

How Democracies Die, Fast and Slow

John Keane

With the fugitive called democracy almost everywhere on the run, the topic of how living democracies die is again topical. It is as if we are reliving the world of the 1920s and 1930s, when politicians, journalists and scholars such as Karl Loewenstein, who coined the phrase militant democracy, urged democrats everywhere to think more clearly about how democracies perish, and to prevent democide by getting tough with the forces of anti-democracy. Today, with many democracies in a mess, commitments to militant democracy face a similar challenge. Knowledge of how democide happens has a renewed importance. It can serve as an early warning detector, a means of spotting the first symptoms of democide so that citizens and their representatives can better protect democracy from its enemies. Fashionable catastrophist theories of democide seek to do this. Many observers are interpreting the January 6th events in the United States in this sudden-death way: as an organised violent attack on the Capitol that was part of a plan to overturn an election result, directed from the top by a defeated demagogue president and his buddies. Keane points out that sudden-death views of democide are actually misleading. Democracies are damaged and destroyed in various ways, and in multiple tempos. The instant snuffing out of democracy by a power grab or military coup d'état is only one form of democide. The more protracted dismantling of self-government by demagogues acting in the name of 'the people', and the slow-motion destruction of civil society by poor health care, domestic violence, religious and racial bigotry, gun crimes, and daily shortages of food and housing are examples of how democide happens more slowly. The slowest form of democide - a type of political sleepwalking - should be the most worrying, Keane contends. Democracies play dice with their own disappearance when their citizens give themselves over to human thoughtlessness: when they blindly ignore the anti-democratic effects of unusual weather events, species extinctions, pestilences and other environmental emergencies, and when they fail to see that democracy will not have a 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'.