

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR MARK CHOU: ADDRESSING DEMOCIDE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICS

By Dr. Jean-Paul Gagnon

Mark moved to the University of Melbourne in 2011, having spent the three years prior to that living in Brisbane where he completed his PhD in political and international relations theory at the University of Queensland. Currently a McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow, Mark spends his time researching and writing on the topic of democratic failure, mainly from a theoretical perspective. Besides this, his research interests and publications also extend to topics on cultural politics (particularly, Greek tragedy and contemporary political theatre) and international relations theory (especially, post-structural and Chinese conceptions of world politics). His monograph, *Greek Tragedy and Contemporary Democracy*, is contracted to be published with Continuum Books.

Jean-Paul Gagnon: *What is democide?*

Mark Chou: Perhaps it's making poor use of an example to cite Joseph Goebbels at the outset, but he once commented that: 'This will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed'. Though no doubt gloating about what National Socialism had

managed to achieve under Weimar's democratic system, what we have here – if we are to take Goebbels seriously – are words to the effect that democracy is a precarious thing. Democracy is the very thing, in other words, that can bring democracy to its knees.

This, essentially, captures the idea of 'democide'. Writing in *The Life and Death of Democracy*, the political theorist John Keane recalled us precisely to this point: that democracies can 'commit "democide".' In contrast to its more common meaning – the murder of a person or people by their government – Keane defines democide in terms of a people who elect, by democratic means, to murder their democracy. This is how a democracy can commit an act of suicide. When incapable of redressing the political crises they have manufactured themselves, whether because of individual freedoms, bureaucratic morass or the sluggishness of democratic politics, the claim is that democracies can die by their own hand.

Specifically, we can say that democide occurs when a majority of citizens or their elected leaders legitimately use democratic means for the purposes of



undermining the democracy in question. What makes these occasions all the more remarkable, and for that matter harder to discern, is that until such time where the democracy is actually toppled or infringed, these popular threats can and sometimes do actually contribute to the fervour of democratic engagement. Mass dissent during public debates and at the ballot box can enliven democracies and give the sense that there is something more at stake. Particularly when dissent takes place without the resort to widespread violence and coercion – after all, no democracy can claim to be without such elements from time to time – no one can dispute that these are the moments that democracy was made to incite and then endure.

Of course, this idea goes against the conventional wisdom in much of the contemporary literature on democratisation, where democratic consolidation, not capitulation, is what's emphasised. And that, for me, is one very good reason – and here I'll quote Keane again – to take seriously the 'vexing thought that democracy as we now know it in all its geographic and historical variations might not survive indefinitely, that it could slit its own throat or quietly take its own life in an act of "democide"'.

JPG: *Could you offer a number of examples where democide has occurred?*


MC: I could give a few, but it might actually be more helpful to just offer one in greater detail – and here it's probably the best use of time to use an example that many are likely already to be familiar with, that is, the democide which took place in the Weimar Republic in Germany. Problematic or not, the Goebbels quote I just made reference to is more or less vindicated by the fact that the Nazis' rise to power took

place within and took advantage of the very Weimar democratic processes which it would go on to systematically dismantle and repudiate. Weimar democracy, in other words, played a not insignificant role in bringing about its own demise.

Though I'll discuss the complexities of that demise in just a moment, we can say that this democide occurred in essence because the 'same citizenry, which democracy had created', became for Sheldon Wolin the very citizens that then 'proceeded to vote into power and then support movements openly pledged to destroy democracy and constitutionalism'. Here, it's important to recall that a large majority of the German people at

the time had a distinctly anti-liberal, anti-parliamentarian and anti-democratic bias. Coupled with a Constitution whose '[p]olitical authority emanated from the people' it could therefore be argued that both the citizens and the Constitution of Weimar collaborated in bringing about that democracy's demise.

Within this environment, more specifically, the Nazis quickly mobilized popular support, something they could achieve largely without needing to breach the

Republic's Constitution. Working mostly within the confines made available to them through Weimar's democratic system – though the Nazis did of course blatantly violate democratic principles through the resort to violence and political intimidation – these anti-democrats employed democratic techniques that would eventually enable them to mobilize the majority ultimately for their own political ends. Indeed, following each election that was held, many of which were actually called by the Nazis themselves, their popularity slowly increased finally to the point where they secured – with the support of the German Nationalist Party – the majority of votes in 1933. 



The route which saw the Nazis take power demonstrates just how democide is possible, how it can arise quite logically in a course of democratic politicking and how, in the heat of the moment, it can be seen to contribute to the vibrancy of that democracy. The openness that was generated from the democratic processes in the Weimar Republic barely prevented any one or faction from entering the political sphere to voice their concerns and advance their proposals. Fuelled by the sense of injustice and the dire economic situation experienced by many Germans during the interwar period, the Weimar democracy enabled almost any party with a grievance the opportunity to have a say and influence the nation's policies. In the case of Weimar, that was enough to hand Hitler the democratic majority along with the mandate to systematically dismantle the democracy that had brought him to power.

JPG: How is democide a risk to democracies – and are certain democracies at greater risk than others?

MC: I think the best way to answer this question is in a round-about manner. The way I see it is that there is

no effective mechanism in a democracy which can prevent that democracy from paving the way for its antithesis, that is, without being itself a risk to democracy. In other words, mechanisms which are purposely created to prevent citizens from going too far and destroying democracy often have the uncomely potential to pave the way for democide. Not only that, but I think the concept of democide extends not only to 'weak' or 'failing' democracies as is typically suggested in the literature. Rather, democide is also a phenomenon that democracies have to contend with when functioning paradoxically at their best. There is no distinct marker, no universal signs of ill health, to alert a democracy before it goes too far and invites into its midst forces capable of ripping it apart.

Weimar Republic's Coat of Arms



Hitler with Nazi Party members



Also, as a point of necessity, the matters that I am talking about here are not the violent and militaristic rebellions, or *coup d'états*, that have from time to time ended democracy's tenure. These, though frequently anti-democratic, do not fall under, but operate outside, the purview of democratic processes. Accordingly, what interests me is when anti-democratic individuals or parties manage, because of their political platform, to secure majority support via legitimately democratic means. These do fall under the purview of democratic processes. And that is why democide can be construed as a risk to democracy: because a democracy can be at a loss to block their success.

JPG: *Have you any recommendations for practitioners to use in order to minimize the risk of democide in their polities?*

MC: The conclusion that democracies can from time to time deal themselves a deadly blow is a disconcerting one. After all, it is no small thing to say that democracy is apt to falter, sometimes with a self-destructiveness that is without parallel in other forms of political governance. In this sense, the prospect of democide brings to the fore the possibility that all democracies are born with a congenital defect, which can never be completely incised from democracy or the process of democratisation. If this is the case, then the future of democracy becomes a great deal more uncertain.

For many, this would no doubt be an unwelcome conclusion. Indeed, if democracy will always remain in the words of John Safford 'an open-ended process', then neither its full potential nor the full gambit of its problems will ever be known before they actually manifest. Because of this, democracy therefore becomes for many a politically dangerous idea, one which is 'subject to great triumphs' but also to 'horrendous mistakes'. That both are as equally likely to eventuate makes democracy's future unknown and its practice a perilous affair. So the important question we need to ask, as you suggest, is how should we deal with this? How can we mitigate the likelihood of democide?

Though there's no universally agreed upon approach to dealing with democide, I think by far the most common and logical response has been to emphasize the need to continually consolidate and strengthen democracy from any internal weaknesses. What is imperative, for those who share this view, is that efforts be made to progressively refine those democratic institutions and procedures which have in the past clasped onto democracy's lifeblood, without themselves becoming a risk to democracy. Though this is no easy charge, it has, I think for the most part, been something skilfully navigated by scholars of democratic consolidation. To their credit, the initiatives they have proposed and put into effect has in recent years decreased both the likelihood and actual number of democratic failures around the world.

But because, to some extent, even the best efforts and most well-conceived mechanisms constitute no absolute guarantee against democide, there have also been commentators who stress the importance of viewing democide not as a logical continuation of democracy, but instead as an inversion or cessation of democracy. By making a point of identifying when a democracy ceases to be democratic, even when that result has been brought about by democratic processes, these scholars believe we can rescue the idea if not the practice of democracy from the worst of itself.

To this end, for instance, it is certainly right that we hold democracy responsible for the rise of Nazism. But while doing so, someone like Claude Lefort insists that we have to at least acknowledge that the ascendancy of National Socialism implied the 'ruin of democracy' not its culmination. On this view, the tragedy which sees democracies self-destruct should not be lauded nor accepted as a natural corollary of democratic politics. To the contrary, it must be guarded against, lamented and quickly separated from the 'normal' operation of democracy. After all, what point is there in studying democide if there is nothing we can do to prevent it in future? And what use is there in espousing and participating in democratic processes if we cannot avoid the mistakes of our past?