

Book Review

How Democracy Ends

Atos Dias*

Runciman, David. 2018. *Como a Democracia Chega ao Fim*. São Paulo: Editora Todavia, 272pp.

In recent years, the debate over the loss of quality or the reversal of liberal democracies has strengthened. Yasha Mounk (2018), one of the main scholars of this agenda, considers that in several countries the enthusiasm for democracy has decreased, and that this can be seen from the low turnout in elections or the decline in confidence in institutions. The election of Donald Trump in the USA contributed to a greater debate on democratic reversal. An example of this is the bestseller *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), arguing that democracies would be losing quality or failing with the election of populist governments. There is no convergence between scholars. Norris (2017), for example, argues that there is no robust empirical evidence that civil and political rights have deteriorated in western democracies.

The book *How Democracy Ends* by David Runciman – professor in the Department of Politics and International Studies at Cambridge University – participates in this debate. Although it does not develop an open debate with the aforementioned authors (since everyone is practically writing at the same time), the book makes clear Runciman's knowledge of the agenda in question. First published in 2018 in the UK, the work is divided into four chapters and aims to discuss what the author considers the main current threats to democracies.

The main criticism that the book brings to contemporary studies on how democracy can fail is that scholars tend to see the end of democracy as a setback or a relapse. Runciman argues that history does not go back, and that is why democracy never returns to what it was before. In addition, studies generally look at experiences from the historical past as a parameter to explain what could cause the collapse of a current democracy. One of the main criticisms developed by Runciman in the book is that, although democratic institutions can maintain themselves, the expected results and guarantees may not be the

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best. For this reason, the author does not deny the argument that current democratic regimes face a qualitative loss, but he also does not agree that democracies experience reversals like those of the 20th century.

The author argues that western democracy is experiencing a midlife crisis. Although there is a loss of confidence in democratic politics, the long years of consolidated democracies have contributed to individuals introjecting their values and recognising gains for the smooth functioning of institutions. For these reasons, citizens would be willing to give up these gains.

As history does not go backwards, the current challenges that can lead to the future end of democracies are different. For this reason, the author considers, in chapter one, that a coup d'état in consolidated democracies – as in the 20th century – seems to be infeasible and, therefore, a threat that has remained in history. Although there may be a collective fear raised by the experiences of the past, the current danger in the author's view is in the crumbling of democracy without breaking the rules of the democratic game. This would happen through the use of non-democratic tools, manipulating voters through fake news or conspiracy theories, for example, so that candidates benefit from the spread of false information or so that their authoritarian ideas are better received in society.

Runciman's book contributes to the debate by arguing that the current real dangers capable of weakening democracy are beyond the control of ordinary citizens, being restricted to the decision of specific groups. In chapter two, for example, the author considers that the possible catastrophes of the 20th century (like nuclear war) were able to mobilise citizens against such threats and, therefore, strengthened democracy. With the end of the Cold War, the occurrence of some major catastrophe caused by human action does not seem to cause much fear as before, although they continue to be real threats. The disastrous consequences of climate change, for example, are seen as so far away that they do not mobilise people and, moreover, appear to be an agenda of experts.

Following this same idea, chapter three discusses the role of new technologies for democracy. The greatest contribution made by the author in this part of the book refers to the impact of the internet on the functioning of democracy. Runciman explains that social networks, such as Facebook, have constituted themselves as efficient spaces for citizen mobilisation and have provided a 'sense of belonging' (Runciman 2018: 133) amid the discredit given by voters to the functioning of the political system. For the author, social networks have given a false appearance to representative democracy (Runciman 2018: 136) and are products controlled by large corporations capable of making decisions that can influence the interests of users, in addition to having the ability to control data personal.

In the final chapter, Runciman deals with possible alternatives to contemporary democracy. Certainly the book does not offer a conclusion on the best alternative, although the author considers that democracy is replaceable. What the book demonstrates is that democracy remains the least worst option.

In conclusion, Runciman's book contributes to the debate because it analyses issues that have been little discussed. However, the work is very close to political philosophy and history; it has a strong speculative content; and it lacks empirical and scientific rigor. For

the field of International Relations, the work is important in highlighting problems related to democracy – a political regime that has defined the shape of modern western states – which are beyond the ability of states to resolve both unilaterally and through interstate co-operation. The book focuses on the decision-making power of non-state actors (small groups or individuals) on problems for democracy (mentioned above) with the capacity for collective impact. The book implicitly points out that threats to democracy are not limited by state borders, and therefore must be addressed at the international level, collectively, and with different actors.

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Received on 23 August 2019, and approved for publication on 1 November 2020.



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