

HOW DEMOCRACY ENDS (DAVID RUNCIMAN)

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In the past year, several high-profile books have been published that purport to analyze the future of democracy. All are reactions, and not positive reactions, to the election of Donald Trump. All are written by people of the Left, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are either wrong or bad, although there is certainly a very strong correlation between being Left and being both wrong and bad. As part of my own analysis of a future Reaction, of which the death or massive alteration of so-called liberal democracy is a necessary part, I am slogging through these books (and also doing so in order that you may avoid doing so). How far I will get through the stack I am not sure, but I did get through this book, David Runciman's *How Democracy Ends*.

Runciman's work is somewhat repetitive, somewhat rambling, and somewhat silly. But to give credit where credit is due, it is not unhinged, and at least recognizes that the end of democracy as we know it today in the West is inevitable. His prediction is not that we'll end up with some kind of dictatorship, or, to use the favorite current buzzword of the Left, authoritarianism. Most of the book is Runciman analyzing bad ways democracy could end, in a stream of consciousness style, but his actual, somewhat hedged, prediction seems to be that we'll end up with an enervated democracy in the West, with countries full of rich, childless old people passively accepting that they have no real say in government, an eternal Japan. Leaving aside that the lifespan of any such society is going to be very much shorter than eternal, it's not even clear that such an end state is better than the supposedly undesirable alternatives Runciman offers as possibilities for democracy's end—coup, catastrophe, or technological takeover.

Runciman is honest enough, too, to admit that democracy has until very recently been regarded as a terrible system. Yes, Winston Churchill in 1947 famously said that democracy was the least bad of the possible alternatives, but as Runciman points out, at that point the other choices currently or recently on offer were pretty obviously terrible. Although he does not dive deeply into political philosophy (or anything else), it is only very recently that pure democracy has been exalted by

large numbers of people, and such exaltation would have horrified the American Founding Fathers, not to mention every other political thinker until the twentieth century. Why this should be, why it has been forgotten that democracy is, and is obviously, subject to fatal deficiencies, is not clear to me. Part of it is simple ignorance—if you asked random Americans to differentiate among “republic,” “representative democracy,” and “democracy,” only a tiny percentage would be able to offer any response that made any sense. The other part is probably the inevitable descent of liberal democracy, the necessary culmination of John Stuart Mill’s pernicious philosophy. But either way, democracy as pushed today is really a new thing, which implies that cutting back on democracy isn’t that big a change.

Still, why Runciman thinks democracy as it exists today in the West is certain to end isn’t obvious. It’s more of a conclusion he announces, and he’s also happy to tell us he has no solutions to offer. Honesty is the best policy, I suppose. Of course, I know why I think democracy, in the sense of “liberal democracy,” is doomed, and I will be happy to explain at length. But for a man of the Left, the current political system in the West, and the arc which it is on, seem ideal, with ever more power accruing to the Left to enforce ever greater emancipation on everyone. Yet Runciman does not advert to this, and he does not identify any specific reason why democracy will necessarily end. His analysis instead echoes Arnold Toynbee or Oswald Spengler; it’s driven by the repeated assumption that political systems, like humans, have stages and a lifespan, a view that is long out of fashion. In fact, Runciman often refers to Western democracy as “no longer young” and now “middle-aged,” drawing explicit biological-type conclusions from that premise. He says that while “Western democracy is over the hill . . . the declining years of anyone’s life are sometimes the most fulfilling.” That’s the sort of thing aging hippies tell themselves as their bodies start to sag. On the other hand, he rejects the usual fear of today’s lazy prognosticators, that we are re-living the 1930s. We are too rich, he says, and most of the West is too old, to bear any real relation to the 1930s. Which is true, but it still doesn’t answer why he thinks democracy is effectively doomed. (Me, I think it’s basically because, as Francisco Franco’s brother-in-law, Ramón Serrano Suñer, said, when asked “Why did the [Spanish] Civil War happen?” answered, “We just couldn’t stand one another.”)

Anyway, putting that issue to the side, first up is coups—the “armed takeover of democratic institutions.” By pure coincidence, the book I read just before this one was Edward Luttwak’s classic, *Coup d’État: A Practical Handbook*. Runciman relies heavily on Luttwak’s book, though why is unclear, since all of his discussion here revolves around Trump, whose actions (and the actions of his enemies) bear no resemblance to anything in Luttwak’s book. Runciman’s basic point seems to be that the circumstances surrounding Trump’s rise and Presidency are the dog that didn’t bark. Trump didn’t do anything crazy; the generals didn’t decide to not obey him; the bureaucracy continued to do what it wanted. Then Runciman spins a counter-factual to further illustrate his point—he correctly points out how dramatic it would be, in fact a form of coup, he claims, had Trump been defeated and refused to accept the election results. He sighs with relief that did not happen. But he seems completely blind to the glaringly obvious fact that the converse did happen—Hillary Clinton and her vast web of myrmidons, throughout the media, the federal bureaucracy, the legal community, and the corporate and academic worlds, have overtly refused to accept Trump’s legitimacy and formed a powerful, and powerfully funded, #Resistance to deny Trump the power of the Presidency and to throw him out of office through any means possible. Not for a moment did any of them accept the results. In fact, yesterday Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor and Democratic Party super-heavyweight, called for the “annulment” of Trump’s election—that is, not just that Trump be forcibly removed from office, but every act performed by government during his administration be declared void. (Probably Reich would also chisel Trump’s name out of any place it appeared in stone.) Yet Runciman says nothing at all about this movement, although, to be sure, this is not a coup in the sense of an “armed takeover,” since the Resistance is already in power, and just trying to maintain that power by emasculating and overthrowing Trump.

Turning away from Trump, Runciman talks quite a bit about the 1967 Greek coup, contrasting it to 2008, when similarly unsettled circumstances did not lead to a coup. At least it didn’t lead to an armed coup—Runciman dances around the question whether there was instead a different kind of coup, where the European Union effectively seized power from the people elected by the Greeks to run their country.

Runciman chalks the difference up to the aged population of Greece today (median age is forty-seven); as he says, “political violence is a young man’s game,” so as the population ages, “Entropy replaces explosive changes as the default condition of politics.” I think this analysis is right, although Runciman beclowns himself by never mentioning the real issue in 1967, which was the quite legitimate fear of Communist takeover, following the actual civil war, ending in 1950, in which the Communists were defeated in Greece. (Note, of course, as always, that those who led the 1967 coup were put in jail for the rest of their lives, while Communists were never punished in any way for their far greater crimes. Wikipedia has a whole lengthy article on the “Trials of the Junta.” Needless to say, there is no article on the “Trials of the Communists.”)

Runciman then sidles away from actual coups to claim that a supposedly related supposed phenomenon, “executive aggrandisement—when elected strongmen chip away at democracy while paying lip service to it—looks like being the biggest threat to democracy in the twenty-first century.” Anyone who is paying attention knows that is code for attacking Poland and Hungary, so it is no surprise that the very next sentence identifies those countries’ governments as the offenders (along with Turkey, India, and the Philippines). Poland and Hungary then regularly recur in the same context throughout the book. It is also no surprise that not a single example is given of this supposed “chipping away at democracy” in those countries, because as I have detailed elsewhere, all this is mere cant, a propagandistic way of stating that Poland and Hungary, where supermajorities of right-wing parties have been elected in totally free elections, aren’t leftist enough, which somehow is supposed to be “anti-democratic” in a way never specified. Part of the problem here is cognitive dissonance—Runciman wants to be a neutral observer of politics, and thinks he is a neutral observer, but his definitions and analysis always assume Left dominance as the only desirable state. Any regime that is voted into power that does not worship “liberal democracy,” which has over the past two decades morphed into shorthand for Left dominance, is magically and without analysis suddenly described as not a democracy at all. Since he can’t state openly why that is, Runciman just leaps to the conclusion without discussion, babbling a little along the way to distract the reader. The same mental confusion is shown by other delicate phrasing in the book,

such as blaming the “miserable current fate” of Venezuela on, wait for it, “playing with the fire of populism.” Yeah, that’s it.

Still, Runciman’s basic analysis of a coup as an unlikely way for Western democracy to end is sound. He has interesting things to say about the 1890s in America as a parallel time, but points out that back then democracy had untapped potential and seemed young, and therefore resilient and appealing, whereas to many today, it seems sclerotic and largely useless in improving their lives, and thus “common cause is much harder to find than it once was.” It’s just that the result isn’t likely to be political violence, mostly due to ennui and affluence, a conclusion with which I mostly agree, although if the hard Left were to gain actual power in America, it seems likely that violence would result, since that is always the default approach of the Left when it has actual power, in order to reinforce and further that power. Buy more guns, is what I say!

Runciman next covers catastrophe, where the majority of the silliness in the book shows up. I’m sure it’s true that if a giant asteroid hits Kansas, democracy will suffer, as people scabble for food among the ash clouds. But that’s not what he’s talking about here—he is mostly thinking of “environmental catastrophe,” repeatedly referring to *Silent Spring* and lecturing us that we are backsliding in unspecified ways from our commitment to environmental health. He adds an incoherent analogy to Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on the Holocaust. Oh, yes, Hiroshima gets thrown in too. Then, of course, he turns to climate change, correctly blaming democracy for the fact that nothing at all is being done about it, but incorrectly assuming an autocratic regime would do something about it, when in fact nothing but a global government would be likely to do anything about it, and then only if convinced future benefits outweigh current costs. He also correctly notes that if environmental disaster actually does come to pass, democracies are pretty good at doing something about it—but he doesn’t tell us why they are better at reacting than other forms of government, probably because they aren’t. Humans are just good at dealing with actual disasters and (probably rationally) not so good at taking high-cost actions now to prevent ambiguous-cost problems later. What Runciman seems to be groping at here, which is a bit clearer in his end-of-book summation, though not presented with any reasoning, is that (a) global warming will probably kill us all, so (b) it’s OK if democracy ends if it allows

us to better deal with global warming. Finally, we get rambling about killer robots and nanotechnology, with the point seeming to be that democracy becomes less important when Skynet is hunting us down with Terminators, which is, I suppose, true.

The author's third Destructor is "technological takeover," which does not mean artificial intelligence (something Runciman accurately points out is always a mere twenty years away), but the erosion of democracy due to the internet, abetted by the Lords of Tech. But Runciman isn't very concerned; he believes that the state holds the whip hand, and platforms like Facebook gain their power, even at their maximum, not through coercion, but through connectivity, an inherently weaker form of influence. Still, Runciman fears, Facebook could undermine democracy if it were to "weaken the forces that keep modern democracy intact." Yes, online interactions seem like pure democracy, but they lack the face-to-face element of the only earlier pure democracies, certain Greek city-states. Here, Runciman for the first time draws clearly the distinction between representative democracy and pure democracy, and points out that the former is threatened not so much by the internet, but by the erosion of social bonds, including participation in party politics, which has been going on for a lot longer than the internet. Still, the internet exacerbates this process, not to mention that autocratic regimes can use technology to enhance their control in ways undreamed of in the past, with the active cooperation of Facebook, Twitter, and all the others to boot.

Finally, Runciman turns to possible alternatives to our current type of democracy. He name checks the Dark Enlightenment types such as Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin, with their inane ideas about turning government into a corporation. But the rest of his analysis is pretty good—he identifies that democracy offers, at its best, dignity and material benefits to the populace, and if it starts to fail in either, its attractiveness erodes. This is the simplest explanation of Trump's rise—not that Trump is not democratic but that much of America believes it is spat upon by the professional-managerial elite who runs the country, and that they are not sharing in material benefits, which are accruing to the same people who spit on them. Such people will seek alternatives, ultimately. One possibility Runciman identifies is "pragmatic authoritarianism" in the Chinese mold. Weirdly, Runciman never gets around to telling us why

this isn't a viable and good idea; he just shifts gears suddenly to "epistocracy," rule by the knowledgeable, or a related alternative, technocracy.

Now, epistocracy was well covered by a book I trashed, Jason Brennan's 2016 *Against Democracy*. I trashed it not because it's a totally bad idea, inherently, but because Brennan's proposals were risible. Even with sounder proposals, though, rule by the knowledgeable is always going to be mostly a bad idea, because the knowledgeable are the problem, not the solution, to most of our difficulties, and that has been true ever since the Enlightenment. Runciman recognizes this, indirectly, citing another political scientist, "The historical record leaves little doubt that the educated, including the highly educated, have gone wrong in their moral and political thinking as often as everyone else." Runciman's conclusion is that "History teaches us that epistocracy comes before democracy. It can't come after." I doubt that, and anyone who says "history teaches us" that something can never happen doesn't read enough history. But perhaps he is right that technocracy, such as in the rule of central bankers, is a more likely turn away from democracy than epistocracy. Not that that's a solution—as José Ortega y Gasset showed nearly a hundred years ago, rule by experts is a terrible form of government.

A much better form of government that is not democracy, and not epistocracy or technocracy, is rule by those with a stake in society. Traditionally, this means some form of mixed government with some, sharply restricted, popular participation. The Roman Republic is one example; another, quite different, one is the government of Venice, which lasted for many centuries. In our context, it would mean giving most of the power to an aristocracy that was actually virtuous (as opposed to our current aristocracy, though how to get from here to there I am unsure), and preventing anyone without a stake in society, or who is supported by society, from having any direct influence on the levers of power. Thus, any person who works for the government (other than, perhaps, combat-likely military or combat veterans), or who obtains any substantial benefits from the government (including Medicare or Social Security), would not be allowed to vote at all (though his interests might be represented by the equivalent of the Roman plebian tribunate). Any person with children who stood on his or her own two feet would be given substantial additional voting power, more for more children.

Any person with illiquid property would also be given substantial additional voting power (those with liquid property less, and none unless the liquid property was legally constrained from leaving the country). Unfortunately, this is not something Runciman even mentions, much less pursues; his view of alternatives to democracy is very cramped, and includes no real examples drawn from history.

Runciman concludes his thoughts on alternatives to democracy with rambling about how technology may release us from the need to work, effectively creating a Nozickian state where each of us pursues his bliss, free to ignore democracy and, for that matter, able to ignore both political freedom and the state. In essence, as he admits, this is accelerationism, though he prefers the term "liberated technology." He does not note it is beloved of Dark Enlightenment types, but at least he knows enough history to compare it to Italian Futurism. The less said about this the better, in my opinion. First, the state will never wither away unless it is first strangled; men desire power over others, and therefore a Nozickian state enabled by technology would never be permitted. And leaving that aside, even were the technology to arrive, which it won't, and the state to permit its own erosion, which it won't, the effect of accelerationism would be total destruction of society, since it would complete the atomization of all things, something anathema to human nature. No such society would continue for long, for man seeks transcendence. This would be the opposite, and the need for transcendence would reassert itself in ways most likely made much more unpleasant by the very technology that put the final nail in the coffin of democracy.

Ultimately, after noting that Greece and Japan are old and stagnant, and their future is robots doing the work while "the old eke out their days playing computer games," Runciman concludes "there are worse fates." Perhaps being killed by Terminators is a worse fate, but there are not many other worse fates for a society, and anyway such a society will not last long. It will be overrun by those with drive or desperation. It is thus unlikely that the entire globe will become like Japan, though likely enough that the West will become wholly like Japan, to be quickly replaced by something else, which is not likely to have the unique beneficial characteristics of the West, but will at least be interested in having

children and seeking a better world, even if that betterment comes from living off the bones of the disappeared West.