Book Review

David Runciman
The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present
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Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

If there is a single political topic that has been the subject of more intellectual and popular discussion, of more private and public concern and, on occasion, a greater cause of hope or despair over the past few centuries, I'd be interested in hearing what it is. Ever since the European Enlightenment (dates uncertain but probably not earlier than the mid-seventeenth century nor much later than the late eighteenth century), purveyors of optimism and promoters of progress have insisted that humanity, despite our seemingly universal tendency to engage in the unpleasantness of racism, caste and class oppression and misogyny and so on, is not only capable of improvement, but destined for it.

The Enlightenment by which, in the European case, is not meant a kind of vaguely metaphysical awakening to the spiritual meaning of the universe, but rather a rational, practical, scientific and increasingly technological approach to life. It was a revolutionary transformation not only of thought in Great Britain, the European continent and its several settler colonies in North America and elsewhere, but also of "elsewhere" as imperialism brought all the alleged benefits of European society to what those self-same Europeans condescendingly called natives, savages or, in Kipling's charming phrase the "lesser breeds without the law" who lived "beyond the pale," never mind that Kipling was actually talking about Germans (Orwell, 1946) and that "the pale" referred to the limits of assured English control in Ireland in the fourteenth century.

The promise of the Enlightenment was, at least in retrospect, was almost irresistible: science and technology portended an end to communicable disease and an increase in efficient communication and transportation; industrial development implied an end to poverty, initially at home and eventually abroad; the market economy was touted as the vehicle through which economic equity and affordable products could be made available to any competent citizen willing to adopt an ethic of hard work and deferred gratification (an attitude ascribed to Protestants above all); mass and, eventually, universal education would dispel ignorance and superstition; and, finally, gradual democratization would ensure the elimination of tyranny and ensure political constitutions increasingly committed to the rule of law, judicial due process, representative and responsible government with the right to vote eventually extended to all citizens. It was an impressive agenda.

We are all, of course, aware of the roots of democracy in ancient Athens. We seldom recall, however, that it was a relatively short-lived experiment and few of us acknowledge that among its most visceral opponents was the legendary philosopher,

Socrates. Nonetheless, we seem willing to connect democratic Athens (in which not much more than 5% of the population actually had the right to participate, since women and slaves were not invited to the general assembly) to English parish meetings, New England town meetings, a few Swiss cantons and ultimately to electronic voting in Internet-besotted North America today. We neglect to remind ourselves that the now common right to vote was recently deeply feared by aristocracies, passionately desired by an emergent bourgeoisie and a distant hope for women and the working class who, in their dreams, may have thought that being a majority of the population might one day work to provide governments more interested in assisting than in oppressing them.

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David Runciman's book, *The Confidence Trap*, tells the modern story of how democracy was won and how it (just barely) prevailed not just over the lesser angels of the *demos* or "the mob" to whom democratic institutions seemed to entrust final decision making, but also (by an even thinner margin) over the great totalitarian movements of the twentieth century headed by leaders as diverse as Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, Adolph Hitler, Mao Zedong and such lesser luminaries as Francisco Franco in Spain, António Salazar in Portugal and any number of Latin American dictators—to name just a few.

Like any civilized man in the modern era, Runciman is a democrat, but he is not as passionate about it as some, particularly those who are deprived of it. In what emerges as something of a mantra, Runciman simply accepts that it is "the only game in town." His book is, as one headline writer put it: "a paean to muddling through."

David Runciman is acutely aware that, in the first few decades of the twentieth-century, it was almost possible to count the world's democracies on the digits of the average human body. He also appreciates that democracy came within a hair's breadth (or at least an Enigma Machine) of failing and of succumbing to monstrous absolutism whether of the extreme right or the putative left—if the justificatory ideologies of the Nazis or of Russian and Chinese Communists make much of a difference.

In *The Confidence Trap*, Runciman constructs an outline of the past century, beginning with World War I and not quite ending today. He does not so much describe and record the extraordinary rise of democracy as explain its improbable failure to fall. He does so by arranging his democratic ducks in a superficially persuasive row.

Runciman is alert to what was at stake as (largely) democracies confronted totalitarian dictatorships. The consequences of a German-Japanese victory would, in Churchill's well-worn words, have "plunged the whole world … into the abyss of a new dark age." Churchill could well have been right. Yet, the allied democracies—thanks to the eventual intervention of the United States of America and thanks, even more, to the horrible price paid by Soviet soldiers and civilians on the Eastern Front—not only

survived, but emerged triumphant. The USA, as "leader of the free world," proved itself ready and eager to take up the role as definer and defender of democracy in what had become resolutely and unambiguously the modern age.

In *The Confidence Trap*, however, the author does not celebrate giddily, nor does he take for granted that the military victory of 1945 foreshadowed any sort of global democratic hegemony. It's true that the imperial system of European colonialism was dismantled; but, what followed was not just an apparent failure of Western-style democracy in many of the new nations of Africa and parts of Asia, but also a form of neocolonialism in which no flag of an alien nation flew over the town squares, but in which the colonial economy was preserved in a asymmetric power relationships—cultural, economic, political and military when necessary and sometimes when merely convenient.

For the most part, however, blatantly imperial guns were less important than foreign exchange markets, international debt ratios and the eventual influence of multinational enterprises backed up by the World Trade organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

At home in the Western world, moreover, the success of democratic nation-states in defeating the Third Reich and its associates did not mean that democracy was safe and sound either as ideology or as practice in those countries that came together to create the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the South-East Asia Treaty Organization, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and any of the multiplicity of multilateral agreements and agencies designed to "to keep the world safe for democracy" one more time.

As Runciman tells the tale, the success of the liberal democracies has been anything but preordained. In fact, he thinks that it could have been unsettled on a number of occasions, which he calls "crises" and which certainly did unsettle a large number of people—friends and foes alike.

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Runciman selects "seven critical years" in which circumstances arose which could easily have brought ruin to the democratic way of life and the lives of many, many democrats. His choices are:

1918, when the shambles of World War I had to be reconstructed into something akin to a manageable global system;

1933, when the Great Depression threatened the global economy and individual nations as well;

1947, when Europe was being redefined according to the demand and counter-demands of the Cold War superpowers;

1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis famously brought the world to "the brink of nuclear annihilation";

1974, when the oil crisis and the economics of "stagflation" scared the dominant West out of its smug assumptions of economic and energy invulnerability;

1989, when the unanticipated implosion of the USSR provided a great opportunity for an actual triumph of "Enlightenment" values that was squandered;

2008, when the Wall Street melt-down not only threatened the global economy, but also proved the philosophical and practical limits of capitalism.

Constructing an inventory of crucial events is one way to do history. It isn't mine. Chopping the world up into centuries, decades or crucial years is certainly expedient. It has an undeniable appeal to people unwilling or unable to understand complexities. It is attuned to the mind for which Wikipedia provides enough answers, and it demands no difficult appreciation of intricate and composite and multifaceted events, circumstances and explanatory narratives. Like bright lights on a dark highway, it helps speed us on our journey without illuminating the sides of the road, much less revealing who built the thoroughfare, or why.

That said, it does give us coherent impressions, and that may not be all bad. Several commentators have mentioned that Runciman is a latter-day Tocqueville who seeks to modernize the classic *Democracy in America* (1835) or, at least, to update James Bryce's *American Commonwealth* (1888). In any case, Runciman closely identifies the fate of democracy with the United States and analyses both in cautious, often "conservative" terms. He sees democracy not as an automatic ticket to some promised land, a realizable utopia or the valuable prize that will reward courage and civic virtue; instead, he considers democracy to be a perpetual process of adaptation, for which it is uniquely qualified since, unlike goal-driven ideologies, its main purpose is not to come to a final destination, but to continue on an endless journey that can only come to disaster if someone succeeds in defining a necessary end point and, therefore, an endgame. Democracy, in other words, is not a specific product, but a constant process.

Critics of this book have said that it is less a work of scholarly research than a running commentary on singular events. It is said to be rhapsodic, often vacuous and sometimes wearisome. While I take the point, my concern runs a little deeper. Sceptics have long criticized democracy for being slow-footed and slow-witted. In the crisis of 2008, for example, admirers of strong action—not least the neophyte leader of Canada's Liberal Party, Justin Trudeau—mused that authoritarian China was in a position, had it wished to do so, to impose austerity as a corrective with or without citizen compliance, unlike the United States and certainly unlike Greece. That neither China nor, for that

matter, Russia chose to do so is not the point; the point is that both were in a stronger position to take corrective action if necessary, whereas Western governments were left taking hesitating steps in various directions and seemed somewhat mystified and uncertain of what to do, how much to do and how to do it. They were pretty much compelled to muddle along.

For Runciman, this is the unconscious genius of democracy. Democracies can appear inept and curiously complacent. Their infuriating failure, for example, to take remedial action on climate change and a host of environmental issues raises a serious question. When confronted with an actual existential problem, muddling may not be enough to get through. This is important. Runciman's faith in democracy does not betoken a rosy-eyed faith in humanity's goodness or wisdom. It is more like a faith in the refusal to follow single-minded leaders down irreversible paths. He comments that "lots of little failures combine to produce lasting success." His is the faith in the steersman, who can guide a boat among perilous rocks in treacherous waters not by heading directly toward the destination, but by narrowly avoiding the dangers along the way.

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People inclined to a cybernetic view of politics do not judge Runciman's prose harshly. He finds favour among those for whom leaders should be less in the business of identifying goals and seeking to achieve them than in constantly correcting their actions as though the goals, even if they could be articulated, stand too far off to warrant our undivided attention. They do not find him as boring a writer as do those for those whom rhapsodies are tedious. Instead, they use descriptors such as "brilliant" and "sparkling." This is not to say that the scholarly merit of a work of historical analysis should be judged by the prettiness of the author's verbal mannerisms and rhetorical techniques, but it is to hint that historical analysis has an aesthetic dimension and that people who are captivated by a specific style are similarly apt to enjoy the message that comes in a specific medium.

The unfailing quality of many of Runciman's admirers is that they can easily drift into complacency. They purvey a certain sense in which democracy can be relied upon to weather storms and to take dramatic action when (but only when) it absolutely must. So, there is a tendency to want to avoid unnecessary drama. They find comfort in Runciman's view that intense and emotional public involvement too often leads to disappointment and alienation. The revolutions of 1848 were, he says, just like that.

Even so, while splashy events such as the 1960s' North American counter-culture and the Paris uprising of 1968 may not have accomplished much, Runciman does say that they were an "impulse [that] was the signal of the future. Politics was going to have to change. It would not necessarily be revolutionary change," he continues, "but a democratic transformation was coming." So, we may speculate, are intimations of

insurrection elsewhere today—the Arab Spring, for example, or manifestations of discontent in former Soviet Republics—underscore the possibility that the Enlightenment's promises may be coming to previously authoritarian locales?

That story, unlike Runciman's account of the survival of twentieth-century democracy, has yet to unfold. Much more is unclear; much less is ready to be told. One item of interest has, however, come to light. David Runciman has said in the press and elsewhere that his story of democracy's endurance has to be balanced. In the end, I think he must admit that, today, just as three-quarters of a century ago, democracy is *not* the "only game in town." It is folly to assume the survivability of democratic systems based on nothing more than the observation that they have been severely challenged, but have somehow prevailed. Re-thinking the recent history of democracy in practice and considering the potential threats from the natural world (global warming, resource depletion, etc.) and from the world of human angers and resentments (terrorism and proxy wars) do not mean that the only alternative is to adopt some sort of authoritarian, elitist, despotic or tyrannical system.

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Authoritarianism, however, is certainly a demonstrable option, especially when we observe high-level corruption and voter suppression, eerie surveillance techniques and convenient indifference to the rule of law and human rights on the part of leaders of the supposedly freedom-loving Western world, and the seemingly unstoppable corporatization of social institutions from entertainment to education (which are becoming frighteningly similar) and from grass-roots politics to the professional public service. Runciman sees this too. And, it was gratifying for me to learn that he has changed his attitude at least a little. While he remains apprehensive about some of the possible outcomes in lands far removed geographically and culturally from Europe and North America, he has been heartened by phenomena such as the "Occupy" movement and other intimations of participatory democracy. The "haphazard and episodic" nature of democratic politics does not demand and cannot survive with a wholly indifferent electorate.

So, David Runciman recalls Samuel Huntington's image of politics as coming "in waves" rather than in abrupt, transformative climactic events. This is at least partly my own view. To retain the nautical metaphor, it seems to me that human cultural evolution is akin to such massive oceanic forces as the deep-water currents and shoreline tides. Compared to them, Runciman's years of crisis are like surface white caps—all very interesting, but soon subsumed. Yet, it is also important to pay attention to the roiling on the surface; it might alert us to profound changes happening below.

If democracy is part of a deep-level pattern, it is at least a human pattern. Unlike the eternal seas, where the best we can do is to navigate through storms, the nautical metaphor is only partial. Walking upright on the land, we do have some manner of agency and therefore of responsibility. Democracy is not a spirit or an historical event over which we have no control. We make our history in conditions that we do not choose. Our opportunities are constrained. Yet, we *do* make our history. So, Runciman may overstate the crises he has chosen. Indeed, he may have chosen the wrong ones (details are always disputable), but the fact that he is willing to embrace the idea that crises can be better managed or even avoided if we do not encourage apathy. For him to endorse even futile gestures of dissent, is cheering. Without at least a little fire, after all, there can be nothing to provide (at least a European) Enlightenment.

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