October 25, 2013 6:52 pm

The future of democracy

By Mark Mazower

Are western democracies losing the ability to learn from their own mistakes?

The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present, by David Runciman, *Princeton, RRP£19.95/$29.95, 408 pages*

Nation of Devils: Democratic Leadership and the Problem of Obedience, by Stein Ringen, *Yale, RRP£20/$35, 264 pages*

The Last Vote: The Threats to Western Democracy, by Philip Coggan, *Allen Lane, RRP£20, 320 pages*

Despised and mistrusted for more than 2,000 years, democracy found itself in favour once again in the late 18th century. Its rise after that was not instantaneous but somehow it ended up the default mode of modern politics, first in the US, then in western Europe. By the end of the 20th century, it was spreading rapidly around the world.

For a few years now, however, things have not been going so well. The idea of democracy promotion as a foreign policy goal has been downgraded under the Obama administration, and the "transition to democracy" has started to seem like more of a hopeful phrase than an accurate prognosis for countries in the Maghreb and the Middle East. Since the onset of the financial crisis in the west, the debate has been heating up in the democratic heartlands. Is democracy itself in crisis? If so, why? And what can we do to fix it?

David Runciman's *The Confidence Trap*, Stein Ringen's *Nation of Devils* and Philip Coggan's *The Last Vote* are all responses to this anxiety. And although there are many differences of approach, tone and conclusion among them, they have quite a lot in common too. One feature that perhaps goes without saying is that all are written by democrats – it has been unimaginable for decades to discuss politics in polite society in the west from any other vantage point. All move rather quickly, too, past the question of why they are democrats, or what this actually means.

The political scientist Jacob Talmon once coined the term "totalitarian democracy" to highlight the pretensions of both fascism and communism to a democratic inheritance. Even if one does not follow Talmon, the slippery quality of the term is striking. Fascist theoretician Giovanni Gentile wrote that fascism was "the most genuine form of democracy"; and while they inveighed against parliamentary democracy, Nazis denied that the Third Reich was a dictatorship and developed their own conception of "Germanic democracy" into the bargain. We need not take such claims at face value. But they do remind us that the problem of definition is not an easy one.

Above these books looms the same tutelary deity: the mid-19th-century French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the classic study *Democracy in America*. Sheer genius and analytic comprehensiveness aside, part of de Tocqueville's appeal for us today surely rests in his own ambivalence about democracy. For him, this new political creed was a force whose advent was unstoppable. He is enthusiastic at some points about democracy's energy and ambition; much less so at what he regarded as its philistinism and its drive to a kind of cultural despotism. Writing at a time when it was still possible for a liberal to confess openly to serious doubts about democracy as a system and to conceive of other choices, he is able to surprise modern readers for whom this kind of detachment is no longer thinkable.

If that is one reason for the reverence now accorded him, another is his emphasis on

President Barack Obama speaks on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, August 2013

America. Although these books talk about democracy in general, it is striking just how much they focus on the US. For the Cambridge political scientist David Runciman, in particular, the whole thing is first and foremost about America. *The Confidence Trap* aims to remind us of two things: first, that democracies tend to complacency; and second, that in the face of crisis, they manage to muddle through. Except when they don't, the cynic will argue, thinking perhaps of Weimar Germany. But Runciman is not deterred. Such countries displayed the lack of a settled democratic culture, he suggests, and, anyway, America is his real concern.

A series of historical case studies advances the argument that America generally learns from its mistakes and moves on. And, indeed, it is true that the US has displayed surprising institutional resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of war and economic depression. As a corrective to the doom-and-gloomsters, his book makes some telling points, and he is a clear and forceful writer. It is useful to be reminded that "crisis of democracy" literature is itself part of the culture: for Runciman, the key fact about democracy is that it is never as bad as it looks.

A focus on American history alone, however, cannot really help answer the question of whether democracies are more successful in adapting to crises than other polities. To put things in perspective, recall that the world's most successful imperial dynasties lasted more than six centuries (the Ottoman and Habsburg), whereas American democracy has lasted little more than two. And even if we stick to modern times, one would have to say that fascism was pretty adaptable on occasions as well: Mussolini's regime started out as a defender of balanced budgets and ended up with nationalisations and autarky. What brought it down was not lack of flexibility – Mussolini himself veered from peace-broker for Europe to warmaker at Hitler's side within two years – but military defeat.

Think too of the extraordinarily labile quality of Soviet communism in the 1920s and 1930s – one minute, the New Economic Policy and the return of private property, collectivisation the next. In short, adaptability is not the prerogative of democracy and when you focus on the US you load the dice: contrary to Runciman, democracy won the war in 1918 not because it was more adaptable than its imperial opponents but because of the resources at its disposal via the US and the British empire.

. . .

What Runciman's focus on American democracy helps to do is to remind us that there is an international dimension to this subject that is closely connected to American self-perceptions. It is not just that people believe the country was the world's first real democracy; they think this implies international responsibilities to help pump the lifeblood of freedom around the world. Not all Americans have believed this, but more and more have done since the country's rise to global power in the 20th century. This is why the summer of 1940 is such a salutary moment; for one brief instant, when it looked like Germany might conquer England as it had France, leaving the US "alone", the panic and dismay in Washington was sufficient to power a transatlantic commitment that would last half a century. After the dust settled in 1945, few things were more important than rebuilding democracy around the world and showing it could be made compatible with capitalism.

As the old misgivings return, and the American appetite for democracy-making worldwide wanes, Runciman is relatively sanguine. He doesn't talk about the recent cliffhanger in Washington, of course, but, as some commentators have been arguing, even the stand-off in Congress over the president's 2010 healthcare law and the debt ceiling can be invoked in support of the vitality of American democracy. Yet by the end Runciman sounds worried about the problem of overconfidence: muddling through may not always work in future even for the US.

Stein Ringen's *Nation of Devils* raises an interesting problem: how, in a democracy, can those in government govern effectively? Put another way, is "democratic government" a contradiction in terms? As the fiasco of the "Obamacare" rollout shows, it is one thing to have a vision and a policy, another to make it work. For a political scientist, Ringen's style is crisp and no-nonsense; he uses cases drawn chiefly from the UK and the US since, as he puts it, "they should be beacons for the democratic world, but have been reduced to substandard governance". What emerges is the fragile basis of all political authority, the need to rely on consent and a shared sense of the purpose of public action. Less clear is how specific the problem is to democracy – I am sure Sultan Abdul Hamid found it hard to get his own Ottoman civil servants, let alone anyone else, to do exactly what he had in mind. Does anyone doubt the Chinese have similar problems?

Ringen's thesis is that better political leadership is possible but his solutions – for example, re-empowering civil servants and giving the drafting of policy more time to avoid mistakes – are not the kind to inspire much confidence. Runciman's view that mistakes are there to be embraced rather than avoided is more plausible and realistic.

Philip Coggan's *The Last Vote*, perhaps the gloomiest of the three, is also the most alert to the connections between the fortunes of the political system and the ongoing financial crisis. For Coggan, a columnist for the Economist and before that the Financial Times, the 1970s solutions found in the west to the problems of the postwar social compact – especially central bank independence to drive out inflation, and financial deregulation – are at the heart of our present political difficulties. These are compounded by hangovers of the past: our addiction to heavy welfare commitments that cannot be funded except through borrowing, and our reluctance to face up to the fiscal implications of the west's ageing populations. With early 21st-century growth rates weakening, all the conditions are in place for a new repudiation of democracy – above all in Europe, where Coggan considers it to be most under threat. Time and again, Coggan brings us back to Greece, where fiscal crisis has made a mockery of the national democratic process: our future too, he warns us, unless we are careful.

The Last Vote presents itself as a wake-up call to voters. The changes he proposes are modest yet probably out of reach and the book is a little too sprawling to make a really effective polemic. But Coggan is surely right that in many countries it is hard to feel sanguine about democracy's future. How and when democracies learn is, as he says, a critical question. The worry is that they are learning less well from their mistakes than in the past. If so, this may be due to two things that deserve more attention than any of these writers give them.

One is international – the collapse of ideological rivals that were doing some things as well as if not better than many democracies, above all in social welfare, and which had forced democracies to change. Lack of competition may thus be as harmful in the realm of ideology and geopolitics as it is in other spheres of life. The second is domestic. The now much-reviled age of postwar corporatism may have coincided with the golden age of economic growth for a reason: all that endless wrangling between business leaders, civil servants and union bosses at least forced a conversation through which capitalism learned about society. The collapse of organised labour throughout the west led to boardroom rejoicing but it also harmed our collective capacity to think about the long-term effects of private-sector decision-making.

The worry that emerges from these three lively and thoughtful books is not that democracy faces extinction but that the kind of democracy that now envelops us – with its billionaires and its unemployed millions, its surveillance state and its unelected technocrats, its individual gratification and its ever-narrowing visions of the collective good – is one that previous generations would have regarded as a nightmare. Coggan wants to rouse us, and in different ways so do his fellow authors. But, as de Tocqueville warned, this is the kind of nightmare from which democracy may never awake.

Mark Mazower is professor of history at Columbia University and author of 'Governing the World: The History of an Idea' (Penguin)

Letter in response to this article:

Capitalism and democracy are brothers in alms / From Dr Lutz Luithlen

RELATED TOPICS United States of America, Barack Obama