

**HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE, FAST AND SLOW,
CONFERENCE BY PROFESSOR JOHN KEANE**

October 11, 2022

The lecture titled “How Democracies Die, Fast and Slow” was presented by Professor John Keane, a leading political theorist on democracy and Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney. Among the organizers was the Centre for the Study of Democracy at SWPS University undertakes research into theories and models of democracy, the quality of democracy, civic and political participation, democratic innovation, social movements, and political views and opinions. It cooperates with numerous research institutes in Poland and abroad, and also with non-governmental organisations. Aside from its academic objectives, the work of the Centre is dedicated to identifying those good practices which improve the functioning of the public sphere. Another organizer was the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology is one of the research centres of the Polish Academy of Sciences (a national academic institution). The Institute’s main goal is to carry out advanced research in philosophy and sociology as well as in cognitive and communication fields. Apart from its research activity, the Institute is also engaged in education, publishing, and popularisation of science.

Also, a third prestigious organizer was the European Social Survey (ESS) was an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since 2001. The survey measures the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty nations. The ESS aims to provide high quality data measuring change (and stability) over time within and between European countries in their living conditions, social structure, public opinion and attitudes. The lecture was a hybrid event held in English. The Opening Speech was given by Professor Andrzej Rychard from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the introduction of the Guest Speaker was made by Professor Radosław Markowski, Head of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at SWPS University, known also as the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities.

Professor John Keane is historian and political scientist, Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney and the WZB Berlin Social Science Centre. He is currently teaching at Beijing Foreign Studies University. He authored numerous books: *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (1995), *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009), *Democracy and Media Decadence* (2013), *When Trees Fall, Monkeys Scatter* (2017), *Power and Humility* (2018) and *The New Despotism* (2020). His creative thinking about politics, history, media, and democracy is well-known and highly appreciated. He has contributed to various world newspapers, including The New York Times, Al Jazeera, Times Literary Supplement, Financial Times, The Guardian, Die Zeit, Hindustan Times, and South China Morning Post. He was recently ranked by El País (the second most circulated daily newspaper in Spain) as “one of the greatest theorists of political systems.” During the time he lived in Britain, The Times (a major British daily newspaper based in London) has ranked him as one of the

country's leading political thinkers and writers whose work is of "worldwide importance." The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) referred to him as "one of Australia's great intellectual exports." He was nominated for the 2021 Balzan Prize (Italy) and the Holberg Prize (Norway) for outstanding global contributions to the human sciences. His latest book, *The Shortest History of Democracy* (2022), has been published in 15 languages.

In his lecture on "How Democracies Die, Fast and Slow" he proposes an intriguing argument based on the question first posed by the sceptics and anti-democrats of the classical Greek world: why is it that the political form known as *democracy* is often so vulnerable to efforts made by democrats and anti-democrats alike to destroy it? Professor Keane notes that social scientists concerned with the subject of "democide" (the death of democracy) have typically relied upon two types of explanations: the death of democracy is either seen as a sudden cataclysm (as in a military coup d'état), or it is viewed as the result of numerous processes that unfold more gradually through protracted accumulations of high-level political grievances and knife-edged manoeuvrings. Democracies are capable to destroy themselves.

Examining the approaches of the end of democracy in the contemporary studies dedicated to democracy (among others, the speaker mentioned David Runciman, with his 2018 work *How democracy ends*) Professor Keane identifies a trend. In this sense, gradualism is more common than catastrophism. It seems that the realities of democracy worldwide are more than a midlife crisis of democracy and we need to understand how democide happens in order to spot first symptoms of democide. This "democide" is not a sort of enlightened fascism, democracy is confronted with a multitude of crises some actual, some potential, but the threats are not always very obvious. Maybe, democracies just need to adopt the credo of Samuel Beckett: "Fail again, fail better".

Nowadays, we do not experience so much the Ancient sudden collapse of democracies as in Greece during the times of tyrants and maybe oligarchs do not institute necessarily a reign of terror, but if we remember the 6th of January 2022 in the USA and the attack of the Capitol, we understand that even an obvious attack to democracy is possible anytime even in the strongest of democracies. Another dramatic case was that of Burkina Faso, this year, 2022: one could see the death of democracy announced on TV, after many mutinies and two coup d'états, resulting in a *slow* accumulation of events and the sabotage of democratic order.

In the gradualist explanation, the democratic breakdown is predetermined. However, the evolutions of democracy from popular self-government of the people, established by periodic elections towards exhaustion or democide are not predetermined. Democide happens because it is chosen by leaders due to conditions besides their reach, such as various unsolved problems resulting in the resignation of government in front of forces of disorder, or other crises, aggravated up to boiling points when autocracy, or military forces takes control over the situation to re-establish order. Populism and demagogues generate excitement and fear and they misleading for the people. Democracies have a sort of autoimmune disease they attract (in the name of the people) demagogues and sycophants. Elective despotisms (Jefferson) are recipes for democide: they look like democratic elections maybe, but they are simply plebiscites and politics is done by dirty tricks. The arguments in the book *The New Despotism* (J. Keane, 2020) show that ballots could be used to end democracy just as effectively as bullets.

Elections work often as political carnivals of seductions and bring to the fore many other dysfunctions that work as effectively for democide: the gifts for voters in elections, ostracizing certain parts of the people as not "the real people". When the government redefines people, the "authentic sovereign people" as if elections are turned

upside down government voting in the people (indicating who the real people are) is a sure path to democide and the outcome is despotic, not fascist, says Professor Keane. Also, high level political games ruin institutions of democracy (such as civil society) and their functioning. More slowly, democracies die when they neglect the foundations of the civil society. As C.B. Macpherson (1911-1987) – the student of Harold Laski and the PhD adviser of Professor John Kean – has emphasized “democracy is a whole society of equals and a whole way of life”. Freedom from violence, hunger and personal humiliation; saying no to child labour, to callous employers, the rejection of bigotry racism, sexism etc, free access to info friend of freedom of thought and enemy of dogma are essentially parts of this whole way of life. Social degradation, the citizens reduced to subjects, by the hybris of messiah displayed by the powerful of the day and the annihilation of democratic institutions, the feelings of unworthiness are destroying dignity and indignity destroys democracy.

The “institutionalist” narrowly state-centred accounts of democide belong to the same paradigm, to a mode of thinking that is of declining relevance and incapable of grasping how democracies can be gradually destroyed by social deprivation and environmental ignorance and decay.

The slowest course of democide is a sort of political sleepwalking, taking place when citizens and representatives ignore political social emergencies, when they fail to notice the ideals and practices and ignore the exploitation and the anti-democratic realities. Among the symptoms that get ignored in their democratic importance are bushfires, heatwaves that melt railways, mega storms, pollution they get disruptive and get more coverage as, e.g., the insect apocalypse, migrations patterns, storm surges, transmission of zoonotic viruses etc. Democracy dies as the newly invented monitoring instances described by Bruno Latour (the parliament of things) destroy the institutions of democracy. They all contribute to the despoliation of our planet, which healthy democracies should not ignore. Humiliating situations such as those during pandemics when citizens fearing for their life, while supervised by police and coerced into “compulsive solidarity” is very similar to despotism and presents a facet of democide. Despotism as the future of democracy due to voluntary subjection of people in front of the multitude of crises catastrophise eco-disasters that bring out the worst in people. Everything seems to escalate these days.

The ethic of wonder is vital for vibrant democracy, also, democracy as self-restraint, in ecologist matters and in front of crises and catastrophes (this is the main argument in J. Keane’s 2018 book titled *Power and Humility*) represents a sign of democratic vivacity. Prudent self-restraint in relation to the eco-system cannot be disconnected from the democratic way of life. The unrestraint in the exercise of power and the social violence inflicted by rich and powerful oligarchs is, simply put, democide. When we think about democracy as a whole way of life we understand it as a way of life with delicate geo-social foundations, which are of prime explanatory importance.

Democracy dies a slow-motion death not only when citizens suffer domestic violence, poor health care, religious and racial bigotry or daily shortages of food and housing. Democracies also destroy themselves when they give themselves over to a “great derangement” (*The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* is a 2016 non-fiction book by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh), to the thoughtlessness that prevents them from seeing that extreme weather events, pestilences, and other environmental emergencies breed power grabs and that democracy will have no future unless its ideals and practices are rid of the deep-seated prejudice that “humans” live outside a “nature” whose dynamics are administratively controllable and commercially exploitable for the use and enjoyment of “the people”.

The Panel discussion with audience participation was moderated by Professor Radosław Markowski. The avalanche of numerous and difficult questions addressed inquired about democracy in relation to themes such as pessimism, the philosophy of community at Tonnies (the discussion of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, their implication and importance in democracy, the philosophy of care in Heidegger, the importance of agora, nationalism, the vital contribution of human nature in relation to democracy (the idea that democracy de-natures; the accent on democratic culture), the pressure of the monumental requirements from the citizen in democracy (a problem that we have emphasized), technologies and democracy, the subject of power sharing (considering, generally, that power is abusive), democracy and capitalism (Polanyi), realism and democracy (the normative aspect of democracy), the idea democracy is always the democracy to come (Derrida), democracy is the fight against the abuse of power, the future of democracy and “monitory democracy”. Monitory democracy is increased watch against the abuse of power, in defence of the complexity and inclusiveness of the people, in defence of the democratic way of life.

One important conclusion of the discussion was that despotism should worry us because there is a trend toward despotism occasioned by circumstances, crises and catastrophes that determine people to submit, to hand over their power.

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N.B.: We have used the information provided by the organizers in their invitation and presentation materials as well as our personal notes taken during the event.

HENRIETA ȘERBAN

COVID-19 AND GLOBAL TERRORISM

COVID-19 and Global Terrorism demand to be accepted as two pandemics that endanger the life of the individual, but it also provokes physical and mental trauma, decisively influencing the security and safety terms. The mentioned perspective brings to attention two meanings of the common fundamentals: both are lethal; in both cases there is neither immunity, nor immunization, being triggered without ominous signs, through random exposure, inducing equally terror, fear and anxiety. In the same analysis key, there would exist an identical *modus operandi*: terrorism promotes and imposes itself through ideological, political and social techniques and the instruments and strategies of fear, while COVID-19 is producing fear and anxiety against the background of insecurity and individual incapacity of the states to counter this danger.

The COVID-19 and Global Terrorism names the intersection point at a denomination level in the sense that both phenomena are connected through the “infectious” characteristic. If the COVID-19 is spreading around through human contact, the virus of terrorism is propagating through social media platforms and the internet. Neither terrorism attacks nor COVID-19 virus can be stopped by borders, their methods and activities being impossible to avoid.

Equally, the emitted perspective is deepening the series of existing similarities. Both provoke severe economic distinctions. The measurements that the COVID-19 reclaims

are targeting, among other things, distance and quarantine, both having the role of decreasing the economic deficit of the states, but also increasing unemployment rates. Tourism and industry are the most affected areas. Terrorist attacks are targeting the decrease and destabilization of industries and of economies. Both erode the trust in the type of policy and solutions agreed and imposed at a governmental and state level. What is being questioned is the capacity of the government to protect its citizens in the case of the medical crises and terrorist attacks.

“The democratic dilemma” has in its attention the tension between the effective countering measurements and the need of persevere the liberal democratic values. The named measures are meant to protect the fundamental human rights even with the cost of limiting, in some proportions, other civil-human rights (the freedom of expression, of movement, of association, private life). The same dilemma functions as a tension in the case of countries affected by COVID-19 virus, the way in which the preventive measures for the spread of the virus degrade a series of other liberties of the individual and community being placed in the exact centre of the debates.

The approach involves the elaboration of strategies and specific techniques for balancing the costs and the investments which the named operations involve. The measures targeting the countering of both phenomena have as key landmarks the effective and immediate response, but also the extended collaboration from a local level to a global one, interdepartmental, at a scientific level, of the private and public field, especially at a state and governmental level. The international collaboration and cooperation have increased importance, as both terrorism and the virus have a raised risk of proliferation and operate at a transboundary level. “A state which applies immediate counter-terrorism measures, but keeps its borders opened and does not dispose of a close collaboration with its neighbours, risks the infiltration of terrorists in its own territory and perpetuates attacks.”

These risks reclaim the finding of a common platform of reaction and action from all states. The technical and practical aspects need to be doubled by operational actions, the intelligence role being a relevant one for finding platforms and a prompt reaction framework. In both cases, the cooperation involves an information exchange, of a comparative evaluating for finding common solutions and for outlining a framework for action at an extensive level.

We consider that the virus and terrorism are similar, both with a content which follows a scheme of crises and global disasters, with known stages in pre-crises, in their wide deployment, in preventing measures and come back to normal things. The management of crises targets preventing measures of the crisis through command centres, through delegation and cooperation, through assistance and specific rules, a last stage being the one of resolve and recovery, of recovery as a set of activities which can diminish the negative effects caused by this crisis.

This perspective has in its attention the existing differences, as well. Terrorism, in comparison to the COVID-19 virus, represents a calamity generated by the human factor. Proliferation and the violence of the terrorist attacks involves the human factor in all crisis stages, from organization, recruitment, planning, to actual attack and to the following negative effects. Comparatively, the virus was not planned, its consequences could not have been foreseen, and it is not following an ideological, political or religious interest. If the virus is considering an aggression directed to a human being, a community or a state, functioning on religious, racial criteria, COVID-19 “has attacked without selection and no direction, both the individual and the whole world.” So that, the way terrorism represents a violent action directly aimed against a rival, adverse part or an enemy.

The differences are also recognized in the applied countering measures: terrorism variabilities are found in radicalization and motivation, but also in the finding of a framework and operational instruments meant to lead to the execution of terrorist acts, counter targeting the neutralization of both named aspects. To fight against the pandemic involves measures and efforts of neutralization of “virus abilities of affecting massively the world”. Both are disposing, unfortunately, of directed consequences on innocent people at a worldwide level, bringing together a shared feeling of common destiny.

The immediate connection which is being established between the terrorism problematic and the COVID-19 pandemic targets a set of common elements recognized in the spreading of propaganda, distrust of public institutions, fear and generalized anxiety. The registered number of victims at European Union level as a result of terrorist attacks in the pandemic period, sums up 21 persons. In Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Spain in the course of the year 2020, a number of 57 terrorist attacks was premeditated, the European space reaffirming that the Islamic State represents “the definition of terror” and that the “jihadism terror” represents the biggest threat to the European Union. The terrorist propaganda, the dynamic and the freedom of circulation are determined factors of the debut of the terrorist attack. The named phase follows the recruitment of global affiliates, with an accent upon the “lonely actor”, the one who is most often setting off the massacre.

Evaluatively, from a numeric and frequent point of view, in the course of 2019, less terrorist attacks have existed comparatively to 2020, a year of restrictions imposed by pandemic conditions, measures which did not discouraged individual terrorist attacks. The limitation of circulation led to, paradoxically, to an influx of “lonely terrorists” into the European states (Belgium, Great Britain, France), favouring the development of messages from online space and with an increase of recruits. On this background we also need to mention the neo-Nazis plan, from the end of the March 2020, of bombing a hospital dedicated to COVID-19 patients.

Restrictions did not mark the end of the attacks caused by terrorist organizations; on the contrary, they persisted. The most affected regions were Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Nigeria and Somalia, regarding intensity, geographical areas and temporary interval. For example, the ISIS organization has carried out more than 100 attacks in Iraq from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, attacks resulting in casualties, pregnant women, new-born children, but also children between 6 and 10 years old. These actions have been carried out by a type of propaganda, of premeditated disinformation and online action directed to a few constantly-affirmed themes: the propagation of conspiracy theories, the equivalence of the virus of vengeance and the punishment of God/Allah, the overqualification of the religious and emotional factor, the augmentation of panic and fears.

Therefore, the functional hypothesis targets and verifies the fact that there exists a directly proportional background connection between the terrorist acts and the pandemic, facilitated by the even crisis paradigm: the attacks have continued and their numbers have risen, even tough restrictions have stopped traveling and instituted the quarantine. “The crisis gives rise to and propagates the crisis” – it is immediate evidence, in the sense that, even if foiled, terrorist attacks have continued to be prepared, to attract funds and recruits.

MARIA ALINA OPREA