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The Life and Death of Democracy

Interview with John Keane

Bridget Cotter interviews John Keane, 9 June 2010

***The Life and Death of Democracy* was published exactly a year ago. How has it been received?**

The reception perhaps mirrors the scope of the book – it’s an attempt to write the first-ever global history of democracy – and the multiple voices it contains. It’s hardly a single-authored book, but very much a collective effort. Conceived during my time at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, it’s a summary statement of what I learned from all the things that went on there: the interesting and sometimes fiery debates, the excellent dissertations, the inputs of researchers and the many visitors from home and abroad who made it such a fine place to work. The book’s also a collective effort in another sense. Hundreds of people generously granted interviews, submitted tips and materials, and read and made comments on various drafts of the long narrative. I suppose the book’s reception has been shaped as well by its attempt to stir up trouble, to prod and poke at the many prejudices that have become affixed to the ideals, language and institutions of democracy.

What kinds of prejudice?

Against previous self-contradictory efforts to justify democracy by resorting to haughty First Principles, the book makes a new ethical case for democracy as the best remedy for human folly, arrogance, lying and the hubris that typically feeds upon First Principles. The book criticises the nineteenth-century myth of democracy’s Athenian beginnings. It tables solid new archaeological evidence of the existence of scores of ancient Greek democracies, some of them much older than Athens. The pre-Greek (Mycenaean, Linear B) roots of the language of democracy are examined. The book defends the controversial claim that early democracy had Eastern origins, in the

citizen assemblies that first sprang up in ancient Syria–Mesopotamia and were later imported via the Phoenicians into the Greek world.

The survival of the spirit of assembly democracy after Athens, for instance within the early Muslim world, is highlighted, along with the medieval origins of democratic government in representative form. The book questions the view of Robert Dahl, John Dunn and others that after Athens democracy faded away almost everywhere, for nearly two thousand years. It pays attention to the long chain of efforts to democratise representative government, many of them forgotten, from the first experiments during the late sixteenth-century in the Low Countries to the later struggles for democratic representation throughout Spanish America and the colonies of Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

The whole approach is not antiquarian, history for history's sake. It's rather a history of democracy that concentrates on the present and future of democracy. It's designed to underscore democracy's great fragility and mutability as a political form, as well as to persuade readers that almost all current fads in democratic theory – from deliberative democracy and its neo-Hobbesian opponents to talk of 'liberal democracy', cosmopolitan democracy and participatory governance – suffer from amnesia. There are various reasons for this chronic memory loss, including the grip of empiricism and a preoccupation with teaching the supposed 'classical' texts and authors, but the knock-on effect is unhealthy. Those who have no sense of the past inevitably misunderstand the present, and that's a big quibble I have with current analyses of democracy.

You write about 'monitory democracy'. What does this mean?

I'd like to emphasise that democracy, treated as a political form, as a whole way of life, is unique because it sharpens people's collective sense of the contingency of who gets what, when and how, and whether they deserve their privileges, or their misfortunes. Alexis de Tocqueville was the first writer on democracy to spot its denaturing effects. Through time, democracy has enabled people – I don't say The People – to question the supposed necessity of tyrants, monarchs, emperors, slave owners, bosses and bullies. It's very odd that contemporary analyses of democracy

mostly suppress the point. So the book sets out to democratise our understanding of democracy by heightening our sense of its temporality. It speaks about three historical epochs of democracy: the early forms of assembly democracy; the emergence of democracy in representative, territorial state form; and, since the end of World War Two, the rise of ‘monitory democracy’, a large-scale mutation that slowly but surely is transforming the dynamics of the spirit, language and institutions of democracy. Democracy is coming to mean much more than just fair and free elections within territorial state settings. It’s a synecdoche for the chastening of power, a signifier that underscores the vital importance of subjecting governments, corporations and other bodies to permanent public scrutiny and control. For the sake of greater equality, democracy is the ongoing attempt to humble power, to keep power on its toes – in between elections, even in cross-border settings.

What did reviewers say about ‘monitory democracy’?

The distinction between assembly and representative forms of democracy is familiar, even though I try to explain in detail how and why the distinction came about. The theory of monitory democracy is a different matter. It has stirred up a lot of discussion and has meant different things to different audiences in different contexts. It all started in Britain, where the book appeared in the midst of the gravest parliamentary corruption scandal since the early nineteenth century. MPs ‘flipping’, bogus invoices for second houses and flats, and petty claims for such items as fox-proof floating duck islands, cake tins and shopping bags costing 25 pence understandably aroused much public indignation.

The first review of the book [in *The Times* by David Aaronovitch] likened the angry hysteria to the grief triggered by the death of Princess Diana. He said, in effect, that the theory of monitory democracy was a great breakthrough because it provided a form of psychoanalytic explanation of the outburst. The book is a type of psychoanalysis of democracy, and the pathologies that have developed around political parties, parliaments and politicians, though I hadn’t anticipated that just one section of the book would be seen as its central message. Much the same favourable reaction to the idea of monitory democracy happened in the Netherlands, Greece,

Belgium and Spain, where there's also been discussion of the book's claim that the first recorded parliament was convened at the end of the 12th century in Leon, in the north of Spain. Spanish journalists and other commentators seemed to delight in the evidence that Westminster can no longer be considered the mother of parliaments.

There's also been a fascinating reception in China. When the book was first conceived, over a decade ago, everybody told me that it could be published only in Taiwan, simply because the authorities in Beijing would consider a lengthy treatment of democracy too dangerous. Well, such is the flux in contemporary China that a full-length Mandarin translation is due to appear next year. We'll see whether there are cuts, for instance of the book's analysis of the strong democratic imaginings within the works of Liang Quichao and Sun Yat-sen, or whether there will be airbrushing of the book's analysis of the dangers of post-democracy in China. I don't know what to expect.

Will you allow the book to be published in mainland China if any of it is cut or 'airbrushed'?

Let's see what happens. The reaction in China to the theory of monitory democracy has been fascinating. The term is easy to translate (*jian du shi minzhu*) and it has a clear resonance within two quite different sets of audiences. The supporters and sympathisers of Charter 08 see its radical potential. For them, what is missing in China, a one-party system defined by much talk of 'the people' and 'democracy', is a secure infrastructure of independent, extra-party mechanisms for publicly scrutinising the power of the authorities, from the municipal level to the very top echelons of power. Yet the theme of monitory democracy has also attracted interest in high official circles, for instance within the China Executive Leadership Academy in Shanghai. Officials there have grasped the need for independent mechanisms for publicly scrutinising corrupted and corrupting power, particularly at the municipal level. They understand well that in the absence of monitory democracy projects like housing construction, transport systems and environmental protection cannot be efficient, effective or legitimate. Whether or not the party authorities will or could embrace the principle of independent public monitoring of their own power is unclear.

It's one of the great political questions confronting our world. Can the Communist Party of China transform itself into something resembling the Congress Party led by Nehru, or the ANC led by Mandela? I wish I knew the answer.

What has been the reaction to the book in the United States?

It's been disappointing. The American publisher's explanation is that the recession has tightened the book trade and that British authors living outside the United States no longer get red carpet treatment. The collapsing newspaper business model, which has savaged book review culture, hasn't helped. Review space has declined by more than a third in a decade. On-line reviews hardly compensate for the decline, or that's been my experience with this book. *The Daily Beast* complained about its excessive length. Several others, including the *Internet Review of Books*, said that my treatment of the American founding fathers, especially James Madison, was unacceptably pejorative: I argue that the republican gentlemen who championed the revolution were actively opposed to democracy. I was struck by the honesty. I suspect the wounded pride caused by the book's treatment of the United States may have fed the silence.

American intellectuals, with some important exceptions, seem to find it hard to think outside their own skins when it comes to democracy. A recent case in point is Stefan Halper's widely discussed claim that China's authoritarian capitalism is 'shrinking the West', and that, given the illusion that capitalism begets democracy is crumbling, what is now urgently needed is a global renewal of faith in the superiority of American-style 'liberal democracy'. His silence is striking about the potential global significance of the new hybrid 'post-Washington' forms of monitory democracy that have taken root in places as different as Taiwan, Brazil, India, South Africa and the European Union. It's as if America is democracy. But America is no longer – as Tocqueville supposed – the lighthouse of democratic norms and institutions. The remarkable democratic breakthroughs in India triggered a different pattern of 'indigenisation'. A global compass swing is happening. The future of democracy will be decided by what happens in the Asia and Pacific region – that's where Tocqueville, if he were still alive, would today have to travel, or so the book argues.

You say that American reviewers were offended by the argument that the Founding Fathers were not democrats. This point is not all that controversial. Why should it have offended them?

The book is pitched against the view of Francis Fukuyama and others that modern 'liberal democracy' has its roots in the American Revolution. That view doesn't square with the fact that all the earliest champions of the new 'compound republic', as Madison called it, regarded a two-tiered, presidential republic guided by periodic election of representatives of 'the people' as the best prophylactic against democracy. No signatory of the Declaration of Independence was a democrat; and literally every delegate at the 1787 Constitutional Convention rejected democracy because they saw it as a formula for social disorder and political tyranny.

The book thus unravels a paradox to show how, with great difficulty, the butterfly of representative democracy escaped from the chrysalis of rule by republican gentlemen, many of them slave owners and most of them hostile to indigenous peoples. The unintended consequence of 1776 - a type of democracy unknown to the ancients - was remarkable. The country witnessed the first peaceful handover of government from one party to another and the first grassroots political party calling itself democratic. America survived a brutal civil war between two hostile and opposed definitions of democracy. It was the first country to turn democracy into an enemy of slavery. And so on. American readers should feel pride in the fact that during the nineteenth century the American republic was the world's most important laboratory of democracy. The devil's in the detail, however, for what the book tries to show is the way that the democratisation of the American republic was causally bound up with the growth of empire. Democracy had a darker side. There have been only three democratic empires: ancient Athens, revolutionary France and the United States, which is the first-ever democratic empire in global form. A democratic empire is of course a contradiction in both terms and fact. How is it possible to spread the language, the ideas, and the institutions of self-government through imperial power in soft or hard form, without inside and outside resistance to the hypocrisy and injustice

of it all? Ancient Athens and revolutionary France paid a heavy price for their failure to resolve that issue. Will America suffer the same fate?

Returning to the alleged difference between representative and monitory democracy: have we really entered a new historical era? Aren't we talking simply about representative democracy with monitoring institutions added on?

I realise I'm out on a limb here. The task of persuading others that we're living in a black swan moment, that there's a need for a *gestalt* switch guided by a 'wild' category, monitory democracy, one that brings new descriptive, strategic and normative significance to real-world trends that we can see all around us, isn't easy. It rather reminds me of the old uphill intellectual battles in defence of the category of civil society. Many observers of contemporary politics speak as if nothing has changed, as if we still live in the era of 'liberal' or 'representative' democracy. We don't, and those living-dead zombie terms are unhelpful in finding our bearings and fixing our priorities, or so I think. The growth of new monitory institutions – I have in mind more than a hundred new types of watchdog institutions born since 1945, bodies such as anti-corruption commissions, citizens' assemblies, summits, human rights networks, democratic audits and election monitors – change the dynamics of democracy as we know it. Helped along by the development of new communication media, parties, parliaments and politicians feel the heat of public criticisms, scandal and disaffection. Membership of political parties plummets. Electoral turnouts become more volatile. Politicians are suspected of being crooks. That's not to say that citizens lose interest in politics. In virtually every democracy it's the opposite; people in fact expect much more of political decision makers and the definition and scope of politics expands, and becomes more 'viral' in quality.

Some conservative reviewers of the book, John Gray and Noel Malcolm for instance, expressed deep fears about the capacity of watchdogs to undermine sovereign state power, but I think that's unwarranted nostalgia. In the age of monitory democracy the powerful – corporations, churches, government agencies – feel the pinch of public scrutiny, sometimes from all sides. Some monitory bodies, human rights networks for instance, operate over great distances. Efforts at chastening power

spread underneath and across state borders. The spirit of monitory democracy goes regional, even global. In all this we're talking about a qualitative not a quantitative shift – a rough 'n' tumble alteration of the spirit, institutions and language of democracy, which escapes the containers of both party-centred elections and territorial states.

So you welcome the trend towards 'monitory democracy'?

When measured in terms of the history of democracy, monitory democracy is easily the most vibrant, dynamic and power-sensitive form of democracy we've known. It's a remedy for some of the profound weaknesses within the old model of representative democracy. For instance, monitory mechanisms encourage the greening of our societies. These mechanisms empower new representatives, some of them unelected, who speak and act against the old paradigm of treating the biosphere as if it were merely a commodity, or an expendable slave of governments.. When they work well, monitory mechanisms also call into question the abuse of state and corporate power across borders. The global uproars that accompanied the American invasion of Iraq, and the devastation of the Gulf of Mexico caused by the criminal negligence of BP, are pertinent examples of monitory democracy in action.

Least obviously, perhaps, monitory democracy is a remedy for what J.S. Mill and other nineteenth-century critics dubbed the tyranny of the majority. They pointed out that representative democracy, with its promise of equality for all, contained the seeds of its own destruction. They did not see that representative democracy could degenerate into something much worse than tyranny – that it could prepare the ground for what Heidegger, in his winter semester seminars of 1933/34, described and justified as the historical fulfilment of 'the people' in the 'Führer state'. Monitory democracy fuels fears and doubts about such dangerous nonsense. It begins to democratise democracy – to cut down to size its old principle of the Sovereign People. There are no guarantees that it will succeed in this. Monitory democracy is an unfinished project; to use the words of Derrida it's still the democracy to come. It will forever be the democracy to come. The struggle against hubris can never be won and that's why it must never be abandoned. Whether monitory democracy can or will

survive the pressures and contradictions of the world in which it's been born, well, I don't know. Monitory forms of democracy are our best hope for preventing or reversing the evils produced by unaccountable power, but they are certainly not leading us towards paradise on earth. Monitory democracy generates plenty of its own pathologies. Its mechanisms heighten the sense that territorial states and their conventional parliamentary institutions are too weak or illegitimate to handle ever-expanding bundles of problems. The practical failure of monitory mechanisms to make headway in areas such as migration, the arms trade and global finance causes disappointment, hurt and suffering to millions of people. The growth of monitory democracy also stirs up feelings that existing political elites are unrepresentative fools who lie, cheat and break promises. Such feelings are of course the soil in which the new enemies of monitory democracy put down tap roots: authoritarian leaders like Ahmadinejad, Chavez and Berlusconi, anti-democratic populists who act as if they have a right to steal people's hearts and minds.

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