

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

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## POLITICS AS THEATRE?

The triumph of liberal democracy in the aftermath of the Cold War has soured with the strains of the Great Recession. The wisdom of allowing the populace a say in national affairs is openly questioned by liberal opinion-makers, as electorates have relished the iconoclasm of outsider candidates or cast protest votes against the status quo. Meanwhile non-accountable bodies—security and intelligence forces, central banks and ratings agencies, media and info-tech oligarchs—have relentlessly extended their powers. Undermined by economic problems, the Western powers have also committed themselves to apparently permanent military intervention in the Middle East in the name of democracy itself, while struggling to manage the refugees fleeing their expanding war zone. Nor has liberal democracy much of a record in handling environmental problems, which have only worsened since its victory. China, the world's second-largest economy, disdains liberal-democratic institutions altogether. In a longer-run perspective, how should these travails be assessed?

David Runciman would seem well placed to answer that question and his recent work, *The Confidence Trap*, sets out to do so. Runciman currently heads the Politics and International Studies department at Cambridge and is a regular political commentator for the *London Review of Books*. Son of the English sociologist W. G. Runciman, he is a pure product of the local establishment: having studied at Eton at the same time as David Cameron, he went on to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he would write a dissertation under the direction of Michael Bentley on sovereignty and pluralism. Published in 1997 as *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, this trailed motifs that recur in Runciman's work. *Pluralism* tracked back from the

anti-sovereignist notions of 1920s English socialists—G. D. H Cole and, especially despised by Runciman, Harold Laski—through a somewhat arbitrary selection of thinkers: J. N. Figgis, Ernest Barker, Frederick Maitland, Otto von Gierke and Thomas Hobbes, the last apparently suggested by Quentin Skinner. *Contra* Skinner, Runciman appears to argue that groups, unlike natural persons, are equivalent to their representations. He expands Hobbes's passing mention of theatrical impersonation—at play in the Latin origins of the term *persona*, as actor or mask—in the course of *Leviathan's* discussion of authorized representation, to read the contract between sovereign and subjects as the bond between actor and crowd. If Hobbes's multitude constituted itself as a commonwealth by authorizing a sovereign's power, for Runciman the sovereign's relationship to the commonwealth is 'unauthorized', on the grounds that the commonwealth cannot exist prior to its representation. This reading would seem to defeat the entire purpose of *Leviathan*, which is to justify political authority on the basis of a transfer of right. More pertinently for his later work, Runciman's aestheticized conception of political representation as theatrical performance notably served to short-circuit any discussion of the relationship between politics and society; indeed Runciman's main disagreement with Cole and Laski seemed to be that they had some concept of a structured society that lay beyond the state. Delinked from material social interests, Runciman's notions of representation and performance could just as well apply to sporting heroes as to politicians, as he duly showed in a series of elegant LRB vignettes of Babe Ruth, Lance Armstrong, Alex Ferguson and José Mourinho.

Nearly a decade later, *Pluralism* was followed by *The Politics of Good Intentions* (2006), a collection of Runciman's writings from the LRB on the political behaviour of Blair, Bush and others around the time of the invasion of Iraq. In the introduction, Runciman describes its aim as an attempt to determine what was new about politics after 9.11, viewed in a longer frame. The focus, though, is on politicians' language and style, rather than strategic goals or decisive acts. The essays have some acid things to say about Blair, Runciman relishing Cheney's description of him as 'a preacher in a tank'. But these are qualified by a half-admiring ambivalence. Blair's seamless transition from 'speaking Clintonian' to tight alignment with Bush was effected through a new, double-sided 'language of risk' which allowed the UK Prime Minister to have it both ways, as the occasion demanded. Thus, it was important to know the risks posed by global terrorism, yet the risks of global terrorism were never fully knowable; this was not a moment to ignore the balance of risk, but nor was it a moment to weigh risks indefinitely in the balance, and so on. In any case, Blair understood that there would be 'no gain for progressive politics in working against the interests of the United States, whoever happens to be president'. This pragmatism allowed Blair to straddle

the double standards of modern representative politics, which demanded both personal, charismatic authority and impersonal, institutional government—Weber's moral conviction and responsibility. The 'genius' of Blair's political style was that its self-aware, confessional character forestalled the charge of hypocrisy: 'How can I be a hypocrite if I know what a hypocrite I appear?' Runciman does not exactly endorse this: Blair is part of the problem, not the solution. Stylistic questions apart, however, on the substantive politics of the invasion there is not much between them. For Runciman, as for Blair and Bush, 'it is almost certainly true that it would have done more harm to leave Saddam's regime in place than to remove it by force'—'war with Iraq may ultimately prove to have been justified.'

Writing in the *LRB* in 2003, Runciman had reacted with distaste to Blair's two-faced, bomb-and-Bible rhetoric. Returning to the same themes in *Political Hypocrisy* (2008), he took a more indulgent approach. Again, the concept is tracked back through a seemingly random group of thinkers—Orwell, Bentham, Hobbes, Mandeville, Trollope, Jefferson and Franklin, among others—without much concern for the widely varied contexts in which they were writing. The absence of such powerful thinkers as Machiavelli, Rousseau, Nietzsche or Schmitt is justified on the grounds that they looked at the hypocrisy of liberal politics from the outside, whereas Runciman's 'liberal rationalists' attempted to grasp it from within. And again, the focus is on political style, not substance. Hypocrisy is defined as the construction of a persona that generates a false impression, as in the theatre—hypocrites are actors, who put on masks—and is thus, for Runciman, a key aspect of political representation, and so central to the workings of liberal democracy as such. By contrast, 'one of the distinguishing marks of fascism' is that it does not need to be hypocritical—though it's hard to imagine what could be more hypocritical than the fascist claim to represent an organic unified people, while waging unremitting class war on industrial workers; not to mention the corruption endemic to the higher reaches of those regimes, unforgettably documented by Curzio Malaparte.

Runciman's lesson, then, is that hypocrisy itself is not the problem. The real danger comes from anti-hypocrites, such as the anti-fascist orator described in Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*: seeking to unmask the hypocrisy of contemporary democracy, they are in reality guilty of 'hypocrisy about hypocrisy itself'. They do not acknowledge that all representative government is based on a 'mask of power' that creates a division between a politician's public and private self. There are two ways to respond to this. Political 'conjurers', like Disraeli, Blair or Bill Clinton, appear sincere but are cavalier with the truth. 'Upright hypocrites', like Gladstone, Brown or Hillary Clinton, prefer the facts but strike the public as being insincere. Hillary's public persona is obviously an artificial construct, Runciman argues, a mix of personal

ambition and pandering to the electorate, designed to conceal her political weaknesses, such as lack of warmth. But though as a candidate she's bound to wear a mask, she is sincere about working the current system and wanting power. This makes her less liable to self-deception than Bill, who might be tempted to believe his own propaganda. But rather than taking sides with hypocrites against conjurers, or vice versa, Runciman suggests 'we'—the first-person plural is ubiquitous—should welcome both types, the Bills and the Hillaries. The choice must be for a system that can accommodate both, as against one that might be intolerant of either.

In several respects, *The Confidence Trap* represents a break with Runciman's previous work. Hobbes is replaced by Tocqueville, as presiding spirit of the exercise, and 'representation' by 'democracy' as its key term. The writing has deteriorated. In contrast to *Pluralism's* 'Cambridgy' prose, *The Confidence Trap* proceeds through a series of aphoristic paradoxes, in which each statement reverses itself, like a rocking horse, without ever getting anywhere—'Democracies succeed because they fail and they fail because they succeed', for example, or 'Nietzsche thought democracy was too good to be true. Tocqueville thought it was too true to be good'. These developments are interconnected. Runciman borrowed the central argument of *The Confidence Trap* from a paper on Tocqueville by Stephen Holmes, 'Saved by Danger, Destroyed by Success'. With it, he imported the having-it-both-ways language he once mocked in Blair. Holmes's text had gleaned a set of truisms from Tocqueville's *Recollections* of the 1848 revolution. These stated that success—for example, Louis-Philippe's long reign—is liable to breed complacency, so one ignores the warning signs of a coming explosion. Likewise, success may undermine political alliances, which are prone to dissolve once the goal has been reached or the common enemy defeated. Danger, on the other hand, may save the day by galvanizing a concerted, forceful response, as the threat posed by the workers' insurrection of June 1848 unified the property-owning class.

In *The Confidence Trap*, Runciman borrows Holmes's easily memorized, 'destroyed by success, saved by danger' mantra and applies it over and over again. 'The ongoing success of democracy creates the conditions for repeated failures, just as its repeated failures are a precondition of its ongoing success'—'democracies succeed because they fail and they fail because they succeed.' Democracy always 'muddles through' its sequence of crises, but just because it does so, it risks becoming complacent about the next. Runciman's Tocqueville argues that the things democracies are good at (commerce, comfort) can be bad for democracy, because they breed complacency; the things democracies are bad at (crisis management, wars) may turn out to be good for democracy, because they shake that complacency. Two further features differentiate *The Confidence Trap* from Runciman's

earlier books. First, the context in which it was written: 'crisis' was not an operative category in *Political Hypocrisy*, but now Runciman sees crises everywhere. Second, instead of selected thinkers, *The Confidence Trap* examines historical events. Runciman bows to Tony Judt's *Postwar* as his model for a general history of the twentieth century, on grounds of both style and content (remarkably, Hobsbawm doesn't figure at all). With Judt's help, Runciman distinguishes seven distinct 'crises for democracy' between 1918 and 2008 in which to put Tocqueville's hypotheses to the test. The selection is somewhat singular.

The first crisis is '1918'—that is, not 1914, when parliaments across Europe voted to send their young men to the slaughter, nor 1917, when capitalist democracy acquired its mortal foe. In fact the 'crisis of 1918' turns out to be no more than Wilson's failure to win domestic support for his Fourteen Points and the League of Nations: the US president wanted to speed up history and bring the democratic future into the present—that was his undoing'. Incredibly, Runciman describes the First World War itself as 'the greatest triumph of democracy in history', without even a *pro forma* mention of the 17 million dead. His claim is based on the notion that the Entente powers were democratic, once the burden of Tsarism was lifted by the February Revolution, while the Central Powers were autocratic. *The Confidence Trap* does not pause to investigate the social or political realities of the belligerents: 'democracy' is fleetingly defined, in Schumpeterian terms, as involving 'regular elections and a relatively free press', autocracy their absence. Yet down to the end of the War, suffrage was more extensive in Germany than in Italy or the United Kingdom. Nor did the racial disenfranchisement of the American South, or the brutal suppression of dissent in colonial Ireland—an integral part of the British state, as Algeria was of the French—have any counterpart within the Kaiserreich. The War was a battle between rival empires, not 'autocracy' and 'democracy'. Allied victory in 1918—which Runciman attributes to the moral and psychological virtues of 'the democracies', better able to withstand the 'defeats and disappointments' of trench warfare than their opponents—was an inevitable function of the bloc's material superiority, combining the world's largest industrial economy with its most extensive overseas empire. This decisive factor gets no mention in *The Confidence Trap*.

The second crisis for democracy is '1933'. Runciman is not thinking of Hitler's accession to power, however, but the non-event of that year's World Economic Conference in London. This was supposed to stabilize exchange rates, four years into the Great Depression, but failed to do so because Roosevelt, another hero of *The Confidence Trap*, had taken the dollar off gold. It seemed that 'the democracies' were floundering, losing the ideological battle, while the Soviet Union marched forward on its Five Year Plan and

Mussolini was widely admired. The rise of Hitler showed that democracies don't always muddle through. Yet FDR turned out to be just the 'inspiring international leader' democracy needed in a crisis, with confidence in the future and nerves of steel. The upshot was the New Deal and eventual recovery, so for 'the democracies', all turned out well.

Fast forward to '1947', crisis number three. The defeat of Hitler in World War Two was not, alas, a triumph for democracy, since the Soviet role could not be ignored. For Runciman the Truman doctrine, the declaration of the Cold War, opens a happier phase. Truman proved the decisive leader democracy needed, ensuring that US and UK forces fueled and funded the Greek civil war, eliminating the victorious Partisans in the name of freedom—'America could not afford to be squeamish'. The chapter is a hymn to Western sagacity, embodied in Kennan's Long Telegram but seconded by valiant insights from Hayek. The dilemma around which it turns is posed by Walter Lippmann: might the Cold War, and the stamping out of communist influence in the Western hemisphere, pose a threat to democracy itself—empowering 'the planners', who would prop up pro-Western dictatorships against market forces? For Hayek, too, the gravest danger to democracy lay in planning. But he pointed out how it could 'muddle through'; the democracies could 'learn how to exercise self-control', by tying themselves, like Ulysses, to the mast of the gold standard or a US-style constitution, and so avoid the sirens of socialism. The German *ordo-liberals* translated his views into public policy, creating a democracy 'protected from its short-term weaknesses in an attempt to secure its long-term strengths'—a top-down arrangement that 'worked'.

The Cuban missile crisis provides the next 'test', though Runciman lumps it together with two entirely different events of '1962', the Sino-Indian war and the retirement of the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. Modern scholarship on the missile crisis is ignored, in a reversion to Cold War stereotypes of the crudest sort. Kennedy—'his temperament suited the crisis, both in his caution and his resolve'—is portrayed as responding to 'Soviet aggression', as if he had not just mounted an invasion of Cuba himself, proving its need for defence, as well as having installed American nuclear missiles on the USSR's Turkish border. Democratic processes had nothing to do with the negotiations, under executive command in both the White House and the Kremlin—though Kennedy was disappointed by the Democrats' lack of bounce in the subsequent mid-term elections.

The Sino-Indian war is treated in the same *Readers' Digest* style. India was 'taken by surprise by Chinese aggression', in Runciman's telling, but Nehru reacted admirably, abandoning India's policy of neutralism to appeal for American and Israeli military assistance. To demonstrate the vast superiority of Indian democracy over Chinese autocracy, Runciman then

flings in a figure of ‘forty million deaths’ for the Great Leap Forward. He has clearly never looked at the historiography of the Himalayan border conflict, which has shown that India was not just insisting on claims to territory of which the Raj had never taken possession in the west (Aksai Chin), and had grabbed by treaty-violations in the east (Tawang), but had adopted a forward military policy to enforce them from the late 1950s, while Zhou Enlai was seeking a diplomatic resolution. Chinese ‘aggression’ was a riposte to Indian belligerence, not vice-versa. In the event, the PLA routed the Indian Army in short order, and then withdrew. Rather than a boost for democracy, the whole affair was such a debacle for India that it broke Nehru, terminally. As for the Great Leap Forward, injected into the argument to give it an upbeat ending, though unrelated to any crisis in, for, or of democracy, Runciman has typically taken a figure from the shoddiest work on it (tacitly, Frank Dikotter), ignoring the careful scholarship by, for example, Felix Wemheuer or Anthony Garnaut, which makes clear how utterly unreliable that work is. Deaths by famine in China are never measured against those by infant mortality and malnutrition in India, where according to Amartya Sen, quoted in another context later on, ‘millions died every year’—how many, Runciman discreetly leaves unquantified.

After this double dose of Cold War bombast, ‘1962’ ends with the bathos of Defence Minister Franz-Joseph Strauss’s high-handed treatment of *Der Spiegel*, a scandal that allowed the 86-year-old Adenauer’s rivals to prise him out of office the following year. Another happy ending, for ‘a crisis was precisely what West German democracy needed’. It invigorated public debate, encouraged criticism and made the FRG ‘look much more like a modern democracy’. *The Confidence Trap* then turns to ‘1974’, which allegedly brought a ‘crisis of confidence’ for democracy. This seems to involve half a dozen events plucked seemingly at random from the early seventies—Nixon’s scrapping of Bretton Woods (1971) and trip to China (1972), the fate of Allende (1973), the Paris agreement on Vietnam (1973), Watergate (1973 onwards), the oil price-hikes (1973), the Trilateral Commission Report (1975), the Indian Emergency (1975) and the death of Franco (1975)—as well as the two British elections, the fall of Brandt and the Portuguese Revolution, which did actually occur in his chosen year. Meanwhile the chapter carefully skirts discussion of 1968, a genuine moment of crisis.

Like the Anglo-American extermination of the Greek partisans, the overthrow of Allende is ‘not for the squeamish’, although it could plausibly be welcomed as a way to get Chile back on a path where ‘democratic freedom was at least a future possibility’, safe from Allende’s socialism. Meanwhile Nixon and Kissinger’s saturation bombing of Indochina is described as a ‘self-rescue project for American democracy’, if ‘ultimately’ corrupt. As for economic problems, though inflation and balance-of-payment crises

were caused by democracy's regrettable short-termism and populist tendencies—'Could any democratic politician be expected to point out the limits of growth and to dampen expectations of continued expansion in living standards?'—happily, democratic flexibility and the apathy of electorates meant that decisions over monetary policy could be outsourced to non-democratic bodies like central banks. Thus 'democracies effectively stumbled on the solution' to their economic malaise by surrendering control to unelected experts—another example of benign muddling through.

Turning to '1989'—a 'wonderful, almost miraculous' year for democracy—Runciman perceives a crisis in the very suddenness of its triumph. 'Democracy was emerging victorious from the travails of the twentieth century. But it was little wiser for the experience.' Unlike Wilson, FDR, Truman and Kennedy, Bush Snr is given no credit for his role as global democratic helmsman at this juncture, presumably because he belonged to the wrong party. Instead, the 'prophetic heroes' of 1989 are, once again, Kennan and Hayek. Fukuyama's prognoses of a post-historical world without philosophy or art are dismissed as 'too gloomy'. 'Democracies' would not just stagnate because they are constitutively restless. Hence '2008'—the Wall Street crash becomes, in Runciman's conceptual strait-jacket, 'a disaster the democracies brought on themselves', through over-confidence and wishful thinking born of the triumphs of 1989. The two forces that were supposed to constrain each other, central bankers and 'public opinion', failed to do so. Runciman finds both the broad population and the experts equally 'to blame'. Fortunately, Hank Paulson's great fear that the presidential candidates might pander to 'popular dislike of bailouts' was unfounded, at least in the case of Obama, who emerges as the 'redeemer' of democracy, proof once again that 'America was still America in its faith in democratic renewal'.

A final chapter sums up the general point of Runciman's meandering analysis, but also demonstrates how little development there has been. In dealing with the present crises—he mentions, somewhat arbitrarily, Syria, Ukraine, Libya, Gaza, the EU—there are two possibilities. Perhaps what looks like muddle and confusion will prove to be clearing the ground for real change. Or perhaps what looks like real change will turn out to be no more than muddle and confusion—'it is hard to know'. In fact, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Runciman's readings of contemporary politics are merely impressionistic—inevitably so, perhaps, when 'politics' is limited to politicians' performance. In 2003, his perspective was coloured by distrust of Blair; by 2008, the outlook had brightened. In 2013, when *The Confidence Trap* first appeared, Runciman blithely judged the dangers of complacency and the saving grace of adaptability to be in balance: democracy's fortunes were not guaranteed, but looked pretty good. Now, in the Afterword to the 2015 paperback edition here under review, he has changed his mind again,



in a Nietzschean-apocalyptic turn: Fukuyama was right to be gloomy, after all. The crisis of 2008 was not big enough to get democracy out of its rut—something more like World War Two is needed.

How, then, should *The Confidence Trap* be assessed? The problems start with its characterization of these ‘crises’ of democracy. The First World War was nothing of the kind. The idea that there was a titanic struggle between democracies and dictatorships during the 1930s is a *post factum* ideological myth. The Cold War was fundamentally a battle between economic systems. The Cuban missile crisis and the Sino-India war were triggered by Kennedy’s and Nehru’s belligerence, and had nothing to do with electoral representation. In the early 1970s, the oil price shock, the American defeat in Vietnam and the scandals of the Nixon administration were economic, geopolitical, and political problems for American power, but hardly amounted to a crisis of democracy, while the overthrow of Allende entailed its obliteration. NATO’s Cold War victory was a triumph for it, though if one was to take Runciman’s characterization of the USSR seriously—outdoing his model, Judt, in anti-Communist bluster, he derides the entire Soviet experience as simply ‘a confidence trick’, a ‘giant Ponzi scheme’—it would not be a very impressive one. The 2008 financial crisis was a crisis of capitalism, not democracy, except in the sense that the TARP was rammed through against the clear wishes of the majority of the US population.

If ‘crises’ are arbitrarily selected and re-defined to fit Runciman’s conceptual mould, ‘democracy’ is risibly hypostasized as a continuous, conscious agent. ‘It’ is always doing this or that: ‘democracy always brings something new’, ‘democracy lives from moment to moment’, ‘democracy renews itself without transforming itself’, ‘it never fully wakes up and it never fully grows up’; when not busy muddling on, it ‘holds its breath and survives’. The real substance of democracy—antagonistic parties and interests, the clash of ideas, struggles over structure and constitution, executive accountability or corruption—is entirely absent from *The Confidence Trap*. At best, a shadowy yet homogeneous ‘public opinion’ is noted from time to time, though the media plays no role, and looming electoral contests occasionally impinge on presidential decision-making. Though democracy in this telling is essentially American—the great figures presiding over its triumphs are Wilson, FDR, Truman, JFK, Obama, with running commentary from Kennan, Lippmann and (honorary American) Hayek—the fiercely competitive US political system is unrecognizable in Runciman’s description of a distracted procedural order that only acts in times of crisis. Far from being directionless, the US state has an acute sense of national interest and can deploy resources overnight to defend it. Nor can an accurate portrayal of the American system avoid the question of money, as Tocqueville well knew.

As for Tocqueville himself, Runciman seems to have forgotten that the concern of his *Recollections* is with the threat that mass democracy posed to property owners in 1848, the mistake of allowing popular forces to organize and the best means of crushing them. *The Confidence Trap* simply culls a few sparkling quotations from *Democracy in America*, with no attempt to register, let alone reckon with, its author's thought. Tocqueville's practical political record—his support for Cavaignac's slaughter of the Parisian workers in June 1848, his role as Barrot's Foreign Minister in suppressing the democratic Roman Republic in 1849, not to mention his view on the colonization of Algeria—is ignored. According to *The Confidence Trap*, his significance as a political philosopher lies in the insight that 'democracy is not as bad as it looks', since in the long run things tend to work out for the best. The fact that what Tocqueville meant by American 'democracy' was primarily social levelling and egalitarian mores is simply passed over. Nor does Runciman report Tocqueville's central argument in that work—that democracy, understood as social equalization, will only be compatible with 'liberty' if it is structured by institutions, or associations, that are the functional equivalents of the aristocracy in *ancien régime* France. It's notable that Runciman's only prior discussion of Tocqueville occurs in a textbook, *Representation*, co-authored with a colleague, where the author of *Democracy in America* is criticized precisely for giving 'democracy' priority over 'representation'—an approach that tallies with Runciman's scepticism about associations and interest-group pluralism, ideas often identified with Tocqueville. In sum, an engagement any deeper than a mere skimming of quotes might have run into conceptual difficulties.

Part of the problem is Runciman's inability to distinguish analytically between democracy and capitalism, with the first often standing in for the second, or stretched to cover it. Tocqueville recognized the potential clash of interests between large-scale private property and mass democracy, but the possibility that capitalism may survive its crises at the expense of democracy—or that democracy might impose restraints on capital—lies beyond Runciman's conceptual grasp. His tendency is always to re-describe capitalist or inter-state crises as political-institutional ones, in what might be described as political reductionism. The result is to avoid any examination of the non-political—economic or social—dynamics that produce the crisis symptoms. In his view, the 2008 meltdown was simply a matter of policy mistakes, and readers are invited to take their pick of whether investment bankers, regulators, central banks or politicians were most to blame; why consumer demand and capitalist growth itself had become dependent on hyper-leveraged credit—in other words, the roots of the crisis—goes unexplained. However, not all the problems of the contemporary world

derive from political institutions; and nor do institutions' 'solutions' to those problems operate in abstraction from wealth and power.

Finally, if there are discrepancies between *The Confidence Trap* and Runciman's earlier work, the continuities are clear. The endorsement of both the Bills and the Hillaries in *Political Hypocrisy* is here expanded to a self-congratulatory portrait of the West as a whole, under American leadership. For a century, it has been more admirable than it knew: sensible, flexible, creative, adaptive, responding almost intuitively to one scary moment after another. As myth-making, this has a ready audience, as the reception of *The Confidence Trap*—'rich and refreshing' (NYRB), 'abounds with fresh insights' (TLS), 'highly original' (*Guardian*)—shows. As explanatory analysis, it flops.