

## **Democracy: trap, tragedy or crisis?**

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### Abstract

A quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the confidence once surrounding liberal democracy has been replaced with increasing concerns over its health. Reflecting this change of mood, there has been a growth in books examining whether democracy may be in crisis. This review surveys some of these recent publications, which are united by a much more pessimistic mood. As these books detail, democracy now confronts major problem in essentially every sphere, with changes in the economic realm arguably being the most consequential. Rather than theorizing more expansive forms of democracy, the challenge increasingly seems to be holding onto what we already have. In reviewing these books, it is suggested that in encountering these problems there is a need to hold onto the hope and promise central to democracy's meaning.

### *Books under review*

- Brown W (2015) *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York: Zone books.
- Coggan P (2013) *The Last Vote: The Threats to Western Democracy*. London: Allen Lane.
- Dunn J (2013) *Breaking Democracy's Spell*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Johnston S (2015) *American Dionysia: Violence, Tragedy, and Democratic Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kurlantzick J (2013) *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mair P (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso.
- Runciman D (2013) *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The remarkable confidence surrounding liberal democracy in the euphoria that greeted the end of the Cold War now seems like a distant memory. Battered by a quarter century of excessive expectations, economic instability, terrorism and warmaking, democracy's star now shines much less brightly. As Michael Ignatieff (2014) puts it, 'the Francis Fukuyama moment – when in 1989 Westerners were told that liberal democracy was the final form toward which all political striving was directed – now looks like a quaint artefact of a vanished unipolar moment.' Indeed, Fukuyama is a rather accurate bellwether for the changed mood: the scholar that so succinctly announced democracy's seeming triumph is now writing about political order and decay, marked by a clear concern with the health of American democracy (Fukuyama, 2014).

Certainly not everyone was as confident as Fukuyama about what the fall of the Berlin Wall meant. It did not take scholars long to identify problems with the democratic transitions underway or to suggest that democracy's freshly won dominance was far from complete. A Nobel Symposium on the topic led to the publication of an edited collection notably entitled *Democracy's Victory and Crisis* (Hadenius, 1997), while Jeffrey Isaac (1998) offered a prognosis considerably different from the optimistic liberal take in *Democracy in Dark Times*. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there was a superficial and belligerent defence of democracy by the Bush and Blair administrations, but the changes they brought with them were overwhelmingly negative for democracy. Meanwhile, economic globalization in its neo-liberal form marched on largely unimpeded. These troubling trends were summarized most prominently by Crouch's account of 'post-democracy' and Wolin's warning of 'inverted totalitarianism' (Crouch, 2004; Wolin, 2008). These two texts are forerunners to the selection of books considered here, the number of which point to the growth of concern about democracy's health. Indeed, as Tormey (2014: 104) observes, 'what is unusual in the current conjuncture is the degree of consensus underpinning the analysis [that democracy is in crisis]. ... Today, it would be easier to assemble those who *did not* think something fundamental was amiss than those who did.' Beyond this sense of crisis, another element that unites these many of these books together is a belief that addressing these problems also entails abandoning the Fukuyaman narrative.

As these books detail, democracy now confronts major challenges in essentially every sphere. In the political realm, the institutions of liberal democracy appear increasingly ill-equipped and out of date for a globalized world. Traditional forms of representation are breaking down, the party system is in seemingly terminal decline, and democracies appear to be captured by special interests. Meanwhile, the economic sphere has largely moved outside of political control, with severe consequences for the health of democracies. Neo-liberalism has proven to be largely parasitic on democracy, doing severe damage to its reputation and its ability to deliver economic and social goods. Closely related are the pressures caused by globalization, which has drastically undermined the ability of states to control their economies. The downside of increased connectivity and speed in communication is that it tends to work at cross-purposes with the much slower process democratic process of deliberation. And with globalization it is not only goods and ideas that circulate more freely, people do as well. Migration, as well as the increased pluralism and diversity of cultures that come with it, pose difficult questions about who composes the demos that rules in a democracy. The social and cultural context democracy requires is being further undermined by increasingly atomized societies, a trend famously documented by Robert Putnam. It is not only at the domestic level that a less hospitable environment can be found. Turning to the international realm, the situation looks quite different from the liberal heyday of the early 1990s. The ‘third wave’ of democratization has been far more inconclusive than once expected, and in recent years there has been a resurgence of authoritarianism. China’s rise and Russia’s return means there are powerful countries supporting a political-economic form distinct from the liberal democratic model promoted by the West. Given that this constitutes an abbreviated list of the problems democracy is now facing, it is hardly surprising to see more publications on this topic.

A common theme found in the books under review is the question or statement that connects to democracy with crisis. Yet as Ercan and Gagnon (2014) correctly ask, ‘which crisis? Which democracy?’. In this regard, a recurring difficulty in these books is grappling with the magnitude of the crisis democracy now is said to face. In noting the medical and theological roots of the term, Koselleck (2006: 370–1) observes that ‘a crisis either reveals a situation that may be unique but could also – as in the process of an illness – continue to recur.’ One finds both understandings of crisis at play here.

It could be, as Guillermo O'Donnell ( 2007: 9) has suggested, that 'that democracy is and always will be in some kind of crisis', a consequence of the inevitable gap between democracy's dual existence as an ideal and a reality. This accords with the narrative that Runciman develops, in which democracies bumble from one problem to the next, never succumbing but never learning much either. Yet the sense underlying many of the analyses, including Runciman, is that perhaps this time things *are* different. Brown details how neo-liberal logic is steadily eroding the democratic sphere, while Mair takes a more empirical approach in detailing the major decline in the role played by political parties. Both share a concern that these longer term trends are reaching a point where their impact on democracy is becoming critical and perhaps irreversible. Yet, as Runciman notes, previously democracies have managed to escape from worse situations, so perhaps they will again.

While there might be a lack of clarity over what kind of crisis we are dealing with, these books are united in their focus on the liberal democratic form that developed in the context of the modern states system over the twentieth century. The concern is with the 'real world of democracy', as Macpherson (1966) once termed it. This is particularly evident in Coggan and Mair, who point to the way the institutions and culture that give shape to democracy are being undermined and eroded. Coggan (2013: 8) presents his book as a 'wake-up call' and is clear about offering a defence of the embattled liberal democratic form. Mair voices similar concerns in considering the rapid decline in the role of parties in Western European democracies, identifying trends that have grave ramifications for the future:

I am seeking to draw attention to an ongoing process in which there are party failings, in which democracy tends to adapt to these failings, and in which there is then a self-generating momentum whereby the parties become steadily weaker and democracy becomes even more stripped down. (Mair, 2013: 2)

Coggan shares these worries, pointing to growing disillusionment and cynicism amongst voters fostering disengagement and a decline in turnout. Echoing Mair's observations about the growing gap between parties and the people they are supposed to represent, Coggan emphasizes the problem of 'double delegation' in contemporary democracies, in which people vote for representatives, who in turn delegate responsibility to unelected officials – 'experts' – who can wield considerable power.

Both Coggan and Mair illustrate how the institutions fundamental to democracy's success in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been increasingly hollowed out, and there are few signs of these trends changing soon. In responding to this diverse array of problems that threaten to slowly erode liberal democracy to the point of destruction, this desire to hold onto what we have – or had – is very understandable. There is a danger, however, of idealizing a 'golden era' of democracy that followed the end of the Second World War and lasted until the social democratic consensus broke down and was replaced with the insurgent neo-liberalism of Thatcher and Reagan. Certainly class cleavages allowed for a more stable party system, but it also reflected entrenched patterns of inequality and limited upward mobility. Further lost in this rendering is the considerable gender inequality that defined democracy, as well as persistent racism that meant voting rights in some of the oldest democracies did not become fully universal until the 1960s. Democratic institutions may have functioned better in the past, but it is important not to forget or downplay the more negative aspects that were also present.

Another complaint that may be levelled Coggan and Mair is an excessive concern with Western democracies. This is to a certain degree understandable, given that they constitute many of the world's oldest and most influential democracies. Focusing on these 'core' countries is also justifiable insofar as the likelihood of democracy making advances elsewhere would diminish significantly if it fails in the West. Nonetheless, Kurlantzick provides a valuable counter, looking to a global environment that is becoming much less congenial to this regime type. Seeking to counter the 'boundless optimism' that shapes the way democracy is understood and supported by Western policymakers (Kurlantzick, 2013: 202), the book outlines a range of trends that suggests hopes of democracy continuing to spread across the globe are increasingly misplaced. While considering developing countries undergoing political transition, where Kurlantzick's analysis dovetails with the others considered here is the central role he ascribes to the economic sphere in determining democracy's fortunes. Noting the strong link transitional publics make between economic prosperity and democracy, when growth has failed to occur it has also discredited the democratic regimes that have failed to deliver public goods and secure performance legitimacy. This leads to one of Kurlantzick's key claims, which is that in developing countries increasingly the middle class is becoming an impediment to – rather than agent of –

democratization. As he notes, this ‘new understanding of the middle class calls into question predictions that powerful authoritarian states like China will eventually democratize, and forces policy makers and democracy activists to question who their real allies are’ (Kurlantzick, 2013: 83). While Kurlantzick makes this argument in relational to transitional countries, it would have been interesting in extending it to the democratic core: is there a risk of a declining middle class turning away from democracy? The rise of Donald Trump in the United States suggests this is no longer an abstract proposition (Phillips, 2016).

The contributions by Dunn and Runciman certainly do not suffer from ‘boundless optimism’ about democracy’s fortunes. Both are wary of its charms, warning against the common tendency to regard democracy’s successes as vindication of its inherent strengths. In these books, democracy is rendered in the image of Inspector Clouseau from *The Pink Panther*: bumbling, messy, over confident, unaware of limitations and oblivious to the role of luck in providing assistance. Dunn ( 2013: 5) writes that ‘the central judgement behind this book is the extreme urgency for citizens of the wealthier countries of the West to learn to distinguish better a (predominantly) happy accident from a magic formula projected drastically forward from the recent history of actually existing democracy.’ For someone who has spent so long writing and thinking about democracy, Dunn tends to display a certain crankiness when talking about it, and this is constantly on evidence here. He is at pains to emphasize its good fortune across history, and makes abundantly clear that democracy may lead to good government but the two should not be equated. Dunn is justified in rallying against simplistic belief in democracy’s good-ness, but one must wonder if he doth protest too much. His account gives short thrift to the solid empirical and normative grounds for valuing democracy, which have certainly played a role in its ascent and current standing. In the end, Dunn ends up swinging too much to the opposite extreme, going too far in emphasising ‘how epically unsuited’ (Dunn, 2013: 156) democracies are to deal with the manifold problems they now face.

Similar themes are explored by Runciman, who does a better job of tempering his scepticism and presenting a more interesting narrative. Instead he depicts democracy as a regime that manages to keep muddling its way through: flexible enough to eventually manage each major problem it faces, but chronically unable to learn the

lessons of such experiences and in turn sowing the seeds for the next crisis. As Runciman (2013: 294) pithily surmises, ‘democracies survive their mistakes. So the mistakes keep coming.’ The result is a neat argument that recognizes democracy’s distinctive strengths of flexibility and adaptability, while identifying how these same traits ensure the problems will reoccur. The key question this raises is the one Runciman considers at the end, namely: is the contemporary crisis of democracy different? Runciman avers from giving a decisive answer, while noting that in four key areas – war, finance, the environment, and rival systems – democracies have fared badly over the past decade and the immediate outlook does not look promising. His reticence to avoid crystal ball gazing is certainly understandable, but leaving the contemporary crisis largely to the epilogue is frustrating and ultimately does a disservice to his core argument. Given that Runciman details how grim democracy’s fortunes appeared in the 1930s and 1940s when it suffered manifold failures while fascism and communism appeared as strong alternatives, it might be asked whether some kind of comparison could be made. From the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 1941 offers arguably the best benchmark for what an existential crisis for democracy looks like. At this time Hitler’s Nazi Germany and Stalin’s USSR controlled almost of all of Europe, Japan was waging a brutal war across Asia as it sought to extend its empire, the United States still remained on the sidelines of the conflict, and only a handful of democracies were left. Democracy’s very existence was in the balance. As bad as democracy’s woes currently may seem, this does put them in sharp relief. And this returns us again to the question of whether the current crisis is fundamentally different to the ones that democracy overcame in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Runciman’s refusal to delve more deeply into this issue limits what is otherwise a provocative and worthwhile contribution.

In *American Dionysia*, Johnston echoes some of Runciman’s general conclusions about democracy, but from a much darker register. He suggests that tragedy ‘seems ideally suited to democracy’ insofar as it offers a way of responsibly engaging with the unavoidable limits and harms that come with democratic rule. Johnston further proposes that:

Tragedy does not seek to put a happy face on democratic realities. Rather than mollification, it is a discourse of candor and respect – for hard truths regarding life and world, which democracy requires given its (often) unbearable

combination of commitments made and failures produced, good realized and harm inflicted, justice delivered and injustice secured. (Johnston, 2015: 4–5)

Johnston offers a powerful argument that democracies are good at celebrating their accomplishments, but they need to become much better at facing up to and dealing with the harm they also cause. This tragic sensibility entails reflecting on, accepting and taking responsibility for the fact that ‘democracy is going to do both substantial good and serious ill – because *it cannot not* do so’ (Johnston, 2015: 5). There is much in Johnston’s account that is thought-provoking and persuasive, but whether tragedy is ultimately the right framework for understanding democracy is more questionable. Runciman (2013: 324) is perhaps closer to the truth when he observes, ‘democracy is not a tragedy; it is too inadvertently comical for that. It is a trap. We are not doomed. We are boxed in.’ Alternatively, Kurlantzick (2013: 232) concludes his book with the injunction to ‘show some humility’. These proposals are not too far removed from what Johnston is proposing, but these other ways of framing seem more appropriate for democracy. With tragedy comes a whiff of determinism, yet such a conception of politics sits ill at ease with democracy, in which contingency plays a defining role. As the writer Njabulo Ndebele puts it, ‘democracy breeds possibility: people’s horizons of what is thinkable and doable are stretched, and it is for that reason exciting, infuriating, punctuated by difficult, quarrelsome, ugly and beautiful moments’ (quoted in Keane, 2009: 853).

Of the wide array of problems facing democracy today, arguably the most important is the way the relationship between the political and economic realms is being reconfigured with the rise and continued expansion of neoliberalism. This is a common theme in the books under consideration. Noting the imbalance between economic and political liberties, Johnston (2015: 148) argues that, ‘if it is necessary to exercise freedom in order to maintain it, it is also necessary to promote and preserve the conditions that make its exercise possible’. The economy is at the heart of many of the issues Coggan identifies, such the increased delegation to non-elected officials, the corrupting influence of special interests and the continued growth of extremist parties. The most incisive account is provided by Wendy Brown, who goes beyond detailing these well-known problems. What she emphasizes is that it is not simply that the economic sphere is becoming detached and removed from democratic control. The situation is worse than this. Economic logic is invading the political realm, and



corrupting democracy. Brown (2015: 201) does not slip into hyperbole when she warns that ‘neoliberal rationality’s ascendance imperils the ideal, imaginary, and political project of democracy.’ While the core argument presented – that neo-liberalism is undermining and perhaps destroying liberal democracy – is not necessarily a new one, she provides a particularly acute account of this process. The conclusion of her analysis is rather bleak: rather than hoping for more expansive forms of democratic rule, the challenge is increasingly one of holding onto and protecting ‘bare democracy’ (Brown, 2015: 202). The result is that the account she offers is actually more pessimistic than Johnston’s book on tragedy and democracy, as the latter offers some proposals for reinvigorating the democratic imaginary through new forms of public memorials and practices. In contrast, Brown gives a sharp account of the way neo-liberalism is acting like acid on democracy, while suggesting little that could counter this troubling situation.

Considering the extensive consideration in these works on the ways capitalism and neo-liberalism threaten democracy, it is remarkable the limited attention given to what is arguably the other most serious challenge it faces: environmental change. Dunn and Runciman are the only ones who consider it more carefully, but even these feel insufficient with the reflections coming at the end of their respective books. The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change findings – which are generally considered as conservative – make for troubling reading: human influence on the climate is certain, global warming real, and ‘continued emission of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems’ (IPCC, 2014: 8). This poses an enormous and unprecedented challenge not simply for democracy, but for the human species and the world it inhabits (and increasingly is destroying). As such, there are strong grounds for arguing that any consideration of democracy’s current health and future prospects must seriously reckon with the likely consequences of massive environmental change. The questions it raises are manifold and not easily resolved: are liberal democracies capable of the long-term planning and decision-making addressing climate change requires? Is it possible to overcome special interest groups and climate deniers that want to maintain the status quo? Is it necessary to expand our conception of democratic representation to include the non-human, such as animals, plants, the seas,

the biosphere? How do we take account of future generations in our deliberations, and how do we weigh their interests against those who are living? And all of these questions lead into a final, more consequential one for democracy: can democracy transform in such a way that it can address the challenges posed by environmental change? For those wondering whether democracy may be in crisis or is in serious decline, the environment must be more than an addendum, it needs to be placed near the centre of our analysis. There is a robust literature in green political theory that can and needs to be engaged with more thoroughly than these authors do.

Coggan, Dunn, Kurlantzick and Runciman all provide ample evidence to disabuse any misplaced confidence leftover from the 1990s that liberal democracy has ‘won’. To date, however, dissatisfaction has largely manifested itself in calls for better or different democracy, rather than alternate regime types, but the worry is that this may be changing. In this regard, Coggan is correct to note with concern the rise of populism, which at its most virulent can threaten to replace democratic rule. He warns that, ‘extremist parties are like those bacteria that attack people with a weakened immune system. They are most dangerous when the economy is weak and the public are dissatisfied with government. In short, at times like today’ (Coggan, 2013: 143). These fears seem all the more justified with the rise of Trump in the United States, and right wing parties benefiting in Europe from a failure to deal with the economic and refugee crises. Meanwhile, Kurlantzick’s survey on transitional countries suggests that the tide may be turning elsewhere, noting that ‘China – and to a lesser extent other successful authoritarian capitalists – offer a viable alternative to the leading democracies’ (Kurlantzick, 2013: 120). Runciman also wonder whether China now represents a rival model to democracy. Climate change is again relevant here: if China can demonstrate that its form of authoritarianism is better able to undertake the long-term decision-making needed for addressing environmental problems, this could make it more attractive as an alternative (Hobson, 2012). Nonetheless, there is a risk of overstating the ‘China model’ – it is hard to see how such an idiosyncratic can be easily replicable, and as its recent economic woes indicate, it is not exempt from many of the problems democracies are currently dealing with. Democracy’s ideational stock may not be as strong as a quarter of a century ago, but it still lacks a peer competitor.

Beyond the immediate problems that democracy is struggling to deal with, what comes through in these texts is that perhaps it is inevitable democracy disappoints. Runciman (2013: xiv) does a particularly good job of capturing this being a constant feature: ‘when it comes to democracy good news and bad news feed off each other. Success and failure go hand in hand. This is the democratic condition.’ As Runciman details, crisis is a permanent part of the narrative of democracy. Democracy always fails to live up to expectations, but it never fails completely. For Runciman it means democracies fail to learn from their past mistakes, it also means the hope that democracy engenders remains. But maybe this is not the trap he suggests it to be, perhaps this foolish hope is a vital part of democracy. As Johnston (2015: 1) notes at the outset of his book, ‘democracy engenders magical thinking. It suggests a world (to be) transformed.’ Given this, really existing democracies unavoidably fall short of the normative claims that animate them. This is not in itself a problem, quite the opposite. It reveals the permanently incomplete nature of democracy, the gap that can never been fully bridged between what it promises and what it delivers. And it is precisely this gap, the incompleteness, which gives it life and value: the hope of democracy ‘to come’. In explaining this notion, Derrida (2005: 85–6) wrote that democracy ‘must have the structure of a promise – and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now.’ Derrida caught something intangible but central to democracy: its contingency, its possibility, the hope it contains. Here Dunn’s contrarianism misses the mark; the Fukuyaman strawman has taken a good beating by now. Given these books are all offering pessimistic accounts, it appears most people – including Fukuyama – have gotten the note about no more triumphalism. Indeed, there is a risk of following Dunn too far in the opposite extreme and ending up with a fatalism that is an anathema to democracy. So rather than trying to ‘break democracy’s spell’, perhaps the real challenge is instead to preserve it. In this sense, maybe the greatest danger democracy faces is losing its magic, the promise no longer being believed.

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