Democracy in the prison of political science

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Abstract
After the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump, a widespread perception emerged that the world was witnessing a crisis of liberal democracy. Not surprisingly, said crisis is at the core of a new batch of political science literature. This review article takes stock of some key contributions to the literature, namely Albright (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), Norris and Inglehart (2018), Runciman (2018a) and Eatwell and Goodwin (2018). My key argument is that the reviewed books are fundamentally limited by problematic ontological assumptions stemming from artificial disciplinary boundaries. Privileging either individual traits of authoritarian leaders or the very specific experience of the USA or the UK, they fail to capture varied, yet deeply interconnected international expressions of contemporary authoritarianism. Following Justin Rosenberg’s open invitation to place the concept of multiplicity at the centre of a renewed research agenda, I suggest that a more holistic take on the crisis of democracy requires a renewed attention to inter-societal dynamics.

Keywords
Political science, politics, democracy, class, multiplicity

Books reviewed:
Albright, Madeleine. *Fascism: A Warning*. HarperCollins, 2018.
Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Broadway Books, 2018.

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Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
Runciman, David. *How Democracy Ends*. Basic Books, 2018.
Eatwell, Roger, and Matthew Goodwin. *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. Penguin UK, 2018.

**Introduction**

Democracy is under threat. It is being emptied of any meaningful content, eroding in the hands of populist or authoritarian leaders. Even in places where democratic values and institutions were considered rock-solid, such as Western Europe or the USA, democracy may not resist attempts to subvert it. Instead of old-fashioned military coups, the challenges to democracy now come in a different form. Distrust in established political elites is hijacked by leaders with fascist or populist inclinations to undermine the written and unwritten foundations of modern democracy.

This is the central argument of an emerging political science literature that has appeared in the last couple of years, in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. Written by established scholars – Madeleine Albright, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, among many others – this literature does not aim solely at academic audiences. In fact, some of these books became instant bestsellers, setting the current political debate beyond the confines of universities’ classrooms with compelling calls to action. For Albright, ‘Trump is the first anti-democratic president in modern US history’ (2018: 246). With a strong sense of urgency, Levitsky and Ziblatt ‘suggest strategies that citizens should, and should not, follow to defend our democracy’ (2018: 10). Norris and Inglehart finish their book suggesting ‘several alternative strategies which could be employed to mitigate the potential dangers authoritarian populism poses for plural societies and liberal democracies’ (2018: 24).

In contrast to the alarmist tone of the mainstream political science literature in the USA, a different approach has emerged on the other side of the Atlantic. Although trying to solve the same puzzle – the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy, epitomized in Trump and Brexit – the British ‘politics’ literature focuses on shortcomings of contemporary democracies, refusing to take the front line in its political defence. From a *longue durée* perspective, David Runciman (2018a) argues that democracy will eventually come to an end indeed, but this end is unlikely to repeat the liberal collapse of the interwar years, taking new forms instead. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), on their turn, refuse any comparison between populism and fascism, claiming that ‘national populism’ aims at ‘a new form of democracy’ (2018: 39). As such, their book clearly stands out from their liberal counterparts. Eatwell and Goodwin’s willingness to accept problematic elements of the national populist agenda justifies Martin Shaw’s description of their book as ‘part of a project to normalise and detoxify the new right’ (Shaw, 2018).

Timely and consequential as it is, the contemporary political science debate on the crisis of democracy remains limited by deep-wired ontological assumptions, rooted in artificial disciplinary boundaries. Trump and Brexit are explained mainly in reference to ‘internal’ political dynamics, occasionally reinforced by ad-hoc ‘external’ factors. Therefore, the recent literature on the crisis of democracy fails to overcome the narrow limits of what Justin Rosenberg has called the ‘prison of political science’ (2016). The consequences of societal ‘multiplicity’ – that is, the fact that societies are in constant interaction, mutually
determining shifting class dynamics – are not systematically incorporated into political analyses. This, in turn, leads to necessarily partial explanations, incapable of connecting the troubling rise of extreme-right administrations around the world. To be clear, the problem is not the choice of object per se, since Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are indeed important pieces of the puzzle. The problem appears when the authors jump to general theoretical conclusions about ‘democracy’ based exclusively on context-specific political analyses.

The aim of this review article is to suggest that a more complete understanding of the contemporary global crisis of democracy must reach beyond the political science toolkit and include insights from other fields, in particular political economy and international relations.

After this introduction, the article unfolds in three sections. In the first section, I review three outstanding examples of the North American ‘political science’ side of the contemporary debate on the crisis of democracy: Albright’s *Fascism: A Warning* (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt’s *How Democracies Die* (2018) and Norris and Inglehart’s *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (2018). In the second section, I analyse the British ‘politics’ side of the debate, focusing on Runciman’s *How Democracy Ends* (2018a) and Eatwell and Goodwin’s *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (2018). In the third and final section, I expand on the critique sketched above, building on the emerging theoretical literature on ‘multiplicity’. Finally, the argument is wrapped up in the conclusion.

**American political science in defence of liberal democracy**

The most powerful voice of the American political science establishment to rise in defence of liberal democracy is the former Secretary of State and Georgetown University Professor, Madeleine Albright. By choosing to frame the nemesis of democracy in terms of ‘fascism’, instead of ‘populism’, she makes a strong political argument, but opens herself to criticism. Indeed, as the author herself recognises, the term ‘fascist’ has been abused so much that its meaning is getting diluted. Albright notes that ‘as people vent their daily frustrations, the word escapes a million mouths: teachers are called fascists, and so, too, are feminists, chauvinists, yoga instructors, police, dieters, bureaucrats, bloggers, bicyclists, copy editors, people who have just quit smoking, and the makers of childproof packing’. As a consequence, the overuse of ‘fascism’ ends up ‘draining potency from what should be a powerful term’ (2018: 8). In times when liberal democracy is actually at risk, looking for a clear definition of fascism is, therefore, a critical intellectual task. Albright’s book is a bestseller aimed at a wide audience. But it also serves academic interest inasmuch as it channels the effort to conceptually grasp the politics of ‘fascism’, defining, by contrast, the limits of acceptable democratic dispute.

Madeleine Albright’s method of inquiry is historical-inductive. That is, starting from several concrete historical cases of fascism, she tries to find a pattern that would allow for a conceptual definition of the mass mobilization tactics commonly employed by the fascist leader. The book provides a penetrating history of authoritarian politics in the 20th and early 21st centuries, with particular attention to Mussolini, Hitler, Chavez, Erdogan, Putin and Orban. Albright’s selection of cases is based on a preliminary definition of fascism. According to her, fascism is not a substantial right-wing ideology, inasmuch as it can be adapted to different political aims. Rather, ‘fascism should perhaps be viewed less as
a political ideology than as a means for seizing and holding power’ (2018: 8). That is, according to Albright, the distinctive trait of fascism is not necessarily the espousing of a coherent set of values, but the constant and deliberate attack on liberal democratic institutions which restrict the power of the fascist leader.

_Fascism: A Warning_ culminates in the last two chapters, where Albright turns to President Trump and the risks of fascism in contemporary western societies, particularly in the USA. Although she stops short of directly calling Trump a fascist, her final hints to spot a fascist leader seem tailored to the 45th US President. Fascism, seen as a specific form of political performance antithetical to democracy, can be identified through a series of questions, that should be posed about potential fascist leaders: Do they ‘cater to our prejudices’? ‘Nurture our anger’? ‘Encourage contempt for our governing institutions’? ‘Seek to destroy our faith in essential contributors to democracy’ (e.g. the ‘press’ and ‘judiciary’)? ‘Exploit symbols of patriotism’? ‘Accept the verdict of the polls’? ‘Brag about their ability to solve all problems’? ‘Threaten “using violence to blow enemies away”’? Finally, ‘do they echo the attitude of Mussolini: “the crowd doesn’t have to know,” all it has to do is believe and “submit to being shaped”’? (2018: 253).

The implication is clear. Trump does not pass the test; therefore, he would qualify as a fascist leader, only tamed, according to Albright, by strong democratic institutions. ‘If transplanted to a country with fewer democratic safeguards, he [Trump] would audition for dictator’ (2018: 246). The ‘warning’ in the title of the book, therefore, refers to the defence of the liberal democratic institutions that are reining in emergent fascist leaders.

Much more detailed, Levitsky and Ziblatt’s book can be read as a variation of Madeleine Albright’s argument. _How Democracies Die_ also takes aim at the perceived danger posed by the election of Donald Trump. Like Albright, the authors strive to conceptually differentiate between legitimate democratic forces disputing power and dangerous contenders, who undermine democracy itself. The book’s starting point is a sensible one: ‘If authoritarians are to be kept out, they first have to be identified’ (2018: 20). Accordingly, Levitsky and Ziblatt take inspiration from the work of Juan Linz (1978) to propose a ‘litmus test’ to identify dangerous authoritarian populists.

The test is based on ‘four indicators of authoritarian behavior’ that anti-democratic leaders tend to display: a) the ‘rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game’; b) the ‘denial of legitimacy of political opponents’; c) the ‘toleration or encouragement of violence’; and d) the ‘readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media’ (2018: 23–24). For the authors, ‘a politician who meets even one of these criteria is cause for concern’ (2018: 22). Finally, the anti-democratic traits enumerated in the ‘litmus test’ are equated with ‘populism’. Accordingly, ‘populists’ are defined as ‘anti-establishment politicians – figures who, claiming to represent the voice of “the people”, wage war on what they depict as a corrupt and conspiratorial elite’ (2018: 22).

It is interesting to notice the similarities between Albright (2018) and Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); not only do the questions suggested by Albright to identify the fascist leader largely overlap with the ‘litmus test’ for authoritarian behaviour devised by Levitsky and Ziblatt, but the latter’s definition of ‘populism’ is very close to the broad, depoliticized definition of ‘fascism’ proposed by Albright. Neither term is used in reference to a defined political agenda, be it on the right or the left. Instead, in the authors’ definitions, ‘populism’ or ‘fascism’ refer to a style of political performance, a discursive strategy which assaults democratic institutions to reinforce the power of the ‘populist’ or ‘fascist’ leader.
Levitsky and Ziblatt go one step further, however. After presenting their definition of populism in the first chapters of the book, the authors do not shy away from applying their conceptual arsenal to assess the perceived damage Donald Trump is causing to US democracy through the erosion of institutions and the ‘unwritten rules of American politics’ (2018: 118). These involve a series of self-imposed restrictions on the behaviour of political elites, starting with the acceptance that adversaries have a legitimate right to exist and that the institutions should not be used to hurt opponents. Furthermore, Levitsky and Ziblatt are much more specific in proposing remedies to ‘save democracy’ (2018: 204). Accordingly, the authors claim that US political elites must seek to restore the conditions for the smooth functioning of liberal democracy: ‘When American democracy has worked, it has relied upon two norms that we often take for granted – mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance’ (2018: 212). The book’s central political claim is, therefore, that democrats should refrain from ‘fighting as republicans’ (2018: 215); instead, they should ‘seek to preserve, rather than violate, democratic rules and norms’ (2018: 218).

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart adopt a cultural approach in their important contribution to debates on the contemporary crisis of democracy. From the outset, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* provides a very different perspective from the historical take of Albright and the institutionalist argument of Levitsky and Ziblatt. Norris and Inglehart address their book more clearly at an academic audience, including comprehensive empirical evidence gained through surveys and quantitative methodologies.

Norris and Inglehart’s analytical arsenal mobilizes the same concept of populism as the above-mentioned authors; they see it as ‘a style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with “the people” not the elites’ (2018: 4). This broad concept of populism is coupled with the adjective ‘authoritarian’, indicating a connection with ‘second-order principles’, which reflect a set of ‘cultural values’ (2018: 6). Accordingly, ‘[i]t is the combination of authoritarian values disguised by populist rhetoric which we regard as potentially the most dangerous threat to liberal democracy’ (2018: 6).

Ultimately, the underlying political agenda is also substantially similar to the one explicitly embraced by Albright and Levitsky and Ziblatt. Western democracies are under attack by political forces catering to people’s prejudices, but ‘authoritarian populism’ can and will be defeated by truly ‘pluralist’ and ‘libertarian’ democratic forces (2018: 222).

Because Norris and Inglehart are ultimately more optimistic about the future of western liberal democracies, their call to arms for the defence of democracy is much less forceful, and their book lacks the political urgency of *Fascism: A Warning* and *How Democracies Die*. As the central cleavage identified by Norris and Inglehart is a cultural and generational one, in the long run it is expected to fade out. Authoritarian populist forces will lose support as their core cohort shrinks and society as a whole becomes more diverse and tolerant. The authors argue that the generational change that western societies passed through in the last decades means that a new generation of ‘millennials’ entered the democratic game, joining ‘generation X’ in demanding a progressive agenda. Used to ‘greater gender equality, tolerant sexual norms, and cultural diversity’, the world view embraced by the newer generation threatens the values of the ‘interwar’ and the ‘baby boomer’ generations. In Norris and Inglehart’s words:

We hypothesize that enduring processes of value change arise from secular processes transforming the deep tectonic plates of Western societies, including generational replacement, the
expansion of access to higher education, urbanization, growing gender equality and greater ethnic diversity. These processes have gradually shrunk the size of the social segments adhering to the core tenants of social conservatism, while expanding the segments of the population endorsing socially liberal attitudes and post-materialist values. (2018: 36)

The rise of ‘authoritarian populists’, therefore, can be explained as a ‘cultural backlash’. According to the authors, ‘[f]or many older people, same-sex marriage, women in leadership roles, multicultural diversity in cities, and, in the US, an African-American President were disorienting departures from the norms they had known since childhood’ (2018: 35). These cultural changes prompt a reaction of previously dominant social groups against a ‘silent revolution’ in cultural values, which can be amplified by ‘period effects’, such as ‘economic conditions’ and rising ‘immigration flows’ (2018: 446). After analysing the contribution of ‘economic grievances’ (Chapter 5) and ‘immigration’ (Chapter 6) to the emerging support for authoritarian populism, the authors argue that, although the support for populism is more strongly predicted by economic characteristics than by ‘birth cohort’, support for authoritarian values, including anti-immigrant attitudes, is strongly related to generation (2018: 143, 205).

As was the case in Levitsky and Ziblatt’s analysis, the policy implication of the cultural backlash argument is a call for tolerance. Since the rise of authoritarian populism is not primarily caused by class dynamics, it cannot be solved solely through economic policies aimed at improving the living conditions of the poor. Instead, ‘insofar as the authoritarian reaction is motivated by a cultural backlash against growing ethnic diversity in multicultural Western Societies . . . it requires another set of policy responses responding to issues such as Islamophobia, Euroscepticism, xenophobia, racial resentment and fears from terrorist incidents’ (2018: 464).

British politics and the limits of liberal democracy

Taken together, Albright (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Norris and Inglehart (2018) represent some variations of the US political science reaction to the crisis of liberal democracy. The underlying fact that liberal democracy is under threat and should be defended is never called into question. This political stance, however, brushes over the real shortcomings of liberal democracy, failing to see that its promises of freedom and prosperity have never been fully delivered for many people, and appear ever elusive after the progressive dismantling of welfare states in a protracted age of austerity. This fundamental limit of Albright (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Norris and Inglehart (2018) is explored by their British counterparts. While Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) examine the frustrations that give rise to what they call a ‘revolt against liberal democracy’, David Runciman (2018a) goes one step further and asks some existential questions whose answers are often taken for granted.

Aiming at a wide audience, How Democracy Ends is written in the same elegant tone as Fascism: A Warning. The election of Donald Trump is a shadow looming over both books. Furthermore, the falsely torn-apart cover, evocative of a dystopian future, coupled with the short and impactful title, place Runciman’s book on the same shelf as Albright’s, despite the author’s protests.3 However, the similarities between the books are just superficial. After starting on the common ground of Trump and Brexit, Runciman takes a deep theoretical dive and looks at the long-term life cycle of democracy. For the author, Trump is not the
end of democracy, he is more of a ‘mid-life crisis’ (2018a: 5). Of course, this mid-life crisis can be devastating, but it is unlikely to mark the end of democracy. Indeed, trying to see in Trump a contemporary equivalent of the authoritarian leaders that dumped democracy in the interwar years would be looking in the wrong direction. Instead, ‘[w]hen democracy ends, we are likely to be surprised by the form it takes’ (2018a: 3).

According to Runciman, contemporary western democracies are much different from what they used to be at the beginning of the 20th century. To start with, Runciman argues that the level of political violence is much lower in substantially older and more affluent societies. The author states that ‘Western democracies are fundamentally peaceful societies’ (2018a: 6). Furthermore, the prospect of various forms of ‘catastrophes’ plays a very different role today. Instead of prompting people to take political action, ‘we freeze in face of our fears’ (2018a: 6). Finally, technological changes have ‘completely altered the terms on which democracy must operate’ (2018a: 6).

Instead of a resolute defence of democracy and a straightforward attack on Donald Trump, Runciman’s book is first and foremost an exercise in futurology, an effort to devise the limits of contemporary western democracy and imagine how it may eventually end, for better or worse. As such, *How Democracy Ends* does not offer answers to the contemporary crisis of democracy. Of course, Runciman fully recognizes the current crises, but instead of warning against fascist perils or suggesting a concrete policy strategy, the author invites the reader to think ahead: ‘Democracy is not working well – if it were, there would be no populist backlash. But attempts to make it work better focus on what we feel we have lost rather than on what we have never tried’ (2018a: 72). The implication is that, instead of looking back in order to find guidance, we should embrace change and not be afraid to build something different and better, since ‘[d]emocracy is not us. The demise of democracy is not our demise. Its salvation is not our salvation... There are no better alternatives around at the present, but that does not mean that none are possible’ (2018a: 217).

While starting in the same place – the election of Donald Trump – the endpoint of Albright’s and Runciman’s books are polar opposites: the first is a defence of liberal democracy based on past authoritarian experiences; the latter is a call to imagine society after it, based on a vision of the future. Similarly, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) start from the same conundrum as Norris and Inglehart (2018), but end with very different conclusions.

The more scholarly and empirically informed side of the contemporary literature on the crisis of democracy revolves around a compelling and urgent question: what is the cause of the current ascent of ‘authoritarian’ or ‘national’ populism? For Levitsky and Ziblatt, the answer is the erosion of democratic institutions and unwritten ‘forbearance norms’ (2018: 212). For Norris and Inglehart, there is a larger cultural phenomenon in place, a generational shift, opposing liberal and well-educated millennials against conservative baby boomers. In contrast, Eatwell and Goodwin see populism not as a passing phenomenon but as a much more fundamental outcome of real shortcomings of liberal democratic politics. The authors identify ‘four deep-rooted societal changes which are cause for growing concern among millions of people in the West... These are often based on legitimate grievances and are unlikely to fade in the near future’ (2018: xxi).

The four key elements (‘four Ds’) identified by Eatwell and Goodwin are: the ‘distrust’ in politicians and established institutions; fears of ‘destruction’ of a given national historic identity; a perception of relative ‘deprivation’ as inequality increases in western societies; and the breaking of bonds between traditional political parties and the people, which the
authors call ‘de-alignment’ (2018: xxi–xxiii). Because these are long-term tendencies, the authors argue that national populism cannot be reduced to a cultural backlash of ‘angry white men’ against ‘tolerant millennials’; therefore, national populists are here to stay: ‘[w]hile they might not necessarily win elections, and their following will ebb and flow, “the fundamentals” behind this phenomenon look set to remain in place for many years to come’ (2018: 269).

Inasmuch as they see it as an expression of suposedly ‘legitimate’ concerns, Eatwell and Goodwin insist that national populism should not be confused with fascism. Instead, ‘contrary to the popular claim that it is a new form of fascism, national populism strives towards a new form of democracy in which the interests and voices of ordinary people feature far more prominently’ (2018: 39). As national populists get to power, they come under pressure to deliver on the expectations they raise. Therefore, the authors highlight the crucial importance of ‘post-populism’ (2018: xxix), that is, the moment when voters will have the chance to evaluate the results of national populist administrations. In the ostensibly benign scenario presented by the authors, populists will tilt the mainstream in the direction of some form of ‘national populism-lite’ (2018: 283), forcing established political parties to make meaningful concessions towards their political agenda, without jeopardizing democracy itself.

Although Eatwell and Goodwin clearly identify some of the material factors behind the surge of what they call ‘national populism’, their analysis is problematically based on a partial view of European national identities, which may end up normalizing race anxieties and justifying nationalist prejudices. In an article about Trump and Brexit predating Eatwell and Goodwin’s book, Gurminder Bhambra calls for ‘an appropriate acknowledgement of the imperial and colonial histories that shape most current Western national polities’ (Bhambra, 2017: 227). In their description of the ‘concerns’ of ‘millions of people in the West’, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) fail to identify the process of racial exclusion through which contemporary national polities were constituted. Therefore, the authors largely reproduce the ‘methodological whiteness’ denounced by Bhambra (2017). Although Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) do not openly endorse racist views, as Trilling writes, ‘their arguments rest on the notion that there is a normal, reasonable amount of nationalism or ethnic preference that can be accommodated in order to keep majority-white populations happy, and that this settlement needn’t shade into racism and violence (Trilling, 2019: 22).’

The preeminent genocide scholar Martin Shaw highlights how Eatwell and Goodwin use hyperbolic language to misrepresent popular sentiment regarding migration. According to Shaw ‘the idea of group “destruction” – which is used to define genocide – is deployed to ratchet up the case.’ Therefore, ‘the authors crudely distort the fears and anxieties of the very people they claim we should be listening to’ (Shaw, 2018).

Furthermore, the authors’ sensibly detached calls for a balanced evaluation of post-populism disregard the urgency of protecting vulnerable social groups directly affected by the racialized ‘nationalist’ discourses and hostile immigration policies. In the same vein, Runciman’s remarks about political violence in western democracies seem overly sanguine. To be clear, I am not denying the statistical evidence that western democracies are less violent than they used to be. My point is that important sectors of the population – in particular, migrants and racial minorities – still experience multiple forms of violence and discrimination in their daily lives, with relevant political consequences.

In the USA, for instance, Loïc Wacquant (2009) mapped the perverse effects of a carceral system designed to discipline and punish poor, African American and Latino populations. Until recently, the US also had a well-documented role in supporting violent right-wing
dictatorships in Latin America, effectively exporting techniques of political violence (Gill, 2004). In Europe, we are witnessing the emergence of violent, extreme-right political organizations in England, the Netherlands, France and Germany (Taylor et al., 2013). Dramatic instances of political violence such as the murder of Jo Cox during the Brexit referendum, the ongoing incarceration of immigrant children at the US border, or the white nationalist terror attacks in New Zealand and Norway call into question entirely peaceful descriptions of western democratic societies, at least from the perspective of marginalized social groups.

Towards a global take on the crisis of democracy

So far, I have evaluated five examples of the recent mainstream literature on contemporary threats to democracy. In the USA, some scholars have taken a clear partisan stance against populism or fascism in general, and Trump in particular. As Albright (2018) claims, dangerous anti-democratic leaders have recognizable and recurring traits. And once populists or fascists are identified, political elites are supposed to overcome previous divisions to keep them out of power (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). More hearteningly, in the long run, we can take solace in Norris and Inglehart’s claim that the cultural backlash that explains the temporary rise of authoritarian populists is supposed to lose steam (Norris and Inglehart, 2018). In contrast, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) argue against condemning populism tout court, and Runciman (2018a) refuses to conflate the end of liberal democracy with the end of history.

Widely varied as it is, this literature is united by insufficient attention to two crucial elements that lie at the core of the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy: class disputes and substantial changes in the international capitalist system – more precisely, the interaction of the two. As such, the debate on the nature, the causes and the possible consequences of the rise of anti-democratic forces is still locked in what Justin Rosenberg (2016) has called ‘the prison of political science’. What it lacks is a sufficiently theorized sense of ‘the international’, allowing for the consequences of political multiplicity to be systematically incorporated into their arguments. Without that, exogenous ‘external’ factors are used to fill in the gaps of ever incomplete ‘internal’ political analyses, which are barred from systematically explaining shifting class relations within global socio-economic dynamics.

The contemporary political science literature reviewed in this article provide further examples of this longstanding difficulty. Because of disciplinary boundaries which, a priori, exclude from theorization cross-border class disputes and the complex relations between international factors and national political outcomes, the research field cannot get beyond episodic debates about the acceptable traits of political leaders (as in Albright [2018] and Levitsky and Ziblatt [2018]) or the particular mix of cultural and economic factors determining electoral decisions (as in Norris and Inglehart [2018] and Eatwell and Goodwin [2018]).

Of course, all the authors reviewed in this article are aware that many societies coexist in the world. Albright (2018) uses international comparisons to prove her point about the dangers of fascist leaders. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) explicitly reach beyond borders using their previous research on populism in Latin America to illuminate the threats posed by a populist leader in the USA. Norris and Inglehart (2018) and Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) aim to explain the rise of populism in advanced democracies in general, not only in specific countries, using a wealth of comparative data. Runciman’s (2018a)
elevated arguments are not meant to be country-specific but to address the limits of democracy in general.

Yet, in all of them, the dynamics that determine the rise of populist leaders and the contemporary crisis of democracy are ultimately defined in domestic terms. International and transnational factors – such as migration, global warming, the rise of China, the war in Syria, or the consequences of the 2008 North Atlantic crisis – play subsidiary roles. The lingering methodological nationalism is evident in the idealization of how national institutions, elites and, ultimately, individual voters in ‘mature’ democracies should behave, and in the causal power that is unproblematically attributed to them.

The non-conformity of Global South countries to ideal types of liberal democracy has never really led to a deeper questioning of the ontological assumptions underpinning this kind of political science analysis. Of course, the problem was deemed to be in their ‘weak’ institutions, which should eventually converge to the liberal democratic ideal. Confusion emerges when ‘mature’ western democracies themselves stop conforming to the liberal conceptual arsenal, abstracted from their own idealized historical experience. Accordingly, Orban, Putin, Erdogan, Duterte or Bolsonaro can be dismissed as consequences of ‘under-developed’ democratic institutions, irrational voters or corrupt political elites. Brexit and Trump, however, put a mirror in front of Global North political science, dramatically revealing the limits of explanations that ignore global socio-economic dynamics and reify internally defined political logics.

A clear instance of the methodological nationalist ontology underpinning this literature comes from the book which has the most universal ambition. When Runciman (2018a) compares the crisis of western democracies to a ‘mid-life crisis’, stating that it ‘include[s] behaviour we might associate with someone much younger’ (2018a: 5), he puts democracies in an evolutionary line, reinforcing the idea that each society is a self-contained entity which undergoes more or less comparable evolutionary changes. But Runciman does not stop there; he keeps returning to his life cycle metaphor throughout the book: ‘This is another function of the democratic middle age. In younger democracies there is a sense that the future is open, for better or for worse. That feeling is lost in mature democracies’ (2018a: 169).

This ontology is problematic and does not help to clarify the underpinnings of the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy in Global North societies either, because it ignores that the building of modern capitalist societies was an inherently international phenomenon (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015). It involved from the start the construction of ‘citizens’, entitled to political rights, and ‘others’, who belonged to the colonies (Bhambra, 2015). After the Second World War, the consolidation of contemporary western democracies capable of appeasing the most radical demands of the working class went hand in hand with the creation of mass-consumption societies, which depended (and continue depending) on a highly uneven global division of labour (Marini, 1973). The deep colonial interlinkages between the British and the Indian societies, for example, make it highly inappropriate to talk about the coexistence of a mature democracy undergoing a ‘mid-life’ crisis in the former and a ‘young’ democracy in the latter. Indeed, the existence of second-class imperial subjects, not duly represented in Westminster until only half a century ago, was clearly incompatible with the most basic democratic ideals. Consequently, British democracy is at best as old as the democracy of its former colonies.

It is not difficult to see in Runciman (2018a) an example of what Johannes Fabian famously defined as the ‘denial of coevalness’ (1983), since the ‘other’ is represented as
belonging to a different historical time, namely, the past. In this specific case, therefore, methodological nationalism unfolds into fully fledged Eurocentrism. In fact, in all of the authors reviewed in this article the prevailing focus on nationally defined political dynamics discounts the uneven and combined character of the development of modern liberal democratic systems. Ignoring the complex interaction between international pressures and opportunities and class disputes, they cannot account for the almost simultaneous rise of authoritarian regimes in countries as different as Brazil and the USA, the UK and Turkey, and the Philippines and Poland. The challenge posed by the contemporary global crisis of democracy goes much beyond Trump and Brexit. It involves a worrisome increase in the acceptance and normalization of extreme-right discursive and political manifestations around the world. To understand these manifestations and their interconnectedness, it is necessary to go beyond methodologically nationalist political science narratives.

**Conclusion**

It has become a cliché to say that ‘economics is too important to be left to economists’. Still, in a nutshell, my core argument is a similar one: democracy is too important to be left to political scientists. The contemporary crisis of democracy is a worldwide political and epistemological challenge, calling for holistic, multidisciplinary and more complexly theorized answers.

In this article, I reviewed five contributions from within the field of political science coming from both sides of the Atlantic. Taken together, the five books reviewed shed light on key aspects of the ongoing debate about the contemporary crisis of democracy, laying bare recurrent traits of authoritarian leaders (Albright, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), the importance of shifting cultural, economic and social settings (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2018) and the long-term challenges to democracy in general (Runciman, 2018a). Nevertheless, as I have argued, all of them fall short of providing comprehensive explanations, capable of systematically bridging international socio-economic dynamics and political outcomes. As a result, they cannot go beyond episodical accounts of the contemporary crisis of democracy, failing to connect its different expressions around the world.

Of course, fulfilling the call for holistic and multidisciplinary answers is not a simple task. It would require taking emerging threats to democracy in the Global South seriously, seeing them as more than simple deformations in a never-realized ideal type of democracy abstracted from the Global North experience. A renewed attention to ‘populism’ or ‘fascism’ in the Global South would allow for empirical investigations of the relationship between different, yet interconnected instances of the global crisis of democracy. How emerging authoritarian leaders and movements learn from each other and network around the world should be a key research question.

It is beyond the limited scope of this review article to fully develop an alternative explanation of the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the ontological foundations of any real alternative lie outside of the prison of political science. If that is the case, it is about time to break with methodological nationalism and start the systematic investigation of the interlinkages between societal multiplicity and democracy.
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Notes

1. Multiplicity, as defined in Rosenberg (2016), refers to the fact that societies do not exist in isolation. This article builds on ongoing debates about the concept of multiplicity and was originally presented as a conference paper in the section about ‘Multiplicity’ at the 2019 EISA Conference in Sofia. For insightful contributions to the debate, see Corry (2018), Powel (2018), Peltonen (2018) and the other participants of the Forum on ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’, published in 2018 in International Relations.

2. Depoliticized here refers to the argument that ‘fascism’ or ‘populism’ do not belong exclusively to one side of the political spectrum (the right), nor to a specific class configuration, in opposition to the classical Marxist argument that fascism is necessarily an extreme-right movement led by national capitalist ruling classes, mobilizing the petty bourgeoisie against the emerging working class and the immigrants (see, for instance, Trotsky, 1996 [1944]; Dos Santos, 2018 [1967]; Poulantzas, 2018 [1974]). The historical materialist tradition of class-based analysis of the rise of authoritarian leaders can be traced back to Marx’s own critique of Napoleon the Third in the classic 18th Brumaire (2008 [1852]).

3. In his influential podcast Talking Politics, Runciman distances himself from Albright and the American political science literature at large (2017, 2018b).

4. An interesting question can be raised at this point as to what extent these disciplinary limitations of political science can be overcome by incorporating a proper theorization of ‘the international’, and what would happen as a consequence with the disciplinary boundaries between political science and international relations, if they ever existed. In other words – and building on Rosenberg’s (2016) metaphor – what happens with political science once international relations breaks out of its ‘prison’? A full response would require a much deeper review of both disciplines and their contested border, as well as considerations on the role of academic disciplines in general. To be clear, I have no pretensions of ‘freeing’ political science from its own prison. Here, I can only suggest that the analysis of traditional objects of political science, such as democracy and other political regimes, would be enriched by cross-disciplinary engagements, in particular with international relations and international political economy. I thank an anonymous IPSR reviewer for giving me the chance to clarify this point.
5. There is a political point in calling it North Atlantic crisis, highlighting its origin, instead of calling it Global crisis. See, for instance, Jessop (2015).

6. See, for instance, Levitsky and Murillo (2005) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2012).

7. In that sense, the shortcomings of the political science literature reviewed in this article can be placed in the broader context of the political and theoretical crisis of liberalism at large, after the short-lived triumph of liberalism in the post-Cold War era. The shocking realization that liberal democratic ideas do not seem to hold even in core western societies should prompt the systematic questioning of liberal political tenets. See Jahn (2013) for an outstanding and comprehensive critique of liberalism.

8. The phrase and its variations are repeated so many times that it is difficult to determine its origin. For an insightful elaboration, see Chang (2014).

9. This involves taking Global South authors as legitimate producers of knowledge about their own social reality and engaging with the literature on the crisis of democracy beyond the Anglo-American academic establishment. For insightful examples, see Bello (2019) and Singer et al. (2016).

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