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‘Three Views of Democracy’

David Runciman is a Reader in Political Thought at POLIS, Cambridge. He is the author of *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (1997), *The Politics of Good Intentions* (2006) and *Political Hypocrisy* (2008), and co-author of *Representation* (2008). He co-edited F.W. Maitland’s *State, Trust and Corporation* for the series Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. He is currently (2009-12) a Leverhulme Major Research Fellow working on a history of democracy in crisis. He writes regularly about politics for the *London Review of Books*.

Abstract

This paper is about confidence in democracy as a system of government. How do we know if something is wrong and our confidence is misplaced? This is a pressing question of contemporary politics but it also has a long history. In this paper I want to separate out three broad responses to the question of what can go wrong with democracy. My aim is to highlight what is interesting and important about the third of these views.

The first says that confidence in democracy is misplaced because democracies have an inbuilt tendency to gloss over their inherent weaknesses. So the better things appear to be going the more reason there is to be suspicious. I call this the idea of democracy as a confidence trick. The second says that confidence in democracy makes sense because only democracies are open to how they really work: other systems have something to hide. If democracy goes wrong, it is because the truth about democracy has been hidden; once revealed, the advantages of democracy become self-reinforcing. I call this the idea that democracy has a confidence threshold. The third view rejects both the first view (democracies hide their weaknesses) and the second view (democracies reveal their strengths). It says democracies hide their strengths behind their weaknesses. Democracy looks bad as a system of government, but over time it turns out to be good. What can go wrong on this view is that democracies become over-reliant on their long-term advantages and discount their weaknesses. They become fatalistic. So on the third view confidence in democracy is reasonable but also dangerous and potentially self-defeating. I call this the idea of democracy as a confidence trap.

The earliest and also the richest account of this third view of democracy comes from Tocqueville. I want to use Tocqueville’s account to explore some of the paradoxical consequences of having a well-founded confidence in democracy. I am particularly interested in how these ideas play out in relation to political crises, and I will attempt to connect this third view of democracy to some of the political crises that democracies currently face, and to the varieties of contemporary political fatalism.

This paper comes out of the project I am currently working on as a Leverhulme fellow, which is a study of series of critical moments in the history of modern democracy (1896, 1918, 1933, 1947, 1962, 1974, 1989, 2008). I am interested in the range of intellectual responses these crises evoked, the patterns in those responses, and also the cumulative impact of our historical knowledge of how democracies cope in crisis situations. Tocqueville provides the intellectual framework for this story.

Major Publications

Pluralism and the Personality of the State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

The Politics of Good Intentions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)

Political Hypocrisy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)