

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present

Public Affairs

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Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to thank you for joining us for this Public Affairs breakfast, the last of the season.

Our speaker is David Runciman, professor of politics at Cambridge, and he will be discussing his recently published book, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*. In it, he sets himself up to the challenging task of analyzing crises facing modern democracies.

Is democracy in crisis? Now, this is a question that has been posed quite often of late. But if you enter this phrase in a [Google search](#), I think you'd be surprised to find many articles which have been written on this subject, not only recently but you can find several which date back to almost every decade of the past century. From financial downturns, to housing busts, to government shutdowns, and voter disaffection with the lack of leadership, these writings all reveal that the history of democracy throughout the 20th century has been, and continues to be, a story of repeated crises.

Even so, democracies have been able to adapt, and this, according to Professor Runciman, is the dilemma. He writes that because democracies are so confident in their ability to solve problems, they defer resolving them, seemingly complacent, setting the trap he writes about.

Professor Runciman begins his narrative by focusing on Western democracy, particularly American democracy, and calls upon the person who first noticed the deeply conflicted and sometimes flawed character of democratic life, his indispensable guide [Alexis de Tocqueville](#). Although de Tocqueville shared the common 19th century prejudice against the values of democracy, by the time he finished his journey in America he had changed his mind. He decided that American democracy is a lot better than it looks.

Professor Runciman carefully chooses seven periods of democratic uncertainty from 1918 to the most recent [financial crisis](#) of 2008 to show why we keep making the same mistakes even as we make progress, which seems to suggest that nothing is as bad as it seems. Perhaps this is why we find it so hard to heed the clarion call that our democracy is in crisis once again. On the other hand, we just may be ill-equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century and caught in what our speaker describes as a confidence trap.

To begin the discourse, please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our guest today.

David Runciman, thank you for joining us.

Remarks

DAVID RUNCIMAN: Thank you very much, and thank you for coming out on this cold morning.

I thought I would just begin by saying a little bit about how I came to write this book. I started thinking about it four or five years ago. What provoked me was a feeling that I had that I imagined I shared with quite a lot of people, which is I was completely conflicted about what seemed to me the central political question of our time, which is: Can Western democracy survive the 21st century? Can it survive what is coming down the line? I was conflicted because I felt there were two equally plausible and entirely contradictory answers.

The first of which is yes, of course it can. Just look at the last 100 years. It survived everything that has been thrown at it. It is the most adaptable, it is the most flexible system of government the world has ever seen, and for those reasons it is the most successful.

Then the other part of me thought that the obvious answer was no. Just look at it. It's a complete mess. I'm coming from a European perspective here, but I'm thinking across the Western democratic world. It's petty, it's partisan, it's trivial, it's short-termist.

When I thought optimistically, the pessimistic voice would undercut it. When I thought pessimistically, the optimistic voice would undercut it. So I thought I would investigate further.

I am a historian. I am primarily a historian of ideas. So I decided that I would look at a series of crises over the last 100 years to see how this dilemma looked from the inside of crises.

I began thinking about this in 2008, as we entered the [crisis](#) that we are still in now I think, looking at how people conceptualize democracy in the middle of those moments where the threats seem most acute, but also to look at the long sweep of thinking about democracy and see if there were insights that would explain why I was so conflicted.

Not at the beginning—to start with, I studied the past crises and discovered, as we have been hearing, that you can find a crisis-of-democracy literature for every decade of the past 100 years, all of them, even the good decades, the 1950s, the 1920s, the 1980s, as well as the bad decades. So the idea of crisis is always there.

But as I went further and looked at some of the classic texts, it was about halfway through the project, not at the beginning, that I came back to [Tocqueville](#) and found in Tocqueville what I thought was a frame for thinking about this puzzle. From that point on, that shaped the way I approached it. So I will just give a little brief account of what it was in Tocqueville that I found and then come back to this idea of crisis.

Tocqueville is a complicated writer. And it wasn't just Tocqueville; it's also writers about Tocqueville, people like [Stephen Holmes](#) and [Jon Elster](#), who extracted from Tocqueville a series of insights which can be simply expressed but I think are quite profound. I'll just give you three, the three basic ones. They're almost sound bites, but I think they are also true, as some sound bites are.

The first is that, as Tocqueville saw it, democracies make more mistakes than other systems of government and they correct more mistakes as well. Just that simple insight. Or, to put it another way, there is always something going wrong in a democracy, but democracies don't get stuck with

the mistakes they make. That's the secret of their adaptability.

The second was his experience when he arrived in the United States. He came to America as a young, snobbish aristocrat. He thought democracy didn't work. He got off the boat in New York. Like many first-time visitors to New York, he looked around him and thought, "It clearly doesn't work because it's chaos." Europeans, the first time, often have this feeling that, "This isn't going to work." He traveled around the country and he concluded that in the long run it does. And so, as he wrote in *Democracy in America*, democracy reveals its shortcomings at first sight, its strengths only revealed at length. That was his second insight, that at any given moment it looks bad; in the long run, the underlying strengths are revealed.

But the simplest version of it—and I think this is Tocqueville's most radical idea—this was a revolutionary thought in the 1830s–1840s: democracy is better than it looks. Everyone before him—and people to this day continue to think this—the classic criticism of democracy is that it is worse than it looks.

This is from [Plato](#) on. As Plato said, democracy is the shiniest, most attractive form of government. All its appeal is on the surface. It promises equality and freedom and giving the ordinary person a sane government. Everything about it looks appealing. But as Plato thought, you just scratch the surface and underneath it's rotten because people are stupid and only elites understand. That's the classic critique.

Tocqueville turned it on its head. He said, I think correctly, democracy looks awful on the surface. All its faults are revealed. Moment to moment, you see the failings of democracy. At any given moment, you slice it and you can see compromise, unprincipled politicians, pandering, short-termism. So in Tocqueville's terms, it's the least attractive form of government. He thought any aristocratic or autocratic system had more dignity, had more grandeur. But in the long run its hidden strengths give it the advantage.

But I think his genius was to spot the likely psychological effects of living under a system that only reveals its strengths in the long run. That is worse than it looks.

As he saw it, there were two ways that democratic citizenship could go. One was towards impatience, because if you live with a system that never quite delivers its rewards at the moment when you want them, there is an inevitable impulse to impatience, anger, a desire to grab the moment, to seize the moment, to complain, "If this is the best system of government, why does it never produce at the moment we need it? Why is the reward always deferred?" Tocqueville's idea of the tyranny of the majority I think captures that. If you read his account of it, it's about the impatience of democratic life, the majority wanting their rewards now.

The other way you could go is towards complacency, because if you live with a system that is better than it looks, the temptation is always there at any given moment to say, "We'll be all right in the end," because we know that in the long run the strengths are hidden. So it looks bad, but it's never as bad as it looks. So at any moment the temptation is always there to assume that the worst will pass and we'll muddle our way out of it. Then the challenge, as Tocqueville saw it, was to find the space between. Where is the space between democratic impatience and democratic complacency?

One possibility—and this is when I then came back to my story about crises—is that crisis is that space. The line that is attributed to [Rahm Emanuel](#) but I'm sure many people said it before him, "Never let a crisis go to waste"—that way of thinking about politics, which is that a crisis cuts through the short-termism, the triviality; it allows you to see, because things have got really serious, to

glimpse the hidden depths. But because things have got really serious, it shakes you out of your complacency as well. That's the possible solution.

It doesn't work. The story I tell in this book is the story of why I think it doesn't work. There's always that hope that at the moment of crisis you will find that promised middle ground where you see democracy for what it is, you grab its strengths. The moment of truth arrives. In every democratic crisis—and I studied the last 100 years of them; I've read the commentary, the newspaper articles—there is this desperation to seize the moment in the crisis where it all becomes clear. You never get there. That's because it is a constant battle between complacency and impatience. Actually, the ground between the two is vanishingly small, and it doesn't magically appear in the moment of crisis.

It hasn't appeared in this crisis, I don't think, and I'll come back to this. In this crisis you can see the impatience; you can see the complacency. That point in between where it all makes sense, we haven't got there yet.

All the way through the book I tell a series of crises from the [First World War](#), through the [Great Depression](#), after the [Second World War](#). One of the chapters is about 1962, the mid-1970s; I wrote about the late 1980s and 2008. What you see is actually the battle between impatience and complacency is driving the narrative and the space between isn't there.

I'll just give an example, the first one in the book, just to give a sense of the way I try and tell this story. I do it by crisis years, so I pick a year and try and organize the narrative around the year.

The first year that I pick in the book is 1918. There are a lot of books out at the moment about 1914. [*Editor's note: Check out [Max Hastings's October 2013 Carnegie Council event about his book Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War](#)*] I noticed in *The New York Times' 100 Notable Books of the Year* three of them are about 1914, which may be too many. I don't know.

Anniversaries are important. So I am four years too early with 1918. I'm sure there will be a slew of books about 1918 in four years' time. I've just got a chapter on it. It's short. It's a stylized account of what happened in that year. But it's a really important year and it's a fascinating year. The story that I tell of that year divides into two parts.

The first part of the year is the story of democratic panic. For the first half of 1918, once the First World War had devolved into what had become clearly a battle between the democracies—once [Lenin's](#) Soviet system was out—and essentially German autocracy. The first half of 1918 was a story of democratic panic and the widespread sense that the moment of truth had arrived and democracies were not up to this. They were not up to the challenge of total war.

The commentary of the time was biased in favor of autocracy on the democratic side. One of the things I write about in the book is there was a kind of cult of [Lüttendorff](#) in this period—[H. L. Mencken](#) was one of the people who drove this—that thought that if this is a battle between [Woodrow Wilson](#) and Lüttendorff, we've lost. Woodrow Wilson is a classic pandering democratic politician and Lüttendorff is the iron-willed autocrat who doesn't have to do anything except take decisions. He can seize the moment. We can't.

The panic—and it was panic—across Western capitals lasted through to the summer, as people imagined Paris is about to fall. Then the tide turns and panic is replaced very quickly. The panic—a lot of it is driven by impatience, anger, anxiety—is replaced by a sudden discovery that the democracies were going to win, and the reason that the democracies were going to win is because they were more adaptable. They made more mistakes during the First World War, but they did not

get stuck with the mistakes that they made. Autocratic German military rule got stuck with the mistakes that it made.

One of the lines I have in the book, which I think is true, is one of the things you discover in 1918 is democracies can experiment with autocracy—it's one of the forms of democratic adaptability—and come back. Autocracies can't really experiment with democracy and come back. Lütgendorff and the German system, they were trapped by their inability at the moment of crisis to adapt and to own up to the mistakes.

It's a stylized, slightly cartoonish account; I know the First World War is more complicated than this. But adaptability is what gives democracies their victory, and adaptability is the reason why they squander their victory, because suddenly the discovery is that this war that it thought, if not its being lost, certainly is going to run on to 1919, 1920. There is going to be a terrible war of attrition. Maybe American money and power will finally tell in the long run.

Suddenly it switches and the democracies discover that they are going to win. This looks like the moment of truth. This is the moment when the space between impatience and complacency can be opened up and it can be seized to create and secure a world safe for democracy.

It doesn't happen, and the reason it doesn't happen is because the adaptability that keeps the democracies from getting stuck with their mistakes also keeps them from fixing on their victories. They move on.

Democratic adaptability means that you never seize the moment, which is good news when you are in trouble and bad news when you are ahead. That is the story of democracy. That is how I try and frame it in the book.

I think it's broadly true. Like I say, I'm conscious that you could write a much fuller history of this period. There are lots of explanations of how and why the First World War was won by one side and lost by the other. But I think that that account both fits the Tocquevillian analysis and it also fits the narrative that I tell of this series of crises in which there is impatience, there is panic, often there is a sense that democracy is not seizing the moment. The democracies nonetheless for that reason manage to muddle through the crisis. Then there is the thought, "This is the chance to seize the moment for good," and the democracies muddle their way through that as well and the moment is not seized.

I tell it through the Great Depression and the birth of the [Cold War](#), the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, right the way through to now.

I want to try to give a shape to that narrative. I'm not going to take you through each crisis. I'll be delighted if anyone wanted to read the book and read about them. I think there are two ways that you can frame that narrative, and this is what I do at the end of the book, using that kind of model.

One is to see it as a cyclical story. Normally, I think, when historians see the past as cyclical it's usually assumed to be a kind of pessimistic approach. Cycles are often associated with foretelling of doom.

On my account, the cyclical story is the broadly optimistic story—certainly if you think about the present crisis, which is democracies stumble into these things but they stumble out of them. That sense that though every time you get out of a crisis the next one is not going to be that far away, at that moment when the prophets of doom start to say "I told you so," on the cyclical story that's

usually the moment when you can start to be relatively assured that the adaptation is coming.

Of course you have to be careful not to be super-complacent, and there is always that danger of saying, "At the moment when it looks like democracy is doomed, that's when you know it's the cure." That is clearly not a good principle to apply to any system of politics.

But the cyclical story does follow that pattern. You will throughout the 20th century find serious commentators predicting utter calamity for democracy just at the moment when the corner was being turned.

One of the examples I have in the book is 1974. The commentary in that year was apocalyptic, absolutely apocalyptic. At the moment when the apocalypse seemed to be imminent, in retrospect it's clear that adaptability was about to save the democracies. As I say in the book, both adaptability and distraction—[Watergate](#) was a wonderful distraction—save democracies. The systems that were unable to adapt or to distract in that way, including the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, that was the point at which they were about to get stuck with their mistakes, because in response to the same crisis they accumulated the debt that was going to destroy them.

So there is that cyclical version of it, which broadly speaking, if you think of the present crisis, suggests that we are in the process of muddling through. And certainly there has been a huge amount of adaptation in the United States, in Europe, in Japan.

The story that I tell starts primarily, because there weren't many democracies when the story starts, with the United States, also Britain and France to a certain extent. It expands to include Israel, India, Japan. But I think these patterns repeat themselves and you can see them in different settings. They are not context-specific. There is a shape to this.

In the cyclical story the current crisis is part of a repeated pattern of complacency producing a drift into crisis. At the moment of crisis, apocalyptic talk, doom mongering, and also real impatience, a desire from people on both sides of the political divide to say, "Well, if this is the moment of truth, why aren't we seizing the moment?" and then pragmatic adaptation, compromise, and a complex and not particularly edifying stumble out, to be replaced by another crisis, maybe, in 15 years' time.

There are broader cycles in the story too. I think there are 40-year cycles as well, driven primarily by economic crises, if you go back a bit to before where my book starts: from the 1890s and the global [financial crisis](#) of the 1890s, which produces a systemic change across democracies, including the United States; through the 1930s, where you get something similar; through the 1970s, where you get something [similar](#). The current crisis may also be part of that pattern of 40-year cycles.

But again, when you get serious critical moments for the interplay between democratic politics and the global financial system, producing moments of acute danger but also adaptation to what is possibly going to be a new way of negotiating that relationship. In the terms of those kinds of cycles, we are not anywhere near the end of the current one compared to the 1930s and the 1970s, these things. It takes at least a decade for that to work itself out. If this is anything like the 1970s, we don't know where this is going to end until the end of the current decade I don't think.

So in my account the cyclical story, though there are dangers of complacency associated with it, is broadly optimistic.

Then there is a cumulative story, which is a cumulative story of 100 years, broadly speaking, of democratic success. Normally that's the optimistic story, but in my account it's the pessimistic story,

or it is the reason to be concerned. The cumulative stories were built up over time of both complacency and impatience. If you live, as Tocqueville said, with a system that never delivers its rewards in the moment, defers them, but adapts and muddles through the crises that it faces, over time people will internalize the thought that, "Any crisis is survivable; if we just hang on we'll get through this."

The longer that story goes on, the greater the temptation is to succumb to the trap that Tocqueville identified, which is either to simply become complacent about the ability of democracy to survive anything, or to give way to that really nagging impatience, which is, "We've had 100 years of this thing. It keeps muddling its way through, it keeps finding its way out. When is it going to deliver its rewards?"

I think if you look at contemporary politics—not just in the United States, though I think the United States is probably the most striking version of this—there is a lot of impatience, there is a lot of complacency as well, and I think they go together.

On both sides of the political divide, there is certainly a lot of impatience in contemporary democratic politics, that sense of frustration that the gap between the underlying rewards that democracy delivers in the long run and its failings in the moment is becoming intolerable and we want to close that gap, and we are willing to do some fairly radical and potentially quite destructive things to try and close that gap, confront the system, shut it down, take it on. There is impatience driving that.

But I think there is also a sense of complacency underlying it, which is that the system has survived everything so it can survive whatever we throw at it. Yeah, we can [shut it down](#). It doesn't matter, because democracy has proved its adaptability.

There must come a point where that becomes dangerous. If the impatience and the complacency build up—because the crises never deliver their moment of truth; they just move through these cycles of confusion, confused crisis producing confused outcome—that tension is bound over time at some point to produce a different kind of crisis or a different kind of tension.

I don't think, and part of this is to do with timeframes—100 years is a long time relative to these cycles of 15-year ups and downs, or even 40-year turnarounds in the relationship between democracy and capitalism. But 100 years is not a long time, and it certainly is not a long time in the history that goes back to Plato. A hundred years into Athenian democracy, it had adapted pretty well. As contemporary students and scholars of Athens increasingly emphasize, its adaptability was its strength. It had adapted pretty well. But 200 years in, it was over.

We're only halfway through that story, and the world is speeding up. So in another 100 years, it's impossible to imagine what that's like. So the idea that this story can just continue indefinitely does seem to me like the most culpable form of complacency.

Then, just to conclude, the other danger always with any cyclical story, the reason cyclical histories are broadly speaking wrong, is that there is no guarantee that this version of the cycle is the same as the previous ones. It might be. In the stories that I tell in the book there are echoes between them, but they are also very, very different. The threats, the challenges, and the risks are very different along the way.

I certainly don't believe that history repeats itself. It can be cyclical in broad terms without repeating itself. But the danger of any cyclical view of history is the assumption that this time isn't different. But this time could easily be different because the world is so different.

The assumption that the way democracy deals with crisis is that the confusion and the short-termism of democratic life allows democracies to get into serious messes, but democracies wake up in time because their adaptability gives them warning mechanisms that allows them—not necessarily through the electoral cycle but through the full range of democratic institutions, including a free press and the rule of law, property rights, the lot—to signal to the politicians the moment they better finally get a grip. They never quite get a grip, but that signal is enough to get them through.

There's no guarantee that every crisis fits that pattern. At the end of the book I talk about some of the present threats to democracy that might not.

One that seems to me self-evidently a different kind of threat from all the ones I describe in the book in relation to war and economic challenges is climate change. There is absolutely no guarantee that it fits that pattern. I'm not saying there is a guarantee that it spells doom for the human race, but it doesn't seem to fit that pattern because of the huge time lags between what we are doing now and the moment when we might wake up to the effects. There has to at least be a possibility that we wake up to the effects on that 15-year cycle account about 15 years too late.

So some of the crises that we face now, some of the time lags are too long to fit that pattern.

Some of them, they are too short. We live in a world where some of the crises that we face, there is maybe a 30-, 40-, 50-, 100-year gap between what we do now and the moment when we really screw everything up.

And in some of the crises we face there is a 20-, 30-, 40-minute gap. In the financial crisis of 2008, some of the most acute moments could be counted in hours. There were at various points hours to save the global economy. That's different. The interconnectedness and the speed, the threats that politicians face and the world that they face, are categorically different from anything that I describe in the book for any of the years pre-2008, in which on the whole, though there were enormous risks in some of the crises that I describe, from the First World War or the Great Depression on, clearly contained within them the possibility of disaster happening. But there was, on the whole, time.

It's not clear there is time always now. For democratic adaptability in some respects in relation to something like climate change, the time lag might undercut it.

In respect to other crises, there might not be time for the kind of adaptability that we want. In the kinds of games of chicken that some American politicians are playing with the [debt](#) and so on, it assumes that there is always time—that is, there is always time to test the system because the system will pull back from the brink. But it's not obvious that over the 21st century there will always be time.

There is nothing I think you can read off the last 100 years that guarantees it. The 15-year cycles I suspect, broadly speaking, will repeat themselves because in some aspects of democracy the timeframes are very unchanging.

The four-year electoral cycle I don't think is likely to change. Electoral cycles are relatively consistent. Human life spans are getting longer, but nothing sufficiently dramatic to fundamentally change. Communication of course is much quicker, but travel isn't any quicker. Some things are relatively consistent.

So you probably will see those 15-year cycles. But the assumption that you can read off that, a cumulative story of ongoing success as democracy just spreads and opens out across the world and

adapts its way through to global domination, seems to me implausible.

So I will end this talk. In the five-year process of thinking about this book and then writing it and engaging with Tocqueville, I began feeling completely conflicted and I ended feeling completely conflicted. But I was conflicted about different things.

I think I understood better at the end of it what I was conflicted about, which is there are these two dynamics at work, the cumulative one and the cyclical one, and I think a Tocquevillean analysis explains both of them actually. And they go together, they always go together; the good and the bad of democracy always goes together. You can't separate them out and then find the bit in the middle. They always go together.

But it is a story where, if you study the last 100 years, the grounds for optimism are relatively clear. But I think that the cumulative story and the moral hazards that are associated with the cumulative story somewhat outweigh those.

So in the end I think, on balance, after five years of thinking about this, my instincts incline me slightly more to the pessimistic than to the optimistic side—only slightly. Democratic adaptability—you can't go entirely that way if you have read 100 years of people saying "democracy is doomed" and being wrong, because that's enough to make anyone wary.

As I say at the end, I don't think democracy is doomed. I don't think it's a tragedy. It's too inadvertently comic to be a tragedy. Democratic life is absurd in many ways, and that prevents it from being a tragedy. That's part of the adaptability.

What I say is that it is a trap. Traps aren't tragedies. Sometimes you find a way out, but they are traps. The confidence trap is we need confidence in democracy for it to continue. But the confidence we have in democracy may feed the cumulative complacency which makes us blind to the ways in which the 21st century is going to be different. That's the conclusion of my book.

Questions

QUESTION: [Rita Hauser](#).

David, I'll ask a question in this sense. You have spoken about democracy writ large and nondemocracies writ large. But within democracies there are many different ones.

DAVID RUNCIMAN: There are.

QUESTIONER: So you can say "overcome catastrophe"—yes. But the Great Britain that emerged from World War I was a very different country. While democratic, it lost its empire, it lost its place, and so on. Germany and Japan, on the other side, had the ultimate catastrophe, and out of it came the birth of democratic or better nations. So, you know, sometimes the pessimistic produces an end result that is much better. I find it hard to deal with the idea of democracy writ large.

DAVID RUNCIMAN: Yes. I completely understand that. It's something that is often said to me. It's not a good enough excuse for me to say, "Well, Tocqueville didn't define it either." I'm not going down that route.

What I try and do in the book is—there are many things to be said about the varieties of democracy that relate to democratic transitions, in which clearly there is not the same kind of story as the one I

describe here. Democracies often do fail, they don't always muddle through, in all sorts of unpropitious circumstances to do with the economic underpinnings of a society, to do with its culture, its tradition.

It can be very difficult to get democracy entrenched. The circumstances in which democracies do become entrenched are also very different. As you said, a very different story for Germany and Japan than for India and Israel than for Britain and the United States.

Nonetheless, in the book what I am interested in is those various democracies in which democracy has become entrenched. I do talk again in the book about what I call the confidence threshold. Tocqueville thought, for instance, that the United States—he correctly spotted even in the 1830s—had passed that threshold, that democracy, despite the various threats and challenges it faced, was relatively secure.

I think you can see a range of different countries around the world in which it is plausible to say that democracy has passed that threshold. What I am interested in is what it means to be on the other side of the threshold. There are a lot of societies that haven't passed that threshold. The range of societies that participated in what I think we still call the [Arab Spring](#) have not passed that threshold.

But certain countries and societies have. That in a way is the challenge. That's the story I am trying to tell in the book, which is thinking about what it means to challenge democracy, to worry about complacency, to worry about impatience, when you also believe that it is the entrenched way of doing politics in the society that you inhabit, the difficulty of stepping outside when it seems fixed. That's what I mean.

But of course I am not claiming that that's the whole of the story of democracy. There is a lot going on in the world at present that doesn't fit that pattern, including very many countries and societies in which the fate of democratic transitions is uncertain. I wouldn't claim anything in my book tells you what is going to happen in those societies.

QUESTION: James Starkman. Thank you for a wonderful lecture.

I think one of the most interesting and possibly crucial issues today is whether economic democracy—i.e., capitalism—trumps political autocracy. I think China is perhaps the most dramatic example of that today, where you had a melding of economics with very little political democracy. Even [Ukraine](#) sort of poses that question right now. In the history of capitalism, would you just comment on its impact on these issues?

DAVID RUNCIMAN: That's a big question.

At the end of the book I talk about the nature of, not necessarily the threat, but the challenge, that Chinese state capitalism poses to Western democracy for the reasons that you say. Over the 40-year cycle since the 1970s to now, the relationship between democracy and capitalism in the West has become strained by the drift—and I think it is a drift—towards inequality. That in a way is the central challenge on our side of the divide. One of the ways in which the challenge of the Chinese alternative is different from the challenges I describe through the book that Western democracy has always faced from rival systems I think is twofold.

The first—and I think this is different from the past—is I'm not aware of anyone really in the West who is advocating that we switch to Chinese state capitalism. There are one or two.

I did an event in Cambridge with a British journalist called [Seumas Milne](#), who is probably the most, in British terms, left journalist writing for a mainstream publication. It was a Cambridge Britain audience, a sort of middle-class conventional audience. He gave them his talk and they lapped it up, that capitalism was rotten and inequality was destroying democracy and we had to seize the moment and grab our freedoms. They lapped it up.

Then someone said, "So what's the alternative?"

He said, "Well, we should do it more like the Chinese run theirs," and the room just—it was like one of those cartoons. [makes a shocked face]

It was a very striking moment actually, relative to even the 1970s, even the 1980s—maybe not the 1990s—where there is always an ideological alternative that is being pushed inside. So democracy is the only game in town. We're aware there is an alternative, but that interaction isn't going on.

Then the Chinese experiment is broadly technocratic, and our society is becoming broadly technocratic. So there is a kind of coming together.

We are all post-ideological in a sense. The question I still think—and it would be very dangerous to be complacent and just read off the cyclical story that I know what's going to happen here—but there is still a fundamental question about whether even a technocratic, pragmatic, capitalist autocracy has democratic levels of adaptability in it. I'm not at all convinced that it does.

I think if there is one thing that you can read off that story, I still think it is true that autocratic systems cannot experiment with democracy when they need to, whereas democratic systems can experiment with autocracy when they need to. They have that extra level of adaptability once they have passed the competence threshold, once it's entrenched.

I certainly don't think that there was that talk in the late-1980s/early-1990s, that very soon the non-adaptability of Chinese state capitalism will be its undoing. It is clearly more adaptable than equivalent systems in the past precisely because it is so technocratic and pragmatic.

But there is still that fundamental question about the danger of getting stuck with your mistakes, that democratic systems I still think have the advantage. I don't think that advantage is enough to say, "It's fine, the next 100 years adaptability is going to win," because there may be challenges that democratic adaptability can't meet.

It is the central question in a sense of our age. It doesn't fit the story I tell in the book. You can use the story I tell in the book to frame what is different about this relationship, but the one respect in which I still think the story goes on, if that makes sense.

QUESTION: Don Simmons.

A major threat to American democracy it seems to me is the enormous concentration of power in the hands of a very small number of individuals or small groups. Have we seen that before? Is that unique? Secondly, what countervailing forces might be coming down the pike to offset that?

DAVID RUNCIMAN: I think we have seen it before broadly. I'm not an expert on American political history, but certainly one of the persistent complaints that runs rough the crisis-of-democracy literature, which turns out to be all-pervasive, it never stops, is precisely that complaint.

One of the ways in which the impatience often bubbles up is the complaint that, "If this is a

democracy, how come so few people are pulling the strings?" I think that does run through the story.

What undoes it is often crises that challenge the hold of those small elites. Something similar may be happening now. I don't know.

Again, one of the ways in which the present crisis might be different—and this is part of the cumulative story—is that there is the accumulated experience of past crises to draw on, which means that the adaptation kicks in earlier. The elites themselves, the fewer people in which power is concentrated, have the evidence of past crises to draw on. And so, in a way, you could say with this current crisis it never quite got bad enough for the legitimacy of the current power holders to be—it's certainly under strain, but relative to, say, what happened in the early 1930s, the strain is not yet sufficient for the systemic change.

If you compare one of the years I write about, 1933, comparing it to 2008, things got so bad before [Roosevelt](#) took over that there was not the space between impatience and complacency, but there was at least that moment when it was clear what the stakes were. Unless I've missed it, we haven't quite got to that yet. The adaptation kicked in so early. The continuity between the regime that brought about the crisis and the regime that is trying to solve it is still there.

The one thing I'm very conscious of is that I don't think anyone should ever say—people have sometimes said it, but I certainly wouldn't—that therefore the solution to the present crises would be for it to get a bit worse, because if it got a bit worse that would open up that space. I think if it had got worse—it's scary enough as it is, and no one in their right mind should ever say, "The solution to the way in which democracy has got stuck is for the risks to be sufficiently great that it gets unstuck," because risks are risks. That's the ultimate form of complacency, to say, "Well, if only they would let it get a little bit more like the 1930s, we would have had the shakeup now which would have allowed a break from the hold that these elites have."

The other thing that almost certainly I think is going to change the dynamics of democratic politics is information technology—not in the sort of Utopian sense of the early 1990s that the people are going to reassert their power through online referenda and so on—but nonetheless the speed of communication. At the moment I think its effects are broadly destructive, the way that it just constrains political activity.

The pace of adaptability of one of the crucial dynamics of democratic politics, which is communication between representatives and represented, the speed at which we are adapting and having to adapt must at some point shake up the hold of the present set of elites, for better or for worse I think.

QUESTION: Arlette Laurent.

What can you tell us about the proliferation of marginal but increasingly powerful anti-democratic parties in what we call the West?

DAVID RUNCIMAN: Certainly that's a problem in Europe and here.

One of the striking ways in which Western democracy is not adaptable is the hold of the main parties over that 100-year story that I tell. Of course the parties themselves adapt in extraordinary ways. Political parties turn out to be almost the most adaptable institutions in democratic life. But the system itself doesn't seem very good at creating space for new parties. It is incredibly hard, particularly in two-party systems, for new parties to come in. And certainly part of the impatience, the

anger, is fueled by that.

You feel it all the time. You feel it in Britain, which I know best, people's incredulity that the same parties are the ones that you have to choose between.

It's great to come to the United States because no one is going to ask me about this—I'm shooting myself in the foot here—but at every event that I have done in Britain, all anyone wants to ask me about is a comedian called [Russell Brand](#). Has this filtered over to here? He is a celebrity, sort of sex-addicted, former drug addict comedian. He's not particularly funny, but he is extraordinarily charismatic. He gave an [interview](#) on the BBC on *Newsnight*, which is the most highbrow BBC current affairs program, with our number one interrogator of politicians, a man called [Jeremy Paxman](#), and this comedian ran rings around him, calling for revolution.

It just sparked every student. I had to ditch my Introduction to Politics lecture course and replace it with a lecture about Russell Brand because the students wouldn't let me carry on talking to them about [Max Weber](#).

His call for revolution was simply that people should stop voting. He said, "This system is rotten, it's illegitimate." Did he have anything to replace it with? No. What he thought was we just had to withdraw our support until it collapsed and then the possibilities would open up.

Again, in any crisis there are always charismatic comedians who are able to tap into anti-democratic sentiment. But it was striking in Britain that this struck such a chord—and across Europe actually. People would come to Cambridge from Scandinavia to give dry seminars about political theory, and they would ditch their talks and talk about Russell Brand.

But it's striking that it's such a negative argument, and it's a crazy argument, the idea that if people stopped voting the technocratic elites that are running the show are going to say, "Oh, it's fine, the game's up," rather than simply say, "Well, we've got more freedom to maneuver." Yet that was the thing that made the appeal. It's a sign of that real frustration.

And alongside that you do have these fringe parties, clearly, that are gathering some of that support. In Britain, the two-party first-past-the-post system makes it very, very hard for them to break through, which fuels the frustration.

One the whole, the historical evidence is that the system does adapt and that the electoral cycle in the end does tend to correct for these things. But again, it would be enormously complacent to think that in stable democracies the system always does adapt. The societies in which this is happening are so much more stable and prosperous than they were at the point where fringe parties, anti-democratic parties, had the capacity in the 1930s to simply overturn it. I mean it's so much more entrenched than that.

But that fuels the frustration. That's part of why the cumulative story is so dangerous. There isn't an alternative. Jokers like Russell Brand become the figureheads of this kind of sense of rage, which just fuels the rage, because it's not going anywhere, that rage. He is not going to lead anyone to anything.

Some of it gets channeled into these minority parties that then don't—in some European systems clearly they do, but in the one I know best, Britain, it's not going to happen. We are going to be stuck with these two parties. Their share of the vote is shrinking and shrinking.

The impatience builds up. Maybe at some point there will be the adaptation that channels that frustration into parties that, though they are critical of the system, serve to help it to adapt. But the historical evidence doesn't guarantee it. So it's a serious threat, and it's a different kind of threat than in the past because it is taking place within systems in which no one is seriously thinking there is an alternative to these systems, certainly not mainstream alternatives.

So the frustration builds and builds, and so does the complacency, and the space between them gets—this is part of the reason why I am slightly pessimistic.

QUESTION: Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*.

Regarding the issues of patience, promise, and adaptability, can you contrast the adaptability of democracies and people's democracies?

DAVID RUNCIMAN: As in you mean people's—

QUESTIONER: The Soviet system . There is an adaptability factor in each. Contrast them.

DAVID RUNCIMAN: Well, I think the historical evidence is of course there is adaptability in both. Again, I don't want to take all of it back to Tocqueville, but that broad contrast—one of the things that he says is that democracy is the untimely system of government, which means that nondemocratic systems are often better at adapting in the moment because of their autocratic power, because of the ways in which they use the language of democracy to conceal and mask what is actually centralized power, which has the ability to impose solutions at the moment that they are needed.

And again, you hear this quite a lot now about contemporary China. No one in the West says, "We need a Chinese-style politburo regulating our banks." But they do often say things like, "Well, the Chinese political system is so lucky in relation to things like environmental hazards because they are more adaptable than we are, because they don't have to worry so much about the long interaction with public opinion. They can just do it."

So there is that short-term adaptability versus long-term adaptability. But the thing about short-term adaptability, if it doesn't have the long-term adaptability with it, is some of those adaptations will be mistakes, serious, serious mistakes—as it were, faced with the crisis, the central autocratic power seizes its moment, grabs what it thinks needs to be done, and gets it wrong, whether it's in economic terms, in foreign affairs terms, whether it's a bad war or it's a bad intervention in the economy, and then it is harder in the long run to adapt out of that. I still think that that is, broadly speaking, the difference.

But the contrast between democracies and people's democracies is now very confused because there are so many, as they are called, as you know, hybrid regimes, which have a mix. Again, the ideal solution: Why can't you have a system which combines them? Why can't you have a system which has the short-term adaptability of centralized autocratic power combined with the long-term adaptability of electoral politics?

I think that that is asking for too much. They just don't go together. The hybrid regimes—[Putin's Russia](#), whatever—might combine elements of democratic life with what is clearly autocratic control. It's not clear that that combination is dynamic and that that combination is one where they interact positively with each other.

I think actually on the whole the long-term adaptability and the short-term adaptability, always one

trumps the other. That's why democracies are as they are—a mess in the moment, better in the long run—and people's democracies are as they are.

Is that an answer?

QUESTIONER: How about applying it to Ukraine?

DAVID RUNCIMAN: I hesitate to apply it to an immediate crisis. Thailand is another. There are lots of countries in the world that are being torn in different directions. I don't want to frame it in these terms, "being torn by the two modes of adaptability."

I am not, and I am not claiming to be—because there are many people who are experts on this and I'm not—someone who can explain the nature of democratic transition. That's not the story that I am talking about. Democratic transitions are clearly very complicated, fractious. They don't follow some nice cyclical pattern. It could go either way. These stories could go either way. They are not part of that dynamic.

Clearly, some of the elements of the story I tell feed into that dynamic. And of course, all states are also pulled in different directions by large and more powerful states.

I know it's not a very satisfactory answer, but I hesitate to apply it to the key questions of democratic transition now. If the democratic transition is successfully made in various countries in the world, I think, however different those countries might be—Ukraine, Thailand—they will fit into this narrative. But they don't fit into this narrative before the transition has been made.

QUESTION: William Verdone.

Do you foresee a crisis in the history of democracy with the strong emergence of religious fanaticism?

DAVID RUNCIMAN: The trouble with writing a very big book is you get really big questions. It's not a big book, it's actually quite a short book, but it takes on large themes.

Yes, up to a certain point. I suppose one of the questions is, is the rise of religious fanaticism something that can be folded into a recognizable version of the history that I have been telling or is it one of these radically new kinds of threats?

Clearly, some aspects of it are new in the way that it intersects with new forms of communication, new forms of organization, and so on. It would be a mistake to think that something that was a threat in the early 20th century that has some feature in common with earlier kinds of challenges to democracy just will follow the pattern of those challenges, because it is different now. There are forms of adaptation among forces that might be challenging Western democracy that weren't there in the past because of the adaptability of the new technology. So, clearly, some of these forces are more adaptable. But, broadly speaking, my feeling is that Western democracy has shown an ability to adapt to that kind of challenge in the past.

Is it different now? I don't know. I hesitate to answer this question because it depends what you think it is an expression of, the rise of the fanaticism.

Certainly, at the end of the book I list what I see as the four challenges facing Western democracy in the future, over the next 50, 100 years. One is climate change; one is public debt; one is the rise of China. I can't remember what the fourth one is. But it doesn't include religious fanaticism. It doesn't

include terrorism.

I may be wrong, but I think that the more serious threats are the ones that come out of the story that I tell about impatience and complacency. I hesitate to say that you can calibrate these things. I don't know. I'm sorry, sir.

QUESTION: David Hunt.

What are the elements in a society that can allow a democracy in crisis to get to a more positive phase? For example, is it extraordinary leadership? You think back to FDR during the Depression; even [Ronald Reagan](#) after the 1970s with very, very high inflation; [Jimmy Carter](#) spoke of the [malaise](#) in the country. You haven't said anything about leadership, and it seems to me it has to be the critical element here.

DAVID RUNCIMAN: I do say quite a lot about leadership in the book. One of the points that I make is I think one feature of the untimeliness of democratic life is that democracies are not good at judging in the moment which are the leaders that are going to save them. You can overstate these things, but the leaders who turn out to be the heroic saviors of Western democracy, from [Lincoln](#) on, weren't recognized as that the moment that they assumed office. It was a story that emerged over time.

The leaders that came into office and were thought to be a kind of fresh start and an opportunity to have a new kind of democracy—like [Hoover](#), for instance, or Jimmy Carter—there is a misjudgment there. I think I have a line in the book, that Lincoln didn't start out as Lincoln. So if [Obama](#) is telling you he's Lincoln at the beginning, he's not going to end up as—

And again, it relates to elections. The elections that turn out to be the crucial ones were not spotted as such at the time on the whole. A few of them were. I think [1932](#) was clearly, but I think that's an outlier.

One of the themes that runs through this is that every election is talked up as the moment where "finally we can get the leadership that we need. This is our chance, the most important choice for a generation." Every election, we are told almost, is the most important choice for a generation, and then it turns out that it isn't—often there are a few that are, but we didn't spot them at the time.

So yes, leadership matters, but when and how it matters isn't often visible at the moment when we need to know.

And democracies do—part of the confidence trap, in a way, is democracies do of course feed off hope, confidence, a sense that someone is going to come along who is going to do it differently, cut through the mistakes of the past, and there is going to be a fresh start. Those kinds of leaders, the desire for them, the impulse to elect them and to celebrate them, runs through the history of democracy. But it's a real stretch to get from that desire and that impulse to the moment being the right moment for the impulse to express itself.

Leadership does matter. At the moments when democracies tend to really convince themselves that leadership does matter, it doesn't guarantee that they then pick the right leader. Often, as you know, they don't.

But again, it can't simply be chance. There is a temptation, again looking back—this is part of the complacency story—to say, "Well, at the time we didn't know it, but it turned out democracy saved

itself because it found the leader it needed." That thought—again a temptation with history—to put the two things together and say, "Well, there is a reassuring story here, which is it turns out that when leadership was needed it arrived, though it wasn't seen at the time." Again, I think it would be crazy to assume that that's a pattern that will follow through into the future.

There is a fresh threat I think now, which is just the shrinking number of people who want to do politics in Western democracies. That is different from the past. The entry barriers are high, but also just the appetite for it as a way of life is relatively low. It's pretty grim I think, I'm told—I don't know, because I'm one of those people who just commentates on it from the outside.

I often say to the students that I teach in Cambridge—I did it the other day apropos of Russell Brand—"Well, how many of you want to go into politics?" These are students at Cambridge University who are choosing to study politics. None.

You think, "Well, how is this going to work?" I can see why they might be attracted to someone saying, "Let's withdraw and let the system fall apart."

The pool is shrinking. There is no question that the pool is shrinking. Again, that means, I think, that it would be a mistake simply to assume that the pattern in the past, that cometh the hour, cometh the man or woman, is going to repeat itself in the future.

But of course leadership matters. Democracies are good. Part of their adaptability is they are good when they have to be at ditching the leaders who don't work. I mean that's one of their crucial advantages. But that is not the same as finding the leaders they need when they need them.

JOANNE MYERS: Well, speaking of leadership, I have to thank you for leading us in this discussion this morning.

I'd like to wish you all a very happy holiday.

DAVID RUNCIMAN: Thank you.

Audio

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Video Clip

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