BOOK REVIEW

John Keane 2009. *The Life and Death of Democracy*.
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Democracy has lived many different lives and suffered several deaths. Forms of self-government, the institutional core of democracy, appeared long before the Greeks invented the word 'democracy'. They did not vanish from the globe with the decline of the Greek polities. Democracy remained alive outside Europe throughout the following centuries. Moreover, advancement and promotion of democracy in modern times was by no means an exclusive occupation of European or Northern American thinkers and states. And still today the evolution of twenty-first century democracy takes place not only in Washington, Paris or Berlin, but also in Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi and Johannesburg. The history of democracy covers a global scale and can be traced throughout the recorded history of mankind. Its forgotten paths offer many surprises usually neglected by parochial Western historiography.

The British political theorist John Keane shows in his comprehensive global history of *The Life and Death of Democracy* that there is no such thing as 'the' history of democracy but rather a plentitude of partially entangled histories of different forms of self-government. From around 3000 BCE until nowadays democracy continuously evolved, died and was reborn in all corners of the world. Democracy resembles

a revenant. Keane approaches this widespread and complex history of democracy by trying to merge the occasionally contradictory and tension-filled histories of democracies into a broader narrative forging a bridge between the history of political thought and its historical implementation, to a political theory of the current and future forms of democracy. Democracy, he argues, is neither a static set of certain institutional provisions nor an enunciated idea, but a universal state of mind, a mental disposition for self-government. Democracy is the understanding that any kind of political rule is man-made and therefore contingent. It bears the claim that nobody should rule over others on the ground of bogus beliefs, alleged Universal Principles, divine providence or brute force. Democracy throws the contingency of political affairs into sharp relief.

Despite this metahistorical mental quality, any substantiation of democracy in terms of institutions and political language is entirely dependent on the given circumstances. Therefore any teleological approach to the history of democracy is mistaken. Democracy is always in the making and subject to permanent mutations. So democracy itself is exposed to the contingency of history. The aforementioned state of mind is more a potential possibility of human thought and action but by no means necessarily. The anthropological constant which seems to nurture a 'continuous struggle […] to control publicly the exercise of power' (160) is opposed by human fallibility. History shows that any experiments with self-government were always contested. Sometimes the wealthy and powerful successfully opposed the implementation of institutions of self-government; in other cases these institutions proved to be utterly defective. The most significant threat of democracy is the seduction of the people by demagogues. Democracy, another central claim of the book, has no historical built-in guarantees and is neither inevitable nor incorruptible. Given this two-faced initial anthropological situation, no iron law of the global spread and historical success of democracy can be claimed. There is no pathway in the history of mankind leading straight to democracy. The history of democracy does not even follow any regular patterns. 'We could say that democracy dwells in a house of contingency.' (161)

This applies for the history of democracy as well as for its present and future. Democracy might prevail in the Western world of the twenty-first century, it might flourish in places like Southern America, India or South Africa – but it can never be taken for granted. In

fact Keane offers a rather grim outlook for the future of democracy. The talk of a 'third wave' (Samuel Huntington) or 'the end of history' (Francis Fukuyama) is fundamentally mistaken. In order to prove the historical necessity of Western democracy, it ignores the devastating effects of economical crises, terrorism, imperialism or public disaffection with politics for the life of democracy. A 're-description' (847) of democracy is needed, which accepts democracy's entanglement with contingency and therefore its vulnerable existence. By doing so, we might learn from the historical births and deaths of democracy which remedies could serve to prolong its current life into the future. With this firm intention of justifying and promoting the continued existence of democracy, the book examines how the idea of democracy dealt with the contingency of history, which manifestations of self-government took place in numerous historical settings. The concrete manifestations of the lives and deaths of democracies depended on external circumstances, such as the social structure of the polity, religious beliefs, the fortunes of war, together with geography or climate. This is in addition to the technical development which determines how intensively a polity can be ruled and how large a democratic public can be. Keane aims to learn why some contingent conditions led either to the birth or the death of historical implementations of democracy. The interaction between changing circumstances and the metahistorical content of democracy is merged into a narrative that distinguishes three overlapping and partially consecutive phases of implemented self-government.

The first, *assembly democracy*, can be traced back until the year 3200 BCE to the cities of Syria-Mesopotamia. Public assemblies of the citizens controlled the kings power and decided publicly about 'who gets what, when and how' (120). These early democratic procedures formed a political tradition which influenced the region's political system in the course of time. Keane regards the Greek democracy as an ancestor of this tradition. Using the example of the 'blood-and-guts Athenian transition to democracy' (9), Keane shows how contingent both the emergence and the fall of democratic self-government can be. There was no master plan of establishing democratic rule in Athens at any time. Instead, the transition rested upon the unintended outcomes of actions by figures like Cleisthenes or Demonax, on the auguries of oracles, the bellicose foreign policy environment, a slaveholder society and so forth. Once erected democracy showed its entangle-

ment with contingency in the daily life of its citizens. It challenged the habitual ways of seeing the world as natural and unchangeable by human beings. To the contrary, democracy 'highlighted the contingency of things, events, institutions, people and their belief' (51) which were formed by the citizens themselves. Never ending arguments in the peoples' assembly, experiences with demagogues striving to become tyrants, the permanent criticism of the Sophists, and institutions like ostracism or appointment to offices by lot demonstrated the contingency of human affairs and led to a skeptical view about power and authority. The question of who gets what, when and how seemed utterly mundane and separated from the world of gods. Athenian citizens could never know what tomorrows' decisions would be. Democracy affected the 'the shared mental infrastructure' (53) of the citizens, it was synonymous with 'unpredictability' (54). Hence the necessity of governing others was fundamentally called into question in favor of self-government. But Athens proved as well the vulnerability of democracy from the inside. The building of an empire and the militarization of life paved the way for *hubris*. Democrats thought of themselves as rulers of the world as they knew it. 'Citizenship and military service grew indistinguishable.' (69) The question of who was entitled to be 'the people' was contested. As the militarization of the public life went on, the interest in compromise declined and undermined the very core of assembly democracy. When Athens was eventually defeated by the Macedonians, there was not much left of democracy. This is one of many examples Keane provides to illustrate that democracy is not a necessary outcome of the historical process and, when achieved, is always endangered.

After Greek democracy vanished, forms of self-government of people considering themselves as equal were cultivated and further developed, most significantly by early Islam. Without going into details, it should be noted that Keane draws the conclusion that Islam 'nurtured a vibrant culture of non-violent power-sharing between rulers and ruled' (131) manifested in institutions like the *waqf*, *meshwerets* or the mosque. They enriched the concept of self-government through introducing the idea of representation. Representative institutions enabled accountability in the exercise of public power and contributed to the formation of what we would today call a civil society. Non-governmental institutions administered their own affairs and interacted with organized religion and governmental power. Democracy

proved to be both versatile and depended on the context of its implementation, since dynamic political communities were now organized within a monotheist religious framework, and political entities larger than the polis. The common approach of conceiving democracy as a particularly Western affair is therefore mistaken. Moreover, Keane argues, that it was Islam which sowed the first seeds of representative government in Europe, more precise in Spain during the twelth century. Viewing democracy as exposed to contingent influences means to grasp the variability of the principle

> that government is only ever legitimate when it has been sanctioned by the active consent of the representatives chosen by the governed themselves (155).

The further development of representative forms of self-government led to the second phase of the history of democracy. *Representative democracy* was developed mainly in Europe and Northern America during the time span of nearly a millennium. Keane offers a multitude of detailed descriptions on the emergence of representative democracy in Early Modern Europe. In general, this process was 'unplanned and messy, even when consciously intended' (166). It led to many different kinds of representative democracy. Influential were a broad range of factors such as kings and noblemen on the Iberian Peninsula, the state of Scandinavian nature, the Western European city councils and burghers as well as religious practices like the Catholic distinction between the office and its incumbent or the struggle of the Reformation.

A brief examination of the revolution in the Low Countries during the sixteenth century illuminates what Keane has in mind when he speaks of a non-teleogical development towards representative democracy. The transition of the formerly Spanish-dominated Netherlands to a first pioneer of representative democracy in Europe depended upon a number of preconditions: the most important of them were the high degree of urbanization, commercial development, the steady growth of a centralized state in royal hands, and old traditions of self-government. In this context, an efficacious reinterpretation of the political language of democracy took place. In the revolution of the Low Countries, 'democracy' denoted political independence, the idea of natural liberty, and the rule of an aristocracy. All of this together paved the way for a successful revolution against the foreign

rule of the *Habsburg* emperor and led to the self empowerment of the urban aristocracies. The Low Countries set an example for the following revolutionary transitions towards representative government in places like England or Sweden. But like all revolutions, its success was at no point guaranteed as well as the following spread of democratic institutions like periodic elections of officeholders and representatives, written constitutions or independent judiciaries.

An example of what could be called democracy by accident is the development of representative democracy in the United States of America. Keane opposes the popular belief that the upheaval of 1776 was the first genuinely democratic revolution.

> The inspiring history of representative democracy in America is no simple tale of blissful progress […], its triumph was never guaranteed; it was always more fraught and fragile than the textbook story supposes (275).

The Founding Fathers of the American constitution had anything but democratic intentions in mind. Instead they put in motion a chain of events which nurtured representative democracy. A balance of power, the rule of law and periodic elections were 'built in the name of putting a stop to democracy' (275) and in favor of an elitist republic of gentlemen-aristocrats. The fear prevailed that the vulnerability of the Athenian democracy to breakdowns due to an ignorant demos was distinctive to any kind of democracy. The genius of 'the people' was mistrusted since it seemed unpredictable and full of paradoxical opinions. Therefore 'the people' needed to be represented by firm and distinguished men. But things turned out rather differently.

> By the early 1790s, the American republic resembled a chrysalis, out of which the butterfly of representative democracy […] soon emerged (284).

Public disaffection with the gentlemen rule, manifested in events like the Whiskey Rebellion or the growth of Democratic-Republican Societies in the late eighteenth century, nurtured a new spirit of democracy. Free speech, the right to differ publicly from the government and the demand of equality of the citizens gave 'democracy' a new and positive meaning. The United States became 'the most promising representative democracy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (359) – against the original and firm intentions of the Founding

Fathers. This democracy by accident set the standard for the representative democracies to come. It nurtured the worlds' first political party system, peaceful handovers of government, grassroots movements, professional election campaigning, extensions of the rights of citizenship and franchise. The American representative democracy contributed to yet another and powerful transformation of the language and the institutional setting of democracy.

But coincidence also functioned as democracy's gravedigger in the European 'graveyard' (455) of the first half of the twentieth century. Initially, the French Revolution contributed to alter the meaning of 'democracy'. The French Revolution promoted democracy as a viable form of government for states defined by a large territory and complex social relations.

> Democracy had become a vital principle: a new type of political regime that ideally combined political representation and the universal suffrage of men with a way of life in which the values of equality flourished, freed from hereditary guff and aristocratic perks (486 f.).

But at the same time, nationalism entered the stage and the search for national identity became a powerful force. The merger of the democratic principle of self-government with the claim that nations should determine their own destiny led eventually to the outbreak of World War I. Things got worse when totalitarian demagogues appealed successfully to 'the people', identified with a particular race or nation in order to ultimately destroy representative democracy.

> Totalitarianism was a simulation of representative democracy […] its institutions, methods and ethos paid homage to the great popular upsurge that dated from the French Revolution. […] Totalitarianism was the rule of the masses, for the masses, by the leaders of the masses. (576)

The European graveyard showed that democracy was anything but invulnerable, that in a time of economic crisis or confusion about collective identity, its language could be turned successfully against it. Democracy, this was the lesson – once again – to be learned, had no built-in historical guarantees.

At the same time, when democracy (almost) died in Europe, it was born in India. The 'biggest and most interesting, cutting-edge democracy' (585) marks the beginning of the third and still ongoing phase

of the history of democracy. *Monitory democracy* complements the established institutions of representative democracy with a plentitude of new techniques empowering civil society to effectively control any actor which exercises state power. It provides quotas for minorities, strong forms of participative local governments, extra-parliamentary bodies of representation, non-violent resistance, participatory budgeting and so forth. Indias unique institutional arrangement and political culture, deliberately non-Western, shows that democracy can work with a *demos* defined by a huge variety of customs, histories and religions. It proves as well the growing importance of the extra-parliamentary civil society in democratic politics. The 'kaleidoscope of social groups and networked grass roots movements' (622) went through its baptism of fire in the 1970s when India stood on the edge of authoritarian rule by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, it showed its teeth when surmounting the patronage-ridden system during the era of Congress Party dominance. India contributed complex patterns of citizens' representation and government accountability to the language and institutional settings of democracy at all levels and in all fields. Democracy once more changed its institutional appearance as well as its language. Now democracy proved capable to function

> within a society that lacked a homogenous *demos*, a civil society schackled by poverty and illiteracy and crowded with all sorts of cultural, religious and historical distinctions (629).

The contingent or 'elusive, random quality' (652) of the history of democracy prevailed as well in the age of monitory democracy.

It is the end of the second millennium when Keane switches from the history of democracy to a political theory of contemporary democracy. Monitory democracy has advanced due to technological progress. Inventions like the internet have certainly changed the political geography of democratic institutions. Modern means of communication caused the 'unplanned birth' (728) of the 'deepest and widest system of democracy ever known' (698). Power scrutinizing mechanisms can be found on a global scale, on different levels, in different sizes and modes of operation. They rely on the close connection of democracy and human rights after 1945. Every human being is now entitled to a set of basic rights. Civil societies are encouraged to stand up for their promotion. Communicative abundance connected with human

rights redefined 'democracy'. Among the new power scrutinizing mechanisms are NGOs, online petitions, Wikileaks, think-tanks or consumer councils. They cover all fields of politics and are committed to provide the public with additional information and to control those who exercise power. The classical institutions of representative democracy are not replaced, but they lost their pivotal position. A plentitude of forces, causers and causes is at work in monitory democracy.

> It is as if the principle of representative democracy – public openness, citizens' equality, selecting representatives – are superimposed on representative democracy itself (695).

Monitory democracy alters the meaning of representation as well. The question of who is represented in which way transcends the national state and state institutions. It has to be answered for every field of politics differently on a potentially global scale.

> Democracy comes to mean a way of life and a mode of governing in which power is everywhere subject to checks and balances, such that nobody is entitled to rule without the consent of the governed, or their representatives (706).

But the global spread of the language and institutions of monitory democracy is by no means a guarantee for the persistence of democracy even in the near future. Keane provides a rather grim assessment for the prospects of monitory democracy. There is no shortage of efforts by the powerful to manipulate the people, the profusion of communication can lead to confusion and disengagement of the citizens from a world which seems overwhelmingly complex. At the same time, the reputation of parties and politicians is in decline. They are perceived to be less influential and representative in the age of global politics. Many people turn their back on the classical institutions of representative democracy. Cross-border politics, dominated by wealthy and powerful elites, squeeze democratic institutions. Monitory democracy suffers from an under concentration of power in governing institutions: though they can be controlled rather effectively, they lack the power to alter the course of global politics. The gap between the 'promise and performance' (818) of democracy has reached a critical extent. Disaffection with democracy and fatalism among the people is on the rise. That leads to 'an old problem: disillusionment with the

institutions and ideals of democracy' (812). In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the future of democracy is at stake again.

Whether democracy's death is at hand is posed by the book as an utterly open question. One remedy offered by Keane is the aggressive propagation of democracy's entanglement with contingency. It should be made clear in public discourse about the defects of contemporary democracy, that it is always in the making and therefore necessarily incomplete. Democracies depend on people who

> speak and act as if they are subjects of this world, in all its flesh-and-blood complexity, rather than objects dangling on some other-wordly or super-wordly dynamic (854).

In other words, democracy is a human invention and therefore must take into account human capacities and fallibilities. In his defense of democracy, Keane reminds us that democracy is first of all a state of mind and that actions towards an advancement of monitory democracy in order to master the future has to start from the people's will to govern themselves. Given this challenging task, and taking democracy's complex entanglement with the contingency of all human affairs into consideration, an attitude of humility is appropriate. Democracy, as is Keane's conclusion, will be the strongest when it means 'the rule of the humble, by the humble, for the humble' (855).