

DEMOCRACY AS THE RULE OF NOBODY! DOES IT MAKE SENSE TODAY?

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Summary I would like to contribute to the ongoing debate on democracy by discussing the notion of the rule of nobody. I first address Rosanvallon's theory of counter-democracy and Keane's concept of monitory democracy. Keane writes about 'monitory democracy' not only as a new phase in the development of democracy on a global scale, but primarily as an abolishment of all domination in human relations. His idea that in a monitory democracy 'no body rules', has been criticized by John Dunn and John Gray. They consider it meaningless to claim that in democracy 'no body rules', since every form of rule needs rulers. I would like to show that both this supposedly realistic criticism and Keane's version of the rule of nobody are too literal and superficial. If we consider democracy to be a kind of sentiment rather than a set of political institutions, we get closer to the puzzling idea that 'no body rules'. This idea, namely, is not about abolishing the rule of men over men, but about being aware of the contingency of all forms of mastery. This was well known to Plato and has been convincingly revived in the works of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière.*

Keywords democracy, counter-democracy, monitory democracy, rule of nobody

Introduction

The economic crisis of the West has opened up the crucial question of liberal democracy. It is about political togetherness and its institutional articulation.

It has already appeared as a request for questioning democracy as such. Some theoreticians (like Jacques Rancière and, much later, Collin Crouch) consider it a consequence of the special type of de-

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mocracy that they called 'post-democracy'. It should be underscored that this type of democracy is neither democracy for the postmodern era nor an order that comes after representative democracy. According to Rancière, it is always about "a government practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy after demos..." (Rancière, 1999: 102).

Post-democracy is a political order in which oligarchy, developed through representative democracy, tries to act regardless of the people. It can also be called consensual democracy that is some kind of "a reasonable agreement between individuals and social groups who have understood that knowing what is possible and negotiating between parties is a way for each party to obtain the optimal share that the objective givens of the situation allow them to hope for and which is preferable to conflict" (*ibid.*). This type of 'democracy' has been developing for the last thirty years. In that period, all of the people's 'wrongs' have been called 'populism'. But the situation has radically changed and the previously described order can no longer keep even the most basic parts of the 'consensus' going.

Even in Croatia, where nobody could have imagined any opposition to 'post-democracy', we have been witnessing different types of democratic resistance to it, from the student movements to the protests by farmers. All the conventional areas of liberal democracy (political parties, mainstream media, etc.) have been surprised by either their style of protest or the range of issues they have raised. It is quite easy to see that some of these movements are not very representative of liberal democracy and the subsequent type of citizenship. Due to the fact that forms of citizenship and democratic movements are deeply interconnected in

the contemporary world, some authors have been forced to reconsider the concept of democracy and, consequently, citizenship. I would like to outline some current notions of democracy and how they fit in with the new practice of democratic citizenship that we are witnessing today. I will first address Rosanvallon's idea of counter-democracy and Keane's concept of monitory democracy. After that I will turn to a realistic critique of Keane's idea of democracy as 'the rule of nobody' (John Gray and John Dunn). Finally I will show that all these theories fell short in their attempt to explain the challenges facing the new democratic citizenship today. Rancière's theory can be more appropriate for the task.

New Types of Democracy

The French theoretician Pierre Rosanvallon describes this new condition as 'counter-democracy'. Counter-democracy is related to "practices that society uses to put pressure on its politicians" (2008: 290). He has a pretty simple thesis: since liberal democracy hasn't fulfilled its promises, various alternative forms of democratic action have come to reality. As he says, we live in 'an age of distrust' that takes its toll in an ever wider gap between society and the political sphere. Today it is very fashionable to maintain a considerable distance to formal institutions and to undermine "the assumption of trust conferred by elections" (*ibid.*: 253). In that way, 'counter-democracy' restricts formal democracy, since "elected officials are reined and lose the room for maneuvering owing to pressure by voters themselves". It can be said that "the dynamics of control take precedence over appropriation of power".

It occurs to us that this is neither about liberal distrust of political power

nor “protection of the individual from encroachments by public authority” (*ibid.*: 6), but about democratic distrust that aims to “make sure that elected officials keep their promises and find ways to maintain pressure on the government to serve the common good” (*ibid.*: 8). What kind of democratic mechanisms have been available to citizens in that sense? Rosanvallon tries to find them in the three dimensions of counter-democracy: surveillance, prevention, and judgment. Surveillance is related to various possibilities of controlling and exposing elected officials available to citizens. Prevention is connected with the organization of functional resistance to the policies that are suggested and processed by incumbents. And finally, Rosanvallon considers that there is a lot of room for putting incumbents on trial by the people (the people as judge).

Interestingly enough, Rosanvallon is not naïve to think that it is just another story on how to serve the common good by concerned citizens. To be sure, citizens have become political consumers with high expectations from political institutions. Besides, Rosanvallon rejects the ‘myth of the politically passive citizen’ and claims that “the people are omnipresent and no longer content to make their voice heard only on election day” (*ibid.*: 254). The problem here is that the people in Rosanvallon’s counter-democracy are too sober, since nobody believes in the possibility of global alternatives to things as they are now. Therefore, the key idea is not a revolution, but permanent moral criticism of incumbents that tries to keep the people alert.

A similar idea was developed by the Australian theoretician John Keane (2009), who put a lot of effort into introducing the concept of monitory demo-

cracy. According to Keane, we are witnessing the creation of a ‘post-representative democracy’ since the impact of representative institutions, parties and parliaments on day to day life has been decreasing. Keane claims that citizens make the life of politicians increasingly complex, putting in question their authority. Monitoring is practiced on different levels and by various bodies of monitory democracy: assembly of citizens, juries, advisory bodies, think-tanks, and consumer counsels. In this conception, the above institutions have many roles. They usually begin their activities by collecting on behalf of the public additional insights and information about the activities and features of various governmental and non-governmental bodies.

Keane in fact rejects any possibility that he revives in this way the spirit of ‘the rule of the people’. Since we live in different times, it is impossible, even though many people still don’t understand it and behave as if they were still living in ancient Greece. In fact, Keane doesn’t have any sentiment with regard to direct forms of democracy. On the contrary, Keane’s concept of monitory democracy keeps the institution of election democracy alive. Unwilling to engage the masses, Keane insists on developing divergent deliberative mechanisms that disclose an illusion of a united ‘sovereign’ people. Moreover, monitory democracy can be used on a daily basis as an obstacle to empowering the masses or the concerned people.

Both authors have expressed systematic doubts regarding populism because they reject the so-called pure people’s will that is promoted by irresponsible political leaders. Rosanvallon hopes to avoid it, affirming some civil society organizations that, unlike traditional inter-

est groups, are not oriented towards protecting the interests of their members. There are at least two consequences of this conception: if politics is reduced only to its counter-democratic functions, it would be limited to its countering forms. In that case, politics would be left to different groups of experts, possibly under the significant influence of various wealthy individuals and groups. Therefore, this type of democracy or citizenship can push the so-called ordinary citizens far away from the political process (see Urbinati, 2010).

Gray's Critique of Keane's Idea of Democracy

At the beginning of his critique (2009), Gray quotes Max Weber: "such concepts as 'the will of the people', 'true will of the people' have long since ceased to exist for me. They are fictions. All ideas aiming at abolishing the dominance of humans by others are utopian". All in all, it seems to him that, realistically speaking, democracy can do many things but it can't abolish the rule of one man over another. Gray does not deny Keane's efforts "in rewriting the history of the democracy, showing that democratic government is in no way a specifically western achievement", but he is thoroughly opposed to his idea that "democracy is a now a global norm". Namely it is one thing to say that democracy is not the cultural property of the West, and another to contend that it is a universal political super-value dominating others. Therefore Gray considers democracy as just one value among many, regardless of its universal desirability. He finds some commonsensical reasons for it. For example, citizens would like a lot of things from governments, such as security, a reliable level of social pros-

perity, ensuring a proper level of tolerance of life styles... It is fairly obvious that democracy is not a crucial tool to realize any of the above. He finds support for his position in the fact that legitimacy of "the current regime in China does not depend on whether it embraces democracy, assembly-based, representative or monitory", but on how much the regime can assure the living standard of its people. Gray puts democracy on an equal level with other 'non-material goods' such as tolerance, even though he believes that "the most important thing among them is the freedom to live your life as you please". We can draw the conclusion that Gray finds the value of tolerance more politically important than democracy as a political regime.

Another critique of Keane's idea of democracy comes from Gray's empirical insight that democracy is historically connected to ethnic cleansing. He believes democracy pushes different types of identities to the forefront of the political scene, which can be somewhat dangerous in multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries. The reason can be found in the constant submission of different minorities in authoritarian states. These minorities, after the break-up of that type of state, are not willing to be permanent minorities even in a democracy; therefore a solution would be to give minorities their own state. Gray came to the conclusion that while monitory democracy would hold governments under constant scrutiny, too much monitoring "is a recipe for paralysis". Furthermore, the majority of people all around the world don't want to make "a fetish of democracy". They just want an efficient government which can properly protect their interests. Consequently, the idea of democracy as the "rule of nobody" can be functional only in ex-

perimental circumstances. It is therefore enough for Gray to have democracy valued according to its instrumental feature rather than for its own sake.

Dunn's Thoughts on Democracy

John Dunn, a respected historian of political ideas, wrote a somewhat sober history of democracy in his book *Democracy: a History* (2005). In it he explores the usage of democracy as a political concept in the works of thinkers and politicians, such as Madison, Sieyès and Robespierre, who contributed to a resurrection of democracy after thousands of years. During their lifetime it started to be connected with the political equality of the people which was articulated by their representatives. Contrasting the notoriety of democracy, originating from the Antique with its current eminence, Dunn asked the key question in his book: Why has democracy become an unquestionable value and regime today? As democracy had been considered an unstable rule by mid-19th century, it was hardly expected that we would ever be in a situation where rejecting democracy would mean “sooner or later to write yourself out of politics” (Dunn, 2005: 41).

To assess democracy properly, he first tried to define what it means. According to him, democracy is a Greek word accepted by all the peoples or, rather, an ‘unmistakably global term’. But he insisted that it is not just a word – it is also an idea that the word can be used to convey. Unfortunately, Dunn didn't explain properly this quality of democracy as a political term. He missed an opportunity to say that from the time of the French Revolution the word started functioning in a somewhat tense relationship between historical experience and expectations. This friction should have been solved by

acting politically, as it has occurred many times during modern revolutions. Therefore democracy as a word was revived at the time because “it served the purpose of theoretically anticipating future historical movement and practically influencing it” (Koselleck, 2004: 273).

Regarding the contemporary popularity of democracy, John Dunn doesn't take its current eminence for granted. He showed that democracy today means both institutions and practices concerning that idea. But as he also considers democracy to be a kind of sentiment, and not just a set of political institutions, he gets closer to the puzzling idea that ‘no body rules’. He is deeply aware that current forms of democracy are both far from its antique origin and the literal sense of rule of everybody, but he doesn't seem to feel any particular regret over it. Even though democracy as a political value has largely contributed to introducing equality in almost all spheres of society (for example, a redefinition of the relationship between women and men), he lives in peace with inequality concerning the “regime of egoism” or capitalism. He is of the opinion that the “democratization of everything human” is not possible or that it is an illusion, at least concerning private property. This thought is not entirely without fault. It means leaving the idea of abolishing the rule of men over men, which has always been the heart of democracy. In fact, we should persist with the idea of democracy as the contingency of all forms of mastery. Only in that way we can hold onto the real meaning of the term originating from Plato's Republic.

Rancière's Dissent Democracy

The previous authors gave us a relatively conventional architecture of libe-

ral democracy. On that basis, it is possible to know who rules and how. Unlike them, Jacques Rancière (2008) seriously develops the idea that 'nobody rules.' To understand democracy as such, he has been going back to its roots in ancient Greece. He emphasizes that democracy has always had at least two faces: firstly, the permissive society; secondly, democracy is not an order, which is due, as Plato said, to the fact that freedom authorizes it to have all possible orders. Furthermore, democracy means a reversal of all relationships that human society is comprised of: a subject doesn't obey a ruler, a wife a husband, a teacher is afraid of a pupil, and even a horse and a donkey push past one who doesn't allow them to pass on the street (Plato, 2001; Rancière, 2008; Kursar, 2011).

But Rancière says that the whole contemporary social theory which deals with consumer society hides a maneuver to stop an allegedly even bigger damage. It must halt a situation in which democracy is not just a form of society, but the very principle of politics, "the principle founding the 'good' rule that is based on absence of founding" (Rancière, 2008: 48). What is the source of this absence of founding? Rancière again points to Plato, who wrote that "there is a possibility of choice that comes from the God of coincidence, the draw that represents democratic procedures used by people of equality to decide on the distribution of positions" (*ibid.*: 51). Since variously defined nobles have been living from the respect for the value of origin, age, and cleverness, they are not conditioned by the luck of the draw. That law disdains these values, and the conflict is created.

It is from that point, according to Rancière, that politics started its adventure. It is however no longer about an

individual who serves his passions and sometimes is prone to laziness (Plato), but that democracy is an anarchic entitlement, "characteristic of those who don't have entitlements either to rule or to be ruled" (*ibid.*: 58). Therefore, democracy is obviously neither a type of institution nor a population as such, some majority, working class people... Democracy also doesn't exist simply because 'the law declares the individuals equal and the collectivity master of itself' (see Rancière, 2007). In that way democracy fights routine models of government that can be founded on one or another way of distributing (positions and chances). Rancière calls that distribution 'police'. If such political regimes wish to be something more (than gerontocracy or oligarchy), they need some assistance from those who have no part. Hence 'the democratic scandal' shows the intervention in the order of non-equality which, ultimately, creates a political community.

With regard to human rights, he considers them redundant if you already have them or if you are a citizen of a concrete political community. And if we think that they are connected to humans as such, regardless of their membership in a political community, we only justify a depoliticized account of human rights. Rancière strongly believes that political subjects are neither humans as such, nor, for example, some identities that come from the constitutional text. They are rather defined in an interval of their private identities, enacted by either the constitution or social relations ('the logic of police').

What does it mean? Historically, different democratic movements have been keen to reduce the impact of what Rancière calls 'natural endowments'. Consequently, they have refuted 'the logic of

police' that has eliminated some subjects from the political body. In short, democratic movements have always had two purposes: firstly, to spread further the influence of the public man to different spheres of the community life, and secondly, to reestablish the belonging of all to the public sphere that has always been under threat of privatization (see Kursar, 2011).

Democratic Insurrection as Part of Dissent Democracy

On the basis of Rancière's ideas it is possible to get a better grip of today's dissent citizenship. We are witnessing new kinds of democratic movements that claim that the politicians 'don't represent us'. These movements offer just a glimpse into the general feeling of concern and anger in some countries of Southern Europe where they have been enjoying significant public support (for example, in Spain). It is no longer about civil disobedience, since that disobedience is justified only if your basic rights are in serious jeopardy. Therefore the new democratic movements don't claim qualification or exception to some kind of majority rule or the protection of basic liberties or rights. We can find some of their roots in the anti-globalization movement during the nineties, when it rose up against the institutions of global capitalism (IMF, World Bank...). Its intention was to impose the principles of political, if not democratic, decision-making in the traditional space of economy.

Today they are fed by a growing gap that has been created between traditional political parties and something that the people want. New democratic movements are now using so-called democratic insurrection that has disregard-

ed democracy as a state-form and goes through democratic practices based on deliberation, decision and action. Thus citizens who are engaged in it can ignore the so-called election aristocracy. It can be shown to be even more subversive to liberal democracy since citizens, on the one hand, ignore institutions of representative democracy (political parties, elections...) and, on the other hand, as an active citizenship, create huge pressure from the bottom. To be even more efficient, they prefer to liberate space for these democratic practices. In that way they sometimes try to reorganize particular institutions (universities, for example) as democratic assemblies. That form of deliberation and decision-making can be organized on different levels, from local communities to the state, and even as a trans-national network of assemblies. In that way they can create so-called common or shared material resources and the results of social production; shared knowledge, affects, values and understandings (see Murray, 2010).

The new democratic citizenship goes significantly beyond the theories of democracy that were offered by Rosanvallon and Keane. They are still firmly inside the story of democracy as a state-form and not truthfully connected to the idea of democracy as 'the rule of nobody'. In that sense Rancière's idea of democracy is much more flexible because he understands democracy as a process of subjectivization that doesn't need politics as a fixed sphere. Moreover, this process of subjectivization continuously denies a clear border between politics and other spheres. Therefore democratic movements have always been moving borders between the public, political and social spheres. They will continue to do that.

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Demokracija kao vladavina nikoga! Ima li danas smisla?

SAŽETAK U članku autor želi doprinijeti aktualnoj raspravi o demokraciji problematiziranjem ideje 'vladavine nikoga'. Prvo se bavi Rosanvallonovom teorijom kontrademokracije i Keaneovom koncepcijom nadzorne demokracije. Keane smatra da 'nadzorna demokracija' nije samo nova faza u razvoju demokracije na globalnoj razini nego se prije svega radi o dokidanju svih oblika dominacije u ljudskim odnosima. Dunn i Gray kritiziraju njegovu ideju da u takvoj demokraciji 'nitko ne vlada'. Oni smatraju da nema smisla tvrditi da u demokraciji 'nitko ne vlada' budući da svaki oblik vladavine treba vladare. Autor članka nastoji pokazati da su ove navodno realistične kritike, ali i Keaneovo shvaćanje koncepcije 'nitko ne vlada' previše mehaničke, odnosno da su doslovno shvatile spomenutu koncepciju. Ako bi demokraciju vidjeli kao vrstu osjećaja prije nego skup političkih institucija, onda bi prije proniknuli u ponešto zagonetnu ideju o 'vladini nikoga'. Ova ideja, naime, ne znači dokidanje vladavine čovjeka nad čovjekom, nego se odnosi na svijest o kontingentnosti svih oblika gospodstva. To je bilo dobro poznato Platonu i uvjerljivo je oživljeno u djelima francuskog filozofa Jacquesa Rancièrea.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI demokracija, kontrademokracija, nadzorna demokracija, vladavina nikoga