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The Threats Democracy Faces Today are Not Identical to those in the 1930s.

The dangers and challenges Western democracies face today may look and sound similar to those of the 1930s, but the cultural context is nevertheless different, especially in Western Europe and America, according to the political academics David Runciman and Yascha Mounk.

Speaking today at a sold out event at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Runciman - Professor of Politics at the University of Cambridge - and Mounk - a Lecturer on Government at Harvard University - explained that the rise of populist leaders and politics around the world had to be properly understood.

“Even a few years ago, I’d have said that one of the things that gives me great optimism about the future of democracy is that there isn’t really a feasible alternative to it,” Mounk said.

“The last few years have slightly given the lie to this optimistic assumption,” he added. “If you look at a country like Hungary, we’ve seen Viktor Orbán, someone who was democratically elected, undermine the protections of the system - to place his own loyalists on the supreme court, put political apparatchiks on the electoral commission, change parts of electoral law, turn state television into a propaganda outlet, force the sale of all the significant private media outlets into the hands of his allies. Hungary is no longer a democracy in any meaningful sense.”

Populist leaders may come from the Far Left or Far Right, but characteristics they share include the message that other political leaders are corrupt, self-serving and can’t be trusted; that blame for current woes can be put on some minority, and that only they truly represent the people – removing the concept of legitimate opposition from within the political system.

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“Populists do not come along and say ‘We want to replace democracy with something else’,” added Runciman. “They say ‘We want to rescue democracy, and one of the ways we’re going to rescue it is by adopting other democratic means to allow the voice of the people to be heard.’ I don’t see that going away.”

Runciman believes that democracies are “brilliant at adapting to circumstances” and “very bad” at changing their core structures. An obvious example of this was the Brexit Referendum, which simply does not fit within the existing British party political system.

“If Brexit shows anything, it’s that a one-off referendum on a fundamental question is really hard to plug back into representative democracy,” he said. “The challenge that Britain is facing at the moment is how to reconcile the answer to that question with the structures of representative democracy.

“Brexit may help trigger it, but there may come a point when we realise the problem is not the choices we make at Election time, but the way in which those choices are presented to us.”

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