

BEN WILSON

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF DEMOCRACY

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By John Keane

(Simon & Schuster 958pp £30)

'NEW, NEW, NEW,' Tony Blair marvelled early in his premiership; 'everything is new.' He personified a willing amnesia that is so much part of our age. The temptation to dwell in the present, with its bewildering newness and illusion of liberation, outweighs an interest in history as a vital part of our political life. This is an age ruled by restricted definitions of what is relevant. The decline of history and the languishing state of our democratic institutions and liberty are not unrelated.

It is perhaps a sign of the danger that democracy is facing that John Keane has been moved to write a history of it (the last such attempt on this scale was by the American Nahum Capen, whose first volume was published in 1874). It has become something of a fashion to write 'biographies' of inanimate things and ideas: fighter planes, football clubs, numbers, scientific theories, and so on. Despite its title, this is no such thing; rather, it is about the lives and deaths of many different forms of human government, sometimes within very short time periods. Keane's approach is evident from the beginning of this impressive work. Most people, I imagine, would name ancient Athens as the birthplace of democracy, and this is where this book commences. But Keane takes an archipelagic view of the classical period – and of democracy in general. Democratic institutions pre-dated and coexisted with Athenian democracy on a number of Greek islands. In turn, these polities were influenced by forms of participatory government that had emerged in Phoenician cities long before. 'In the Greek world,' Keane writes, 'democracy was not a single or fixed form: although the assembly was its core institution, it resembled an odyssey, in which different mental imaginings and various practical experiments were par for the course.'

This is why Keane believes that history is indispensable in thinking about democracy in our own time. The archipelagic perspective is a useful corrective to the idea that democracy takes one distinctive form that can be handed off the peg to peoples with different histories.

His account shows that ideas of participatory government have been pioneered in a number of surprising and far-flung places. Early Islamic expansion gave room for self-governing communities to exist to a great degree independent of the metropolis. Conflict on the periphery of the Islamic empire led to the creation of the first durable representative institutions: the *Cortes* called by Alfonso IX in 1188. At other times, the edges of empires have provided the laboratories of democracy. In inhospitable areas, where women took on greater roles, the first experiments in female suffrage were made. In late eighteenth-century Quebec, property owners, irrespective of whether they were men or women, enjoyed the franchise. Women were given the vote on Pitcairn Island in 1838. Australia in the nineteenth century was known as 'the Paradise of Dissent' – and it was often constructive dissent. Australians developed ideas of proportional representation and the secret ballot. The leap in the dark of universal suffrage occurred in the British colonies long before Westminster caught up.

John Keane sets out, as he says, to democratise our understanding of democracy by jolting us out of complacent thinking. The majority of the book concentrates



Nehru announcing Gandhi's assassination, Cartier-Bresson 1948

on the unfamiliar rather than the more conventional histories of Westminster or Washington. Keane experiments with a number of voices, from the polemical to the analytical, and from ironic detachment to involved, lyrical narratives. There are jokes, and in one chapter he takes the guise of a future female historian writing of the first decade of the twenty-first century. His aim is to carry the reader through a long and sometimes complex history, and I think he succeeds.

The approach is necessary because there is no straightforward narrative, no force of history that propels democracy forward, just as there is no single definition. 'That's how it was,' writes Keane: 'no clear-cut laws of motion, no regular patterns, just higgledy-piggledy breakthroughs and setbacks bound together by continuous struggles of people to control publicly the exercise of power through the use of assemblies.'

In that spirit, Keane is always on the lookout for the evocative phrase. In a chapter on India – one of the best in the book – he comes up with 'banyan democracy'. India helped revive and reinvigorate the very notion of democracy after it was almost put to the grave in Europe (there were a dozen democracies in 1945). In doing so it defied limited theories of democracy. It showed how democracy was not confined to white men and women; it succeeded in a vast country with a diverse society; and

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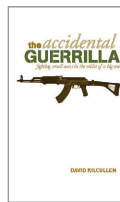
it riveted the loyalty of illiterate millions with scant knowledge of Western traditions. It was, argues Keane, thanks to the acumen and self-denial of Jawaharlal Nehru that this extraordinary political society could be built. Later in its development, Indian democracy incorporated many innovations to keep itself in good order: power-checking mechanisms such as people's courts (*lok adalats*), participatory budgets, water consultation schemes and other grass-roots manifestations of civil society. It resembles the banyan tree, whose vast size is supported by many entwined trunks and roots.

India leads Keane to a new characterisation of modern democracy. Early democracy, conducted in small states, was participatory. Its successor, representative democracy, was built upon ancient institutions, such as medieval parliaments and guilds, later augmented by the printing press and the rise of parties. Since the Second World War democracies have changed again, and Keane calls them 'monitory'. This is the most complex form of democracy yet seen, involving a plethora of watchdogs, power-scrutinising institutions, pressure groups and single-issue protest movements. It means that the citizen is represented many times over, often by unelected and self-appointed bodies.

This form of democracy sits uneasily with textbook representative models, with which we are still most comfortable and to which most of our institutions are, formally at least, still committed. Monitory democracy stands a chance of working when it is combined with an active citizenry; yet at no time has civil society seemed so impoverished. The price to pay for all this monitoring is intense loathing of politicians, an incomprehensible babble, and voter apathy. Worse still, 'monitory democracy' begins to seem like one where the state has turned the gaze back on its people. It is a world where no one is quite trusted: where the safeguard of vigilance has been perverted into indiscriminate suspicion. It is enough to make you fall out of love with democracy, and many already have. When monitoring bodies are estranged from the people they claim to serve, politics becomes something like a scramble among an elite.

If the lives of democracies around the world are important, their deaths are no less so. That is why history is crucial for democracy. We stop seeing democracy as some glorious continuum which is resilient enough to trundle into the future no matter what. If free societies are to find ways of adjusting to the new pressures of organised lobbying, spin, widespread disrespect and a panoptic, 24-hour media then they should absorb the primary lesson of this book. Democracy is about far more than periodic elections: it is about cultivating habits of democratic living. Democracies survive and thrive when they are responsive and creative in adapting to new situations. When they give way to fantasies of the end of history, they fall into hubris and self-destruction.

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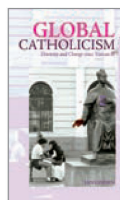
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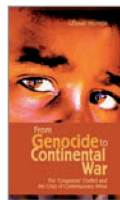
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