

Interview - David Runciman

Written by E-International Relations

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Professor David Runciman is a Professor of Politics at the University of Cambridge, where he was Head of Department from October 2014 to October 2018. Professor Runciman gave his Inaugural Lecture on “Political Theory and Real Politics in the Age of the Internet”. He also hosts the weekly politics podcast, *Talking Politics*. His most recent book was *How Democracy Ends*, which was published last year. Professor Runciman’s research projects include *Conspiracy and Democracy*, a five-year Leverhulme-funded research program based in CRASSH. This interview has been edited from a recorded conversation.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I’m mainly a historian and I think a lot of the most interesting research involves looking at the history of the very recent past. There’s a lot of fascinating work that’s been done around the political order that existed at the end of the 20th century. For example, on the end of history, where it came from and how it has come undone. More broadly, looking at how a liberal view of the world isn’t some timeless thing, it’s a construct. It has lots of contingencies built into it, and we’re seeing some of them now. I think historians have a lot of interesting things to say about politics and international relations by looking at the recent past. I’m also interested in the history of the perceptions of technology. Now, there is work from people who are finding surprising insights into 21st century technology in historical texts. For a long time, contemporary human beings have been interested in things we think we are the first to worry about, when we’re not.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Like a lot of people, I found the last 2-3 years in politics quite mind-altering. If you study politics for a living and you keep being surprised, which I have been consistently, you do start to change how you think about a lot of things. With luck, you start to become less sure of yourself and more aware of the limitations of your knowledge. The events of recent years, including Trump and Brexit, are indicative of the way that democratic politics around the world seems to have moved into a new phase very quickly and very dramatically. I’m 51, so that’s most of my life lived in one relatively stable political environment. I can remember the Cold War, but most of my adult life I’ve experienced the post-Cold War. At the moment, I’m really interested in 20th century writing about some 21st century questions.

If you want an answer to who has prompted the most significant shifts in my thinking, then I would say Hannah Arendt. A lot of people are interested in her work, but I was always bored by her writing and by people writing about her. About two months ago I read her book *The Human Condition*, and it completely changed the way I thought about her. In fact, it changed the way I thought about lots of different questions. It’s good to remember that just because everyone says something is interesting, they are not necessarily wrong! The book is wrong about some things, but it is deeply interesting.

In your opinion, what is driving current trends in relation to artificial intelligence in the field of Politics and International Relations?

I would say it’s three things. First, people who study Politics and International Relations (IR) are interested in power.

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They're interested in not just the power of machines, but in the power of corporations like Google and Facebook and their extraordinary ability to influence the world we live in, without having conventional political power. It comes back to thinking about the varieties of power and some of these varieties are quite new.

Second, in politics, people have a growing awareness of the ability for this technology to influence and shape elections. This has got a lot of people thinking about what this technology is good for and what it's bad for. We're probably in a pessimistic phase. People used to think technology was going to be wonderful for democracy and now they think it's terrible. The truth is that it's probably both good and bad. It's certainly driving a lot of interest, such as the focus on Cambridge Analytica.

Third, you find in IR that there are lots of things that are placed in a single category for artificial intelligence (AI). However, you just have to study AI a little to know that it has huge variations internationally – it means different things in different places. In Japan, AI means a caring robot. In other parts of the world, it means flesh-eating robotic monsters. The way that politics tackles it, is different across political systems and cultures – AI is not a single thing. It's like everything else – if you can't see the international variations you can't understand what it is.

You are currently engaged in two fascinating research projects, *Conspiracy and Democracy* and *AI: Trust and Society*. Are there conspiracy theories surrounding artificial intelligence in democratic societies and what impact are they having?

One part of the *Conspiracy and Democracy* project was to look at a common view that AI (and digital technology more generally) is driving conspiracy theories because it's allowing them to spread. There is a perspective that we live in a world where there are more and more conspiracy theories because the Internet has provided people with an opportunity to believe the craziest things. They then find other people who believe them, creating a network of people. What we've found is that this is probably not true. That behaviour does exist, but there are also more people who debunk conspiracy theories, so it's not all skewed one way. Conspiracy theories are actually debunked quicker. There have always been conspiracy theories, so it's not a phenomenon of the internet age, it goes way back.

It's also interesting that there is a perception that this technology is responsible for creating conspiracy theories. However, it isn't until very recently that there were conspiracy theories about the technology itself. There are lots of conspiracy theories now that say that Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg is secretly up to something. A lot of the reporting on Cambridge Analytica is written in the style of a conspiracy theory. It involves the idea that you uncover the network that involves the Mercers, Trump, and Brexit and everything connects – they're joining all of the dots. There are more people seeing the world and how everything connects to everything else, and this knowledge is power for a few players in the tech space. But those are still not the dominant conspiracy theories. There are many more conspiracy theories that are depressingly old-fashioned ones and they are anti-Semitic. Even some of the conspiracy theories about technology are anti-Semitic because every conspiracy theory has an anti-Semitic variant of it. It's not particularly the dominant mode, but I suspect that it will grow.

Does your research suggest that new technology will strengthen or weaken democracy in established democratic societies?

New technology will definitely both strengthen and weaken democracy. The digital revolution is obviously good and bad, and some of it is fantastic for democracy. It enhances people's voice, it enhances their ability to complain, it enhances their ability to inform themselves, and it allows them to create communities of like-minded citizens to get things done. However, it is also driving anger and hate, it is empowering a technical elite that is very unaccountable in democratic terms. The same thing that makes Mark Zuckerberg like a medieval prince is also the thing that allows people on Facebook to look after each other and protect each other in a natural disaster. They can do that in ways that can transform the political capacity of their states. I don't have the solutions to the problems, where AI has both a positive and negative impact. People always seem to think that everything in this field must come with solutions, but I don't have any.

You recently talked to Francis Fukuyama on your podcast *Talking Politics*. What are your thoughts on

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identity politics and does it relate to your research areas?

Francis Fukuyama is a very interesting man, but I'm not persuaded by identity politics. I think he treats identity politics as too broad a category, so it includes everything from gender at one end to rising Eastern European nationalism at the other. I don't think it's helpful to think of it all as identity. There clearly is something happening in politics where people are forming new kinds of groups with outlooks and attitudes that are politically divisive.

The areas that I'm interested in, the education divide and the generation divide, I don't think are defined by identities. In our politics now, whether you went to university is a bigger determinate of how you vote than income, gender, or class. The other big divide is how old you are. If you want to know how people voted on Brexit, you learn much more by knowing their age and their education than their occupation or their party affiliation. It's not clear to me that age is an identity. I know there are millennials, but I don't think that people over the age of 45 identify with the over 45's, or that people under 45 identify with others in that age bracket. But that was the dividing line in the last British general election. The same applies to people who go to university. I don't think it's an identity, but it is an outlook and has shared cultural assumptions. Those two areas are driving some current challenges in our politics.

I'm with Francis Fukuyama in thinking that these are new areas, as it's not just political left and right anymore. It's also not just about material income distribution questions. However, I don't think identity politics is what you should call it. It's about a sense of a shared outlook that produces forms of shared political behaviour. There is something about identity that is too close to how you present yourself as a member of that group. I'm not sure that it's helpful to think like that, particularly with old and young distinctions.

In a recent Guardian article you described democracy as “tired, vindictive, self-deceiving, paranoid, clumsy and frequently ineffectual.” In what context has this view of democracy emerged?

It was indeed a phrase I used, but it was to describe the view of the people who are most contemptuous of democracy. There is a group of people who are semi-anarchic, but also very reactionary, who basically say that the experiment has failed, that we've tried democracy and it doesn't work. I don't think they are right, but I can see why they increasingly think that. Of those adjectives used in the article, I definitely think that democracy is tired. I think our democracies are struggling to renew themselves. There is also vindictiveness in there. Self-deceiving – I think we spend a lot of time telling ourselves that democracy is this wonderful thing and we've stopped asking ourselves how and why. I think there is a lot of paranoia around, and I think democracies are quite clumsy. The line in the article sounds terrible at first, but when you break it all down it starts to make sense. The reality is that this is the polite version! Democracy has been described as 'cannibalistic zombie politics.' I think this view is wrong. I think there are ways that democracy can potentially renew itself. Part of that is about being aware that we can't just cling on to the democracies that we've had for the last 20, 30, 40 years and think that if we keep going that we'll be alright. We will have to adapt.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of Politics and International Relations?

I would say that it's important to take seriously the fact that many of the most interesting insights in politics and IR are not in politics and IR books. They are in novels, they're in history of art books – it is not limited by the academic discipline. Books about politics and IR that are limited by the academic discipline are often not actually about politics and IR, they're just about the discipline. It's not about being interdisciplinary necessarily, it's about supplementing your academic reading in IR with some amazing novels about politics that gives you a different kind of openness. There is a danger that a lot of academic social sciences are self-referential. Being interdisciplinary just means that you're being self-referential in an interdisciplinary way.

The other thing is, don't take too long to write what you're writing, because the world is changing fast. It's good to write shorter and more topical things alongside more academic work. Write short pieces of journalism or blog posts and get into a regular habit of producing that kind of work if you can.

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