In a Frozen Crouch

Colin Kidd

- *How Democracy Ends* by David Runciman
  Profile, 249 pp, £14.99, May 2018, ISBN 978 1 78125 974 0
- *Edge of Chaos: Why Democracy Is Failing to Deliver Economic Growth – And How to Fix It* by Dambisa Moyo
  Little, Brown, 296 pp, £20.00, April 2018, ISBN 978 1 4087 1089 0
- *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt
  Viking, 311 pp, £16.99, January 2018, ISBN 978 0 241 31798 3
- *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* by William Galston
  Yale, 158 pp, £25.00, June 2018, ISBN 978 0 300 22892 2

A historian ought to know better, I suppose. But for the last decade – ever since I passed a long queue of anxious depositors outside a branch of Northern Rock in September 2007 – the idea that we might be living through our own version of the 1930s has proved irresistible. The run on Northern Rock augured a financial collapse on the scale of 1929, and has been followed by the re-emergence in the West of protectionist posturing, authoritarian politics, demagoguery and nativism, as well as the bullying land-grabs in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine. But such anxieties aren't new. Book titles such as *How Democracy Ends* and *How Democracies Die* echo Jean-François Revel's gloomy *Comment les démocraties finissent*, published in 1983. Revel, a shrill conservative, thought Western democracy was doomed, its very openness, pluralism and tolerance of criticism rendering it vulnerable to a less scrupulous communist enemy. Everywhere he looked, Revel saw signs of democratic paralysis and impotence: in détente, in the spread of peace movements and anti-nuclear campaigns, in the widespread assumption that to be anti-communist was to be reactionary and an enemy of progress.

Revel's worries about democracy were widely shared in the 1970s and early 1980s. In February 1974 the head of the home civil service, Sir William Armstrong, suffered a dramatic nervous breakdown in Downing Street, convinced that democracy itself was at stake in the miners' confrontation with Ted Heath's government. When Armstrong's colleague Sir Douglas Allen, the permanent secretary at the Treasury, speculated openly about coming in to work and finding tanks drawn up on Horse Guards Parade, his colleagues couldn't tell whether or not he was joking. Was the UK on the brink of a left-

wing revolution or a counter-revolutionary coup? The moment passed, but, hard as it is now to believe, in the wake of the 'winter of discontent' of 1978-79 many rank-and-file trade unionists saw union power as a greater threat to democracy than Margaret Thatcher, and voted Tory in 1979. The subdued American Bicentennial of 1976 had taken place in the shadow of Watergate, presided over by an unelected president, Gerald Ford, brought in first to replace a besmirched vice president, Spiro Agnew, and then a disgraced President Nixon. Commentators discussed whether democracy was compatible with what was now being termed an 'imperial presidency' (the title of an influential book by Arthur Schlesinger Jr, published in 1973, which argued that with superpower status the American executive was exceeding its constitutional prerogatives). The Trilateral Commission – a discussion group founded by David Rockefeller to bring together policymakers, academics and journalists from North America, Western Europe and Japan – put out a controversial report in 1975 titled *The Crisis of Democracy*, which argued that an overload of welfare responsibilities was enervating democratic states. In much of Latin America military strongmen – Generals Pinochet, Banzer, Videla and Stroessner – were in charge, and in southern Europe democracy was brittle. Portugal's fledgling democracy was born out of a junior officers' coup of 1974, and in the same year the Turkish invasion of Cyprus brought down the junta in Greece. In 1975 the death of General Franco started Spain's transition to democracy; an attempted military coup was foiled in 1981.

Nevertheless, Western democracy survived, and by 1989 Francis Fukuyama had published an article, later a bestselling book, announcing the 'end of history'. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, Fukuyama maintained, the only ideal left standing was liberal democracy. Even at the time his claims seemed wrongheaded as well as hubristic. Indeed, his optimism now seems much less plausible than Revel's prediction of Kremlin-inspired interference in the open societies of the West.

David Runciman argues that we are wrong to think that the 1930s or the 1970s provide any sure precedent for the current travails of democracy. It might be better, Runciman suggests, to look instead at the populist turmoil of the 1890s. In the US, William Jennings Bryan, an insurgent agrarian Democrat, managed to barnstorm his way to prominence. His speech at the 1896 party convention – 'You shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold' – hinted at the bigotry which lay behind his homespun appeal (he ended his career as the prosecuting attorney at the trial of John Scopes, the Tennessee teacher charged with teaching evolution in 1925). France, meanwhile, was torn apart by the Dreyfus Affair. Division on this scale is potentially fatal to democracy; trust, as

Runciman reminds us, is its lifeblood. However, both democracies survived, with Dreyfus exonerated in 1906, and the Democrats able to domesticate Bryan's populism.

Runciman warns us not to look for the familiar symbols of the coup d'état – tanks in the streets, generals seizing television and radio stations – as the heralds of the death of democracy. The transition is likely to be much less cartoonish, and consequently harder to detect or guard against. Indeed, the phenomenon he terms 'zombie democracy' might already be with us: an electorate is convinced that it is determining policy because it is asked to give its voice in referendums, not realising that the referendums are merely spectacles, carefully stage-managed by political elites who decide not only the questions, but also the meanings of the answers given. The people, Runciman argues, are easily gulled because referendums are 'presented as the antithesis of the subversion of democracy'. The real result of the Brexit referendum was to 'hand more control to the British executive, whose job became to deliver on what the British people wanted'. Brexit wasn't in any straightforward sense a coup, but it points to the difficulty of distinguishing democratisation from its opposite.

Making reference to the rich variety of coup-like phenomena identified by the political scientist Nancy Bermeo, Runciman notes how many of them involve the payment of 'lip service' to democracy, or at least to its simulacrum, whether by way of 'election-day vote fraud', 'promissory coups' by groups that then use elections retroactively to justify their regimes, 'strategic election manipulation' or, less obtrusively, 'executive aggrandisement', where those in power incrementally and undramatically 'chip away' at democratic norms. These days, a coup is 'marked by the attempt to conceal what has changed'. In Eastern Europe new forms of 'illiberal' democracy – best described as 'competitive authoritarianism' – are emerging, with elections accompanied by conspiracy theories, the scapegoating of minorities and fanfares of purportedly democratic self-congratulation. In Turkey Erdoğan has made cunning use of actual and threatened military coups against his regime to subvert democracy, in the name of democracy.[*] The seemingly quotidian category of democracy, so widely recognised that it seems to need no definition, dissolves into irony, antinomy and paradox.

The most troubling of Runciman's paradoxes concerns our condescension to those who gave us Brexit and Trump. Are some issues simply too technical and demanding for the electorate? Surely we don't want rule by the stupid, or worse, government by the hucksters capable of conning a bare majority of the people at least some of the time? Many of us have had these thoughts in the last couple of years. But what if we ourselves are the problem? Epistocracy, the rule of those who know best (or think they do),

undoubtedly possesses a superficial appeal. In her own prescription for curing democracy's ailments, the economist Dambisa Moyo recommends increased eligibility requirements for political candidates, including a mandatory period of non-political work experience; government-backed voter education as a means of nudging citizens towards the 'right long-term policy choices'; and weighted voting, with three tiers of voter, 'unqualified', 'standard qualified' and 'highly qualified', as a means of boosting 'the influence of the best-informed segment of the electorate'. Runciman is unpersuaded: epistocracy risks the creation of an arrogant, group-thinking 'monster'. There is, he writes, much to be said for an untutored populace that frequently changes its mind: 'Ignorance and foolishness don't oppress in the same way that knowledge and wisdom do, precisely because they are incompetent.' In any case, epistocracy always runs the danger of collapsing into undemocratic technocracy, the rule of those who actually understand the way the machinery works, and put the mechanics before democratic values.

Runciman is alert to the unknowability of the various threats we might face and, more pointedly, to the couch-potato unresponsiveness of democracy in the face of the looming disasters we do know about. We suffer from 'apocalypse fatigue'. The 'creeping' threats posed by global warming, biodiversity loss and nuclear proliferation are well known, but lack political 'bite'. It is a mistake, he says, to assume that there is a straightforwardly winnable battle in democratic life between the good people who want to save the planet and the bad people who don't. The situation is much more ambiguous, and tinged with bleak comedy: 'Both sides care and neither side cares. Both care because no one wants the world to end. Neither cares because this is democracy: what people really care about is who gets to tell them what to do.'

Technology poses separate challenges. Runciman discerns in twitterstorms and 'online witch hunts' the return of the direct democracy practised in classical antiquity, something 'fickle, violent, empowering', a modern version of the mob of the ancient city-state. The tyrannical majority no longer gets to kill the offender, but opportunities for newer and speedier kinds of social ostracism have opened up. All of us are one unfortunately phrased email or tweet away from public shaming. Freedom of speech is an essential and endangered ingredient of our liberal democracy; but no less important are civility, considerate reticence and, I suspect, the least hymned of democratic virtues, outright hypocrisy.

Machine politics, which in effect allowed broad-based political parties to carry out filtering roles – sifting out Trumps, extremists and uncompromising political purists –

has been replaced by the echo chambers of the web. Instead of ‘capacious’ parties containing ‘significant areas of overlap’, as Runciman puts it, we now have online cultures of partisanship. In 1980, Runciman reports, only 5 per cent of the Republicans surveyed didn’t want their child to marry a Democrat; by 2010 that figure was 49 per cent. At that level a democratic way of life becomes very difficult to sustain.

The web, Runciman argues, has opened up a space for ‘supercharged expressionism’. Unfortunately, tech titans like Mark Zuckerberg, innocent about politics to the point of cluelessness, regard themselves as enhancers of democracy, not the problem but the solution. Here Runciman identifies a cluster of developments which might, cumulatively, destroy democracy: an arcadian nerd elite oblivious of its own technocratic tendencies; an anarchic 24/7 electronic forum which gives vent to unassuageable demands for the rectification of personal grievances; and a hollowed out democratic system whose humdrum compromises and short-term fixes provoke frustration and anger among the demanding high-speed citizenry of the net. All this, Runciman suggests, ‘makes Mark Zuckerberg a bigger threat to American democracy than Donald Trump’.

Runciman isn’t interested in solution-mongering, but he does give his readers some reassurance, albeit inflected with grim farce: ‘Stable democracies retain their extraordinary capacity to stave off the worst that can happen without tackling the problems that threatened disaster in the first place.’ No democracy, we are told, has ever reverted to military rule once GDP rose above $8000 per head. The worst that might befall us is something like the experiences of Japan since the freezing of its economic miracle or of Greece in the aftermath of the debt crisis. Japan is elderly – half the population is over the age of 47 – and sclerotic. Its politics are simultaneously ‘venomous and toothless’: the relentless churn of politicians caught with their fingers in the till goes unpunished by violence on the streets or social dislocation. Greece has somehow ‘fallen apart without falling apart’. Here – in another elderly society – the worst is feared but never quite happens, and democracy endures in a ‘kind of frozen crouch’.

Runciman’s tone is elegiac. The historical conditions which provided democracy with a niche for a century or so are changing. As a result, it is probably ‘over the hill’, enduring a ‘midlife crisis’. He foresees a long ‘drawn-out demise’ sustained by the political equivalents of dentures and hip replacements.

Will the economic decline of the United States be similarly gentle? I thought at the time of Trump’s surprisingly modest acceptance speech on the morning after the election that he might be another Berlusconi, the fact of winning and the trappings of high office sufficient to satisfy his vanity. I was wrong. Although Runciman is confident that

American democracy is robust enough to survive Trump, he does warn that the late middle age of democracy will not follow a single trajectory. Different democracies will experience their own aches and pains, and sometimes life-threatening events. But can we be confident that American democracy – racially divided, bitterly partisan, trigger-happy and with a huge military-industrial complex – will discover a late maturity?

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It's true that the United States presents a distinctive version of democracy's current malaise. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt note, Trump was elected not by a majority of the popular vote, but by an institution, the electoral college, devised as a defence against rabble-rousers of his ilk. It is scant consolation that the Founding Fathers saw him coming. In the *Federalist*, Alexander Hamilton noted that 'of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues and ending tyrants.' That's the reason Article Two of the US constitution created a two-stage process, leaving the actual election of the president to an electoral college made up of discriminating local worthies selected according to rules devised by each state legislature. What the founders did not sufficiently guard against was the rise of political parties, which transformed the college of independent-minded notables into slates of party loyalists. From a very early stage, as Levitsky and Ziblatt point out, 'electors became party agents, which meant that the electoral college surrendered its gatekeeping authority to the parties.' However, we need to tread carefully here: overzealous gatekeeping is also an affront to democracy, as 'it can create a world of party bosses who ignore the rank and file and fail to represent the people.'

Indeed, the authors recognise that some 'profoundly undemocratic' trade-offs underpinned the bipartisan co-operation characteristic of American politics for much of the 20th century. The system rested on 'racial exclusion and the consolidation of single-party rule in the South'. What preceded it, in the period immediately after the Civil War, was racial and partisan conflict. Trust and forbearance – without which democracy is precarious – were attainable only when the ideal of racial equality was discreetly shelved. The 'toleration' and 'restraint' which 'served as the soft guardrails' of American democracy came at a massive cost in the sanctioned oppression and neglect of black Americans.

Until recently, moreover, American parties were marked by 'internal heterogeneity', not least in the Democratic Party, which functioned as an alliance between socially ultra-conservative white Protestants in the South and blue-collar ethnic minority groups in the

northern cities, many of them Catholics. The Republicans too brought together under one banner liberals in the North-East with conservatives in the Midwest and West. These internal differences meant there was less temptation to demonise the other party. Nowadays things have changed. The Republicans have supplanted the Democrats in the South, and the two parties confront each other as embodiments of alternative Americas: one white, evangelical and conservative, the other a multiracial coalition. The authors note the chilling statistic that among 'politically engaged Americans', 70 per cent of Democrats and 62 per cent of Republicans 'live in fear of the other party'.

This polarisation leaves moderates little room for manoeuvre. Trump-like figures have abounded in American history and Levitsky and Ziblatt are under no illusions about the appeal of authoritarians and xenophobes to a significant minority, sometimes up to 30 per cent or so of voters. Thus the 'real protection' against Father Coughlin, Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy or George Wallace is not the supposedly democratic instincts of the voters themselves, but the now weakened party establishments. The ascendancy of primary contests – far from an unmixed blessing – has ended the era of secret anointments (and exclusions) in smoke-filled rooms. Even so, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, the grandees of the Republican Party could have done more to prevent the election of 'a president with a dubious allegiance to democratic norms'. There was plenty of 'hemming and hawing' in the upper reaches of the Republican Party, and several key figures – among them John McCain, John Kasich, Mitt Romney and the Bush clan – declined to endorse Trump. But none of them was bold enough to take the subsequent step of endorsing Hillary Clinton. Instead, by closing ranks, the party elders 'normalised the election'.

Diagnosing the problem is almost as difficult as trying to fix it. William Galston, a former policy adviser to Bill Clinton, reminds us that the people can authorise any form of government, but their authorisation doesn't make rule by a strongman democratic. Of course, one person's strongman can be another's democratic saviour. During the Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt openly raised the possibility that he might ask Congress and the American people for emergency powers. He also tried to pack the Supreme Court when it struck down elements in his New Deal programme. In retrospect, it's easy to give more leeway to FDR than to Trump. But the four-time president – the first and only president to serve more than two terms – was perceived in many quarters as a would-be autocrat. Where do we draw the line? After all, without FDR's cunning exercise of presidential power, democracy might have died altogether in the early 1940s.

Democracy turns out to be a highly misleading shorthand term for a family of political practices. The label pretends that electoral competition or the will of the people is its defining characteristic. This is a convenient front that carries authoritarian hardmen into office across the globe, and gives them enough legitimacy to pose convincingly as democrats. It is a stunted definition which, crucially, omits respect for the rule of law, support for neutral arm's length institutions (including the courts and the civil service), for freedom of the press, for minorities, and for one's partisan opponents as competitors rather than enemies. Ultimately, restraint, good manners and mutual trust among different sectors of society – between parties, between winners and losers – seem almost as significant as the individual's possession of the vote. There are further confusions: what we call democracy is really 'representative democracy', something very different from the direct participatory democracy of ancient republics. In addition, as we have seen recently, plebiscites and referendums can confuse the will of the people with the mandates enjoyed by elected representatives. The leading theorist of democracy in the 20th century, Robert Dahl of Yale, was happier with the term 'polyarchy' – the rule of the many – as a description of the way democracy functioned; a responsive system which enables the inclusive, procedural reconciliation of multiple interest groups. Dahl's terminology is unlikely to catch on, but it serves as a reminder that politics is an area of human life acutely troubled by the confusion of names and things. We seem frantic about losing something, without having adequately defined for ourselves what it is we treasure.

Indeed, our catastrophising about the future brings into sharper relief the mundane but ineradicable flaws already present in democratic culture. Liberal democracy, it transpires, always teeters on the edge. These days the danger that we might lapse into a populist distortion of democracy, one that limits pluralism and freedom, is keenly felt. After all, as Galston notes, majoritarian populists present themselves, not unreasonably, as 'arch-democrats', and so too do ethno-nationalists. But other risks are less obvious. Galston also reminds us of the liberal temptation to privilege certain causes at the expense of the will of the people, and to equate these preferences with liberal democratic standards. Only in 2015 did support for the death penalty in the UK dip below 50 per cent for the first time. When polling on the question began in 1983, 75 per cent of the public favoured its return. Which group presents the greater danger to liberal democracy: populist hangers-and-floggers or ourselves, the liberal do-gooders who long thwarted what was until recently the undoubted will of the people? The death penalty was more popular than Brexit has ever been; but on this issue the political class did not deign to give the people a referendum, and the public mood gradually mellowed, when it

might have soured. In democratic politics no sure route reliably avoids the pitfalls of illiberal populism and liberal elitism.

[*] Ella George wrote about the establishment of Erdoğan's ascendancy in the *LRB* of 24 May.

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Letters

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Can it really be that the only thing Colin Kidd takes away from the closing line of William Jennings Bryan's 1896 Democratic Convention speech – 'You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold' – is a hint of 'the bigotry which lay behind his homespun appeal' (*LRB*, 13 September)? Is one of the most influential popular movements in American history to be dismissed as just a lot of nativist race-baiting by a rabble cynically roused, Mencken's old canard about inflamed half-wits? One hopes not. There is today a new left-progressive surge in the Democratic Party that aims to clear out the corporate, centrist cobwebs. And in that respect, its representatives (like New York's Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) owe a huge debt to the agrarian movements of the West, the Grangers et al, who brought Bryan onto the convention floor in 1896. As James Morone wrote ten years ago in these pages, the Democratic Party of 1896 was 'mired in laissez-faire … its politicians served local oligarchs, broke unions and busted strikes' (*LRB*, 21 February 2008). Sound familiar? This is why the agrarian movement was so important. In Morone's words: 'Bryan and his followers pushed the party in a radically new direction: federal power ought to protect workers, tax wealth and fight inequality.'

And they had to, because economic life in America in the 19th century was eye-wateringly unequal. The Morrill Tariff of 1861, the capstone of sixty years of legislative wrangling over import policy, secured rates of 48 per cent on dutiable goods, a 70 per cent increase on the tariff of 1857. During the thirty years between its passage and Bryan's speech, farm wages fell by 35 per cent. Much of this had to do with the monopoly power of railroads and grain-buyers, who cartelised agricultural distribution and repelled every attempt by farmers to set up co-operatives that could guarantee stable prices amid droughts and a long-term decline in agricultural profits.

With manufactured goods now considerably more expensive and wages considerably lower, all that was left to paper over the loss of purchasing power was debt, which exploded. And deflation of 2 per cent a year from the 1870s until the beginning of the 20th century meant that the debt, issued on an unregulated and therefore usurious basis, grew heavier at a compounding rate. 'The Republican Party is unreservedly for sound money,' said McKinley in his own nomination speech. Unreservedly, and

unremittingly. By 1896, the situation was a vice-grip so crushing that farmers had no room to breathe.

What is missing from Kidd's article, and what so much liberal political scholarship of the last half-century has been at pains to avoid, is capitalism. 'Democracy', as he points out, is 'a shorthand term for a family of political practices'. And one of those practices – arguably the most important of all – is figuring out who gets paid and how much they get away with. The Pew Centre has calculated that since 1964 mean hourly wages (in 2018 dollars) in the US increased from $20.27 to $22.65, or 12 per cent. Almost all that growth has gone to the top 20 per cent of earners. Perhaps we should spend less time tearing our hair out about the sudden disappearance of 'norms' and 'civility' from American politics and more on who it is that politics has been expressly uncivil to. Decorum, it turns out, might be code for the harmonisation of elite interests; hand in hand, they have led us right back to the foot of the cross.

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