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**David Runciman, *Jak kończy się demokracja*,  
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pp. 256**

Many liberal democracy advocating researchers often tend to go to extremes in formulating conclusions and forecasts. In times of positive international conditioning, they proclaim inevitable and unconditional triumph of this form of democratic systems and its superiority over other forms of government. In their opinion, democracy is elevated not only to the rank of value in itself, but also to a value objective and universal. The optimism of the “end of history” and the “unipolar moment” endured the hardship of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and still remains noticeable in scientific and political discourse. However, on the other hand, in case of a crisis in democratic functionality or status quo being disrupted due to the increase of anti-democratic popularity, or even the rise to power of parties whose political program does not meet accepted standards, enthusiasts of liberal democracy are able to quickly come to the conclusion that it has been completely distorted from its original

form, and herald its imminent fall throughout entire system – pointing obstinately to the example of the Weimar Republic. David Runciman in his work successfully avoids this trap, offering an original approach to the problem of the crisis of functionality and popularity of the Western political system.

Despite his noticeable political preferences, the author does not treat contemporary crisis of trust in public institutions and the establishment only in the category of a clash between populism (identified as a radical wing which is the source of raging fascism and a threat towards the peace and freedom) and the essence of democracy. He considers populist movements as a symptom rather than a cause of the weakening of modern order, which has its source in the loss of citizens’ trust in democratic institutions or in the superficiality of their functionality. Since this phenomenon is progressive and not explicit, Runciman hypothesizes that the vio-

lent coup d'état will be rejected as a likely scenario for the collapse of the Western political system. As he states, the end of liberal democracy is not spontaneous and it cannot be clearly defined, because it is a long process of trust in its effectiveness decay.

The work was divided into an introductory part, a prologue, four chapters, a summary and an epilogue. In addition, the Polish translation was accompanied by an original preface written by Jarosław Kuisz. The work assumes a problem-oriented structure: the author devotes each chapter to a different aspect of the issue, which is the fall of democracy – both potential and functional. The author also devotes a lot of attention to issues related to conspiracy theories. This theme is noticeable in all chapters. Runciman considers them to be both a decay accelerating factor and a symptom of the dysfunctionality of liberal democratic institutions.

The first chapter, entitled “Zamach stanu” [Coup d'état], focuses on the most obvious democracy collapse scenario, which is the political upheaval committed by non-democratic forces. The author, apart from revolution carried out by non-government group, presents (and analyzes) six potential scenarios of the fall of democracy introduced by Nancy Bermeo: “administrative coup d'état”, “election day fraud”, “legitimized coup”, “competence escalation”, and “strategic electoral manipulation”. In the course of the analysis, Runciman additionally distinguished another one: the external negation of democracy. He presents this type on the example of the actions taken by EU Troika in relation to Greece overwhelmed by economic crisis of 2008. The fact that the author indicates both populist and elitist sources of decay of democratic fo-

undations is, as has been mentioned, the advantage of the book. However, it is difficult to agree with the concept presented by the author in regards to development of populism conditioning. As one of the most important factors he mentions the lack of wars that would unite the nation in a sense of community in opposition to an external enemy. This approach seems to contradict the observed increase in the support of populist movements as a result of dissatisfaction caused by foreign policy, which led to the involvement in the conflict and citizens' disappointment of its result.

In the second chapter, entitled “Katastrofa” [The Catastrophe], Runciman analyses what impact on the vitality of liberal democracy has “existential risk” factor. He focuses mainly on two of them: ecological issues and weapons of mass destruction. Both scenarios: climate change and nuclear war, are along the most frequently mentioned threats not only for the international order but also for the entire civilization. Runciman refers to historical events and literature (both to academical data and fiction) in order to show how these threats are perceived in democratic societies. He also addresses the problem of moral dissonance between democratic order and possession (and use) of weapons of mass destruction, as one of the main reasons for the progressive negation of fundamental values and thus the essence of democracy. However, this approach seems to be strongly exaggerated. The development of nuclear weapons undoubtedly constituted a breakthrough in the art of war, superpower geopolitics and a global balance of power, however, despite the panic of the 1950s and 1960s, it did not cause social decay or rejection of ethical values by the West. Nuclear weapons, although extremely destructive, since the

end of World War II had only deterrent functions. And although the possibility of it being used was (and, in a sense, still is to this day) the main fear of the Cold War period, it did not bring more suffering than mustard gas, napalm or conventional weapons – military means that in some cases are widely used by Western democracies to this day.

What particularly stands out in the current situation is the fact that Runciman mentions a global pandemic and the use of biological weapons as one of the global existential threats. He devotes relatively little attention to these issues; they are mentioned along the revolt of intelligent machines, however, due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth looking at how the author perceived the likelihood of a similar epidemic, and how he estimated its potential impact on the liberal democratic order. Especially due to the fact that, according to official statistics, Western European countries and the United States are currently among the most affected by the ongoing epidemic. The economic, political and social consequences that the next few months bring in these countries are difficult to estimate, hence it is worth to familiarize with the presented point of view, especially in regards to the elements that are considered to be the most vulnerable.

The third chapter is devoted to the problem of rapid technological development, which erodes the foundations of a democratic society. Nowadays this topic is quite widely discussed, especially in the context of threats to privacy and surveillance of citizens carried out by social media, private corporations and government. While Runciman does not belittle this issue, he puts more emphasis on the problem of the impact modern technolo-

gy-shaped mentality has on social bonds and citizens' involvement in public affairs. The formation of this model of thinking in democracy, slowly turns it into mechanical societies and, according to the author, into full susceptibility to manipulation of undemocratic forces. Or on the contrary – it causes frustration resulting from dissonance between being used to quick problem solving and the complex nature of economics, social issues, or foreign policy. Runciman also devotes a lot of attention to the problem of non-democratic NGO actors assuming control over citizens, and the weakening of moral and ethical principles (which are the basis for the functioning of a democratic society) caused by online anonymity.

One of the most prominent advantages of the study seems to be chapter four, entitled “Coś lepszego” [Something Better]. In this part, the author undertakes a critical polemic with modern alternatives to liberal democracy, such as pragmatic authoritarianism, epistocracy, and anarchism. Because this topic is controversial, the discourse about it tends to be non-substantive. Advocates of liberal democracy often use dogmatic arguments, clinging to the accepted canon of values and not allowing any alternative. On the other hand, its opponents often make naive assumptions and base their arguments on far-fetched simplifications of the complicated political, social or economic reality, which in practice reduces their postulates to utopianism. Runciman is trying to defend liberal democracy without denying its flaws and weaknesses, pointing to those of its negative features that contribute to the increase in the popularity of alternative concepts. However, what lacked was polemics with more balanced concepts – such as citizen meritocracy.

One of the most noticeable features of the work is its informal, sometimes even popular science character. The author uses colloquial language and overt simplifications. He also devotes a lot of attention towards analysis of non-scientific, fictional literature. For this reason, although the book reads very fluently, it sometimes resembles more of a free reflection on a given problem than a thorough study of the field. An important problem, which to some extent affects the reception of the work, is, as mentioned, a very explicit political declaration of the author. While this is usually inevitable, especially when discussing controversial and emotional issues, Runciman's parallels between Trump and his supporters and Hitler seem too far-reaching. In other places, the author uses phrases such as "conservative journalist and instigator" and "privileged white man", which seems to fit more to journalistic rather than scientific texts.

Another issue that raises some reservations is also the lack of a specific definition of the very essence of liberal democracy.

In the first chapter Runciman rejects the claim of more than two hundred years of US democratic tradition, due to the fact that the rights and freedoms guaranteed to their society have been gradually expanding – both on its subject and object. Thus, the USA in the twenties is not considered by him to be a full democracy, similarly (though for quite different reasons) the United States of the nineties. In the entire study, the author points to distortions and institutional problems, referring to examples taking place throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Therefore, one can get the impression that democracy itself is only an idealized concept – a state practically unattainable in the real world.

*How Democracy Ends* presents an interesting approach to the problem. The author conducted his research on political, psychological, philosophical, economic or sociological levels. Despite the loose approach to methodological and formal aspects, it is certainly a valuable reflection on the significant problem of the modern West.