

A yellow diamond-shaped warning sign with a black border and two white circular mounting holes at the top and bottom. The text is centered on the sign.

CRISES OF DEMOCRACY

ADAM PRZEWORSKI

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Is democracy in crisis? The current threats to democracy are not just political: they are deeply embedded in the democracies of today, in current economic, social, and cultural conditions. In *Crises of Democracy*, Adam Przeworski presents a panorama of the political situation throughout the world of established democracies, places it in the context of misadventures of democratic regimes, and speculates on the prospects. Our present state of knowledge does not support facile conclusions. We “should not believe the flood of writings that have all the answers.” Avoiding technical aspects, this book is addressed not only to professional social scientists, but to everyone concerned about the prospects of democracy.

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PREFACE

Writing an academic book about current events is perilous. The period between the moment the book is written and the time it is read is long, while political life does not stop in-between. Hence, much information contained below must be read with the caveat “as of such and such date.” Yet if a book is worth anything, the arguments and the conclusions should survive the particular events that may have transpired in the meantime. I say this without much confidence: the very event that prompted me to plunge into this volume was something I never expected, the victory of Donald Trump. Yet I think I learned something in retrospect, namely, that the reasons to worry about the current state of democracy in the United States and in some European countries are much deeper than the contingent events. Had Trump lost, many people who are now rushing to write books similar to this one, myself included, would have been occupied by other pursuits. Yet the economic, social, and cultural conditions that brought Trump to office would have been the same. This is what I learned writing this text: that the causes of the current discontent are deep, that they would not have been alleviated by accidental events, and that we need to ask what if Clinton had won or Brexit had lost, and what will happen if and when whatever governments that are now in office in developed democracies fail to improve the lives of people who had voted for them? What then? Where should we seek solutions: in

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economic policies, in political reforms, in discursive strategies of combating social fragmentation and racism? No answers to such questions are obvious to me, so there is little I try to persuade the readers about. All I can do is to formulate questions, entertain possibilities, and invite the readers to think together.

I present a panorama of the current political situation across the world of well-established democracies, place it in the context of past misadventures of democratic regimes, and speculate about their prospects. I know that some readers will be disappointed by how often I fail to arrive at firm conclusions. But one should not believe the flood of writings that have all the answers. I understand, and share, the quest to find sense in what is happening around us, and the urge to think that the diverse developments that surprise us must be somehow related, that everything must have a cause. Yet establishing what causes what and what matters most is often very difficult and sometimes impossible. Particularly in our perilous times, it is important to know what we do not know before deciding how to act. Hence, I hope to encourage skepticism among those who will read this book only because they are concerned about the prospects of democracy. At the same time, I hope that graduate students and my professional colleagues will find here an agenda for research on questions that are technically difficult and politically important.

The topic of this book concerns the dangers to democracy lurking in the current economic, cultural, and political situation. Yet the greatest danger we face is not to democracy but to humanity, namely, that unless we do something drastic now, immediately, our children will be baked or

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flooded. If this danger materializes, all our concerns about democracy will become moot. Tragically, this specter receives only scant political attention, and this absence is reflected in the pages that follow. Yet it casts an ominous shadow over everything else we may care about.

Some people have already reacted to various parts of this text, so the current version is indebted to comments by Carlos Acuna, Jose Antonio Aguilar Rivera, Jess Benhabib, Pierre Birnbaum, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Zhiyuan Cui, Daniel Cukierman, Larry Diamond, John Dunn, Joan Esteban, Roberto Gargarella, Stephen Holmes, John Ferejohn, Joanne Fox-Przeworski, Fernando Limongi, Zhaotian Luo, Boris Makarenko, Bernard Manin, Jose Maria Maravall, Andrei Melville, Patricio Navia, Gloria Origgi, Pasquale Pasquino, Molly Przeworski, John Roemer, Pacho Sanchez-Cuenca, Aleksander Smolar, Willie Sonnleitner, Milan Svolik, Juan Carlos Torre, Joshua Tucker, Jerzy J. Wiatr, and three anonymous reviewers. I am particularly indebted to John Ferejohn for forcing me to revise the analytical framework.

Introduction

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

(Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, c.1930: 275–6)

Something is happening. “Anti-establishment,” “anti-system,” “anti-elite,” “populist” sentiments are exploding in many mature democracies. After almost a century during which the same parties dominated democratic politics, new parties are springing up like mushrooms while the support for traditional ones is dwindling. Electoral participation is declining in many countries to historically unprecedented levels. Confidence in politicians, parties, parliaments, and governments is falling. Even the support for democracy as a system of government has weakened. Popular preferences about policies diverge sharply. Moreover, the symptoms are not just political. Loss of confidence in institutions extends to the media, banks, private corporations, even churches. People with different political views, values, and cultures increasingly view each other as enemies. They are willing to do nasty things to each other.

Is democracy in crisis? Is this change epochal? Are we living through an end of an era? It is easy to become alarmist, so we need to maintain a perspective. Apocalyptic announcements of an “end to” (Western Civilization, History, Democracy) or “death of” (the State, Ideology, Nation-State) are perennial. Such

claims are titillating but I cannot think of anything on this list that did end or die. Not yielding to fears, a dose of skepticism, must be the point of departure. The null hypothesis must be that things come and go and there is nothing exceptional about the present moment. After all, it may well be true that, as the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács would have it, “crises are but an intensification of everyday life of bourgeois society.” Just note that the Harvard Widener library holds more than 23,600 books published in the twentieth century in English containing the word “crisis” (Graf and Jarausch 2017).

Yet many people fear that this time it is different, that at least some established democracies are experiencing conditions that are historically unprecedented, that democracy may gradually deteriorate, “backslide,” or even not survive under these conditions.

1.1 Crises of Democracy

What should we be looking for if we fear that democracy is experiencing a crisis? To identify crises of democracy, we need a conceptual apparatus: What is democracy? What is a crisis? Is the crisis already here or is it only impending? If it is already here, how do we recognize it? If it is not yet visible, from what signs do we read the future?

We are repeatedly told that “Unless democracy is X or generates X, . . .” The ellipsis is rarely spelled out, but it insinuates either that a particular system is not worthy of being called a “democracy” unless some X is present or that democracy will not endure unless some X is satisfied. The first claim is normative, even if it often hides as a definition. Skinner (1973: 303), for

example, thinks that a system in which only some people rule does not merit being called a “democracy,” even if it is a competitive oligarchy. Rosanvallon (2009), in turn, claims that “Now power is not considered fully democratic unless it is submitted to the tests of control and validation at the same time concurrent and complementary to the majoritarian expression.” The second claim is empirical, namely, that democracy may not endure unless some Xs are present (or absent). If democracy requires some conditions – say J.S. Mill’s (1977: 99) “high wages and universal reading” – just to function, then it is vulnerable to breakdowns when these conditions are absent. A modicum of economic welfare, some level of citizen’s confidence in political institutions, or some minimal level of public order are the most plausible candidates for such conditions.

Thus, one way to think is that democracy experiences a crisis when some features which we consider as definitional of democracy are absent. Consider a triad of what Ginsburg and Huq (2018a) consider to be “the basic predicates of democracy”: competitive elections, liberal rights of speech and association, and the rule of law. If we treat this triad as definitional, we get a ready-made checklist of what we should be looking for to identify crises of democracy: elections that are not competitive, violations of rights, breakdowns of the rule of law. Yet if we believe that democracy may not survive given some particular situation, we may still be worried that it faces a crisis even if no such violations are observed. We may still have a checklist constructed by the definition but now we also have a set of hypotheses that condition the survival of democracy on some potential threats, and we are

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directed by these hypotheses to examine the particular threats. If such hypotheses are valid, if the survival of democracy depends on some aspects of its performance, and democracy does not generate the required outcomes, a crisis occurs – democracy is in crisis.

Note that some features may be treated alternatively as definitional or as empirical. If one defines democracy as Rosanvallon does, to include contramajoritarian constraints on majority rule, “constitutional democracy,” then the erosion of judicial independence is *prima facie* evidence that something is wrong. But one may also reason that if the judiciary is not independent, the government will be free to do whatever it wants, violate the liberal right, or make elections non-competitive. The problem with adding adjectives to “democracy” is that not all good things must go together. The more features – “electoral,” “liberal,” “constitutional,” “representative,” “social” – we add to the definition of democracy, the longer the checklist, and the more crises we will discover. In contrast, the same list can be treated as a set of empirical hypotheses. We can then investigate empirically what are the conditions for elections to be competitive or for rights to be observed or for the rule of law to prevail. If it is true that elections are competitive only if rights are observed and law rules, then taking any one of these features as definitional and treating others as “preconditions” is coextensive. If they are not coextensive, then some kind of definitional minimalism is unavoidable: we must choose one of the potential features as definitional and treat others as hypothetical conditions under which the selected feature is satisfied.

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Hence, what we would consider as crises and how we should go about diagnosing them depends on how we think about democracy. The view of democracy I adopt is “minimalist” and “electoralist”: democracy is a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections and have a reasonable possibility of removing incumbent governments they do not like (authors who held this view include Schumpeter 1942, Popper 1962, and Bobbio 1987). Democracy is simply a system in which incumbents lose elections and leave when they lose. Hence, I investigate the possible threats to elections becoming non-competitive or inconsequential for whoever remains in power. To repeat, these threats may include violations of the preconditions for contested elections enumerated by Dahl (1971) – the liberal rights and the freedoms – simply because without them the incumbent government could not be defeated. They may also include breakdowns of the rule of law and erosion of the independent power of the judiciary, along with loss of confidence in representative institutions (as in “representative democracy”), acute inequality (as in “social democracy”), or the use of repression to maintain public order (“liberal democracy”). But I treat these violations as potential threats to the ability of citizens to remove governments by elections, not as definitional features of “democracy.”

The relation between “democracy” in the minimalist sense and the “rule of law” is particularly complex. First, there are both logical and empirical reasons to question whether supra-majoritarian institutions, such as bicameralism or presidential veto, or counter-majoritarian institutions, such as constitutional courts or independent central banks, are necessary to

support the rule of law. Gargarella (2003), for example, lists several mechanisms by which a majority can and would want to constrain itself even in the absence of such institutions. As McGann (2006) observes, there are well-established democracies, including the United Kingdom and Sweden, which have neither a separation of powers nor judicial review of the constitution, and yet in which majorities constrain themselves from violating rights. Indeed, Dixit, Grossman, and Gull (2000: 533) demonstrate logically that violations of rights are likely to be more egregious in the presence of supra-majoritarian institutions once a government enjoys supra-majority support.

Second, I put “rule of law” in quotation marks because, as Sanchez-Cuenca (2003: 62) astutely put it, “The law cannot rule. Ruling is an activity, and laws cannot act.” What is typically seen as a relation between democracy and the rule of law is in fact a relation between populated institutions: governments and courts (Ferejohn and Pasquino 2003). Law “rules” when politicians and bureaucrats obey judges, and whether politicians do or do not comply with the instructions of constitutional justices is a contingent outcome of their electoral incentives. Moreover, as will be seen below, it is often next to impossible to determine if some particular measures they adopt do or do not conform to legal or constitutional norms, with individual judgments, including those of constitutional justices, clouded by partisanship. Under democracy, the only effective device for disciplining politicians are elections: as Dixit, Grossman, and Gull (2000: 533) observe, “The ruling individuals must foresee an appreciable chance that their power will come to an end . . . And they must foresee a possibility of regaining power once it

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is lost.” There are two possibilities: (1) politicians (and bureaucrats) obey judges because otherwise they would lose elections, so that “the law” rules; (2) politicians do not obey judges because otherwise they would lose elections – a majority does not want politicians to listen to what the judges tell them they can or cannot do. The rule of law is violated but as long as politicians’ actions are motivated by the fear of losing elections, the system is still democratic by the minimalist criterion. Democracy is “illiberal” – a term made fashionable by Zakaria (1997) and embraced by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán – but it is illiberal because politicians expect that otherwise they would lose elections. Yet, if politicians do not obey the judges even if a majority would want them to because they do not fear elections, the regime is not democratic.

Understood in this way, democracy is a mechanism for processing conflicts. Political institutions manage conflicts in an orderly way by structuring the way social antagonisms are organized politically, absorbing whatever conflicts may threaten public order, and regulating them according to some rules. An institutional order prevails if only those political forces that have institutionally constituted access to the representative system engage in political activities, and if these organizations have incentives to pursue their interests through the institutions and incentives to temporarily tolerate unfavorable outcomes. Specifically, conflicts are orderly if all political forces expect that they may achieve something, at the present or at least in some not too distant future, by processing their interests within the institutional framework while they see little to be gained by actions outside the institutional

realm. Hence, democracy works well when whatever the conflicts that arise in society are channeled into and processed through the institutional framework – most importantly elections, but also collective bargaining systems, courts, and public bureaucracies – without preventing anyone from gaining access to these institutions just because of the substance of their demands. To put it succinctly, democracy works when political conflicts are processed in liberty and civil peace.

The conflicts that divide a particular society at a particular time may be more or less intense and may divide the society along different lines depending on whether they concern economic interests, cultural values, symbolic issues, or just fleeting passions. Their forms, their subjects, and their intensity depend on the actions of governments and the alternatives offered by competing political forces. The stakes entailed in institutionalized conflicts do not simply reflect the intensity of antagonisms that arise in a society. Institutional frameworks shape the ways in which social conflicts become politically organized, some increasing and others limiting the stakes in the outcomes of political competition. I argue below (see [Chapter 9](#)) that democracy works well when the stakes entailed in institutionalized conflicts are neither too small or too large (for a technical version of this argument, see Przeworski, Rivero, and Xi [2015](#)). The stakes are too low when results of elections have no consequences for people's lives. They are too high when results of elections inflict intolerable costs on the losers. When people believe that results of elections do not make a difference in their lives, they turn against “das System,” as in Weimar Germany. When the electoral losers discover that the government pursues policies

that significantly hurt their interests or values, they become willing to resist the government by all – including violent – means, as did the bourgeoisie in Chile under President Allende. Hence, democracy works when something is at stake in elections but not too much is at stake.

An often overlooked emphasis of Schumpeter's (1942: chapter 23, section 2) "minimalist" view of democracy is that governments must be able to govern and must govern competently. Later I delve into some historical periods in which the institutional framework made it difficult for governments to be able to govern, either because the electoral system led to government instability, as in Weimar Germany and the French Fourth Republic, or because the system of separation of powers generated a stalemate between the executive and the legislature, as in Allende's Chile. To govern effectively, governments must satisfy a majority yet not ignore the views of intense minorities. When conflicts are intense and a society is highly polarized, finding policies acceptable to all major political forces is difficult and may be impossible. There are limits to what even the best-intentioned and competent governments can do.

If this is the standard, when is democracy "in crisis"? The very word "crisis" originates from ancient Greek, where it meant "decision." Crises are situations that cannot last, in which something must be decided. They emerge when the status quo is untenable and nothing has yet replaced it. This is what we mean when we say that "the situation reached a crisis point": when doctors say someone is in a crisis, they mean that the patient will either recover or die but cannot remain in the current

state. Crises may be more or less acute: in some a turning point may be imminent but some crises may linger indefinitely, with all the morbid symptoms.

The intuition of crises conveyed by Gramsci's motto is that the current situation is in some ways untenable, that some threat to democracy has already materialized, yet the status quo democratic institutions remain in place. While Marx (1979 [1859]: 43–4) thought that “new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society,” nothing guarantees that when the status quo institutions malfunction, some other institution would descend on earth as a *deus ex machina*. What happens when the status quo institutions do not generate desirable outcomes depends on their properties and on the alternative institutions – would any do better? – on exogenous conditions, and on the actions of the relevant political forces under these conditions. That a disaster is unfolding under the status quo institutions need not imply that some other institutions would do better: this was Winston Churchill's view of democracy. But even if some alternatives are feasible, it may well be that given the relations of political power under the extant institutions, the situation would linger on and on. Crises are then situations in which the condition under the status quo institutions is some kind of a disaster: no change occurs, but it may. This is what we will be looking for below: whether the current situation is in some ways threatening and whether there are signs that the traditional representative institutions are being affected.