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Book Review: Crises of Democracy

Ibrahim Genc*

Over the last few years, especially since Trump's rise to power, many political scientists have been sounding the alarm bells. Amongst them is a prominent scholar Adam Przeworski. He warns that citizens have lost their trust not only in democracy but in nominally democratic institutions that constitute the basis for a healthy democracy. For the author, the unique challenge to democracy is the one that gradually destroys democracy, the one that almost has no signs of danger on the surface. Critical of arriving at firm conclusions and predicting the future, he notes, "I hope to encourage skepticism amongst those who will read this book." (Przeworski 2019:xii). The primary purpose of this book is to demonstrate the issues in today's democracies by offering cases from past and present.

The author offers his account of democratic failure across various case studies. Those studies include Germany in the 1930s, Italy in the 1950s, and Orban's Hungary. Presenting both historical and contemporary examples from different countries makes this an empirically rich study. Drawing on the past models, he argues that economy and inequality are essential factors that determine the durability of democracy. He also draws our attention to the part that citizens play in determining the political outcomes. "Conditions," writes Przeworski, "do not determine the outcomes; actions of people under the conditions do" (2019:79).

Critical of adding adjectives to democracy, Przeworski argues that adjectives make it more challenging to qualify as a democracy. Such demanding definitions of democracy for him creates an unnecessary longer list of crises to examine. For that reason, he chooses to adopt a relatively simple explanation of democracy. "Democracy," writes Przeworski, "is a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections and have a reasonable possibility of removing incumbent governments they do not like (2019:5). Given his definition of democracy, he places particular emphasis on the electoral process. For instance, "Under democracy," he puts, "the only effective device for disciplining politicians are elections (Przeworski 2019:6).

Departing from the past, Przeworski identifies three signs that cause a crisis. He posits that, amongst several others, three signs that might indicate a crisis warrant closer examination. Those are "(1) the rapid erosion of traditional party systems; (2) the rise of xenophobic, racist, and nationalistic parties and attitudes; and (3) the decline in support for "democracy" in public opinion surveys" (Przeworski 2019:83). Even though he offers his take on each sign, he does not arrive at a satisfying conclusion. Rather, he poses more questions.

Having explained the past, the author turns to the present world. He argues that the belief that future generations will have worse conditions than their parents contributes to the crisis of democracy. Przeworski then concludes his book with the following remarks. "I am moderately pessimistic about the future. I do not think that the very survival of democracy is at stake in most countries, but I do not see what would get us out of the current discontent." (2019:206).

This is undoubtedly a timely book by a prominent political scientist. Comparing the past with the present in the book allows us to see the differences between two troubling times. Moreover, perhaps, more importantly, he brings back some of the old literature that seems to have been forgotten by some of today's scholars.

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The one thing that might trouble the reader is the unwillingness of Przeworski in offering definite answers to the question that he asks. Though he clearly says that he does not intend to provide solid solutions, seeing perhaps, a few answers would have been great for readers and, of course, for students of democratic decline. In addition to this, adopting a “minimalist” view of democracy might receive criticism from scholars of democracy.

To finish on a positive note, the book seems to have taken its place amongst prominent books on the issues that democracy faces as it is an excellent analysis of different cases from the past and present. More importantly, the author, perhaps deliberately, by posing questions at the end of almost every section, creates opportunities for future researchers. For anyone who wishes to delve into the trajectory of democracy in today's world, this is a must read by a prominent political scientist.