appears to be the opposite: growing polarization between the main political parties,

declining willingness to compromise resulting in a general blockade of government, a return to 'responsiveness' at the price of 'responsibility', with policy triumphing over office-seeking—all in contradiction of the established model of median voter dominance, as Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, authors of *Winner-Takes-All Politics*, point out in a recent paper; all the more so, as voter preferences in the United States seem to have remained largely unchanged. The rebirth of ideological purity in the United States has taken place mainly on the right, in the Republican Party, with Democrats basically remaining in a centrist position, which further deepens the divide between the two parties—hence the term 'asymmetric polarization'. But why should one party in effect prevent itself from building a national majority, for the sake of more authentically representing a narrow core constituency? It is here that interest groups come in, especially those of capital—a subject Mair only marginally touches upon. In Hacker and Pierson's account, the American business lobby serves as a sort of functional equivalent for the European state, providing its preferred party with financial support, thus liberating it from servitude to the median voter. In a constitutional system of divided government, the party can then dedicate itself to blocking legislation, thereby preserving the institutional status quo in a world of rapid social and economic change. The result is what Hacker has elsewhere called policy 'drift': the gradual undermining of redistributive policies and institutions by denying them the regular update they require to keep pace with their changing environment. Neutralizing the state in this way can apparently be an effective political equivalent to 'globalization', in a country still hegemonic enough in principle to command realistic alternatives to neoliberalism.

How ironic that today re-politicization seems mainly confined to the right, and not just in the United States; consider the new 'populist' parties in Europe that are in large part benefiting from the centre left's abandonment of its old constituency, in pursuit of grand coalitions with the centre right. As to organized interests, it is worth noting that, at the very time when 'catch-all' parties and their elites are engaged in an accelerated withdrawal from their social base, business associations in Europe have grown more attentive to their 'logic of membership', breaking free from corporatist entanglements with trade unions and the state and radicalizing their rhetoric, together with their political stance. The dynamics will only intensify the developments so finely etched in *Ruling the Void*.