

John Keane The Shortest History of Democracy

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Books

“Many [people],” John Keane tells us, “think democracy is fucked.” That’s the context for Keane’s fascinating little book: a history – as per its title – but also a defence of democracy. He begins by busting some myths.

The traditional Anglophile narrative starts with classical Greece. But long before Athenian democracy, popular assemblies checked the ambitions of tyrants across what’s now Syria, Iraq and Iran. “[D]emocracy of the Greek kind,” Keane says, “had Eastern roots, and [...] today’s democracies are indebted to the first experiments in self-government by peoples who have been, for much of history, written of as incapable of democracy in any sense.”

Keane does not discuss pre-class cultures, even though the egalitarianism of hunter-gathering seems to have facilitated decision-making systems that more hierarchical agricultural societies could not replicate. Instead, he problematises the assembly-based democracies of the ancients, in which citizens – a category that usually excluded women and slaves – deliberated in the public squares of small city-states.

We associate democratic governance with peace. Yet Athenian citizens lived in an almost permanent state of war, with their participation in political affairs entwined with their military service.

Though liberals today sometimes link democracy and secularism, Keane suggests the Greeks modelled their debates on the rowdy conferences in which the gods thrashed out the governance of the universe. Yet if

democracy sprang from polytheism, it did not depend upon it. On the contrary, Keane identifies a “punk quality” in democracy, rendering it “permanently unsatisfied with the way things are”. A series of piecemeal innovations in mediaeval Europe fostered the transition from the assemblies of the ancients to the electoralism of modernity.

Keane notes the fraught relationship between parliamentary democracy and the capitalism with which it was historically associated. The electoral system posits each voter as politically equal; the economic system mandates grotesque disparities in power. Yet he’s far more concerned about populism, something he sees as “an autoimmune disease of electoral democracy”.

For Keane, representative democracy constitutes an advance over the participatory methods of the ancients, partly because of its greater practicality for complicated and geographically diverse societies, but also because voting encourages pluralism and tolerance. Elections remind citizens of their diversity: they wouldn’t, by definition, be necessary if everyone voted the same way.

By the same argument, when demagogues promise utopias in the name of “the people”, they’re invoking a dangerous fiction, positing a harmony that doesn’t and cannot exist. It’s in these sections that the book reveals itself most clearly as a product of the post-Trump era, its thesis a response to the authoritarian populism swelling not just in the United States but across the world.

Keane reminds us democracy must not be taken for granted, noting that, despite the seemingly inexorable spread of parliamentarianism in the late 19th century, by 1941 fewer than a dozen electoral democracies remained. Yet the book’s justified hostility to Trumpism leads to a history curiously devoid of popular agency. Consider Keane’s description of how electoralism broadened from the 18th century onwards: “Eventually the working classes and women were acknowledged as worthy of the franchise. Some colonial peoples, such as in Senegal, were even blessed with the right to vote. And the formal abolition of slavery happened; in the United States, a bloody civil war marked off electoral from slave-based assembly democracy.”

The passive voice elides how that acknowledgement took place, gliding over all manner of campaigns – the Chartists, the suffragettes, the great wave of national liberation movements – that pundits today would dismiss as “populist”.

“Populism,” Keane insists, “shows that the ship of democracy can indeed be sunk by its mutinous sailors.” Yet if we’re discussing slavery, we might note that the abolitionist Frederick Douglass presented a very different version of the same nautical metaphor. He warned that a vacillating Abraham Lincoln could not be trusted to deliver full equality, unless pushed by a mass struggle. “We are not to be saved by the captain,” Douglass said, “[...] but by the crew.”

Keane enthuses over what he calls

“monitory democracy”: the augmentation of the political system by extra parliamentary scrutiny, ranging from unofficial monitors in polling stations to scientists measuring the health of coral reefs. In particular, he values the “communicative abundance” of the digital era, which ensures “every nook and cranny of power becomes the potential target of ‘publicity’ and ‘public exposure’.”

It’s a strange argument to make in the wake of Donald Trump, a man who thrived on the hostility of the media and exploited “communicative abundance” for his own ends.

What gives the watchdogs of monitory democracy teeth? If they rely on state power, they’re predicated on the dubious notion that the state does not have interests of its own. If, on the other hand, their bite depends on the public (as Keane implies), their efforts only matter insofar as anyone cares. Wasn’t that the lesson of Trumpism: that The Donald could laugh off “exposure” precisely because the liberal media lacked a populism of its own?

Keane concludes his history by considering those who dismiss democracy as a curse word. We won’t, he says, win them back with appeals to philosophical models or timeless principles. Rather, we should think of democracy as a protean system that protects “different ways of living freed from the dictates of arrogant, violent and predatory power”, however they manifest themselves.

Here’s hoping his thought-provoking short history spurs some of the conversations we need. ● Jeff Sparrow