

Violence and Democracy

John Keane

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John Keane is a visionary maverick in his principal field of study, which is political science, because he challenges basic assumptions that few have questioned for centuries in light of discernible and imaginable trends. These challenged assumptions include the Hobbesian leitmotiv that the nation-state should monopolize the means of violence. In challenging this hallowed assumption, he catalogues many of the horrors of excess that it has engendered, both directly and indirectly. This he does, not to justify pessimism or despair regarding the future of our species, but to explore ways in which a truly populist democracy, working through and, if need be, beyond institutions of civil society, might eliminate "surplus violence" from human affairs. With a view to bringing this about, he proposes to set "a new course between dogmatic pacifism and just war doctrines" (58, 158), and this should be of great interest to any political philosopher who favors peace over the alternatives more often chosen, especially during the last century.

The process of imposing democratic constraints on statist uses of violence involves, in Keane's terminology, "democratizing violence" (194–98). Success in this endeavor is a prerequisite to holding individuals morally responsible for the state-ordered violence they initiate or execute because under the amoral Westphalian system now operative such violence has been institutionalized and thus rendered anonymous (36–37). Such success is, moreover, incomparably more urgent now than ever before because of what Keane refers to as a "triangle of violence": nuclear force, uncivil war, and apocalyptic global terrorism (20–29). To counter this tripartite challenge, he argues, people must learn to engage in what he calls civility politics (81–88).

This being Keane's agenda, let me now situate his work within political theory writ large. To begin with, the overall thrust of his perspective will please few mainstream actors in the military/industrial/academic "foreign affairs" complex. Nor, inversely, does he win the hearts and minds of theory-bound leftists who will invariably believe he acquiesces too readily in the background machinations of that complex. The latter criticism, however, is misplaced, as can be seen from a careful reading of Keane's work, for such a reading would show clearly that he opposes the sort of unconstrained capitalism which facilitates the violent victimization of innocent people, notably through the unprincipled sale of weapons of war (18, 99, 128, 161, 177). In this regard, he is especially incensed about land mines, which are very cheap to buy but almost prohibitively expensive to remove (124–27).

Faulting current versions of just war theory for accepting Westphalian nationalism as a given, as does Michael Walzer, for example (13), he consid-

ers the US constitutional system, which he calls Philadelphian, better-suited to democratizing violence (190). The latter objective requires the exercise of civility politics, which cannot succeed so long as political theory and practice take as a given the demagogic monopolization of violence propounded by Hobbes (62, 75, 77, 82, 92–93, 110, 205–06). One ameliorative constraint on the *homo homini lupus* nation-state system is international law, which (present US unilateralism notwithstanding) Keane believes has been advancing. He puts greater trust, though, in the development of genuinely civil society. This is by no means inevitable (42–53), of course, but can be built by such steps as activating William James’s century-old call for a moral equivalent to war (94) or using all accessible means of communication to hold perpetrators accountable for acts of violence (191–98). The urgency of taking such steps is made manifest by state-initiated exploitation and even glorification of violence. Contrary to some analyses, this institutionalization of violence is not simply a return to barbarism (55–68). Rather is it a historical culmination of the merger of technology with politically dominant power, which in its modern embodiment is most readily exemplified by the “overkill” potential of nuclear weapons. Perhaps, as some contend, their ever-present capacity to bring about catastrophic losses of life can be stymied by maintaining a “nuclear balance” among world powers (72–74); but the nonproliferation this presupposes has been failing since the end of the Cold War.

Keane’s positions considered so far are somewhat atypical but well within the bounds of standard-brand political theory. He goes beyond these bounds, however, to reflect on the ethical implications of the issues his attention to violence brings to the fore. As intimated above, for example, he questions the applicability of just war theory in the modern world (11–12, 79, 113). The key reason for this skepticism is the triangle of violence that involves nuclear weaponry, uncivil wars, and global terrorism. He speaks of *uncivil* war very deliberately, in part because the concept of civil war, however meaningful within a Westphalian world of nation-states, is now routinely disregarded both as to participants and as to their methods. Similarly, the unilateral bellicosity recently exemplified by “American style” military intervention (129–33) has undermined the applicability of just war theory. And it is being rendered even more ineffective, Keane suggests, due to the popular acceptance of violence in the world that is brought about by media exploitation of its entertainment value (19, 102–05, 198–204).

The interpenetration of these factors leads us to believe that violence is natural (7, 50–51, 65, 170–72), so to counter this “hard ontology” of violence (94, 169) we must devote ourselves to “denaturing” violence (4). The ethical stance most suitable for this purpose is not to be found, for Keane, in the deontological tradition (12, 91–92, 133–34, 159–60, 162, 166), but is rather a kind of judicious pragmatism (134–38, 162–65) combined with the key anti-Hobbesian virtue of humility (205–06). This is not to be understood, though, as a task for trained professionals only. “The delicate and often dangerous process of context-bound judging,” Keane contends, “. . . is of interest

not only to political philosophers. . . . [I]t is of concern as well to citizens who themselves routinely practice judgement calls within actually existing democracies" (163). This popular input is all the more necessary given the hypocritical appeals to democracy on the part of governments that so readily resort to violence (209). By contrast, says Keane, the operative principle that should underlie democratic judgments in this regard is that violence can be approved only when it diminishes or eliminates violence (161).

The principal significance of this book is that it problematizes violence against a background of studies that approach appropriate political behavior more abstractly as they treat such topics as the criteria of justice, the advantages of communitarianism, or the historical significance of atrocities gone by (6–7). To counter this doctrinaire acceptance of violence, Keane takes on a wide range of acquiescent attitudes toward violence, including those of René Girard (8–9, 188) and George Sorel (147–50) and such philosophers as Rousseau (180–81), Paul Wolff, and Sidney Hook (33–34). He finds support for his cause in, for example, Hannah Arendt and the Polish proponent of anti-party politics, Adam Michnik (150–53). As such, this book would be appropriately included on the reading list for any course that is open to addressing the political possibility of human and humane survival. One would do well to supplement this book with Keane's *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially his seminal discussion therein of "Ethics Beyond Borders."

Indeed, one could build an entire advanced-level seminar just on relevant works by John Keane. His *Reflections on Violence* (London: Verso, 1996) is an earlier version of, and has been subsumed into, *Violence and Democracy*. More appropriate for such a seminar would be works of his that explore the potential for democracy and/or civil society, e.g., *Global Civil Society?*; *Whatever Happened to Democracy?* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2002); *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); *Democracy and Civil Society* (London: Verso, 1998); *The Media and Democracy* (London: Polity Press, 1991); and *Civil Society and the State*, ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988). Also relevant are *The Changing Nature of Democracy*, ed. Takashi Inoguchi, Edward Newman, and John Keane (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1998) and Keane, *A History of Democracy*, forthcoming. For an expansive source of related materials, see the website of the Union of International Associations, <http://www.uia.org/civilsoc/links.php>. Anyone convinced of the sharp boundaries between philosophy and other disciplines would perhaps discount these works as not systematic enough for philosophical inquiry. They do, however, represent a corrective to such claims as that of John Rawls, in his *The Law of Peoples*, that philosophers have nothing to contribute to such concerns.

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