

## An Interview with

# Dr. Jean-Paul Gagnon

## On Democratic Theory and Politics

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*Dr. Jean-Paul Gagnon is a social and political philosopher specializing in democratic theory. In the light of recent developments around the world, I interviewed with Dr. Gagnon because of his expertise in democratic theory.*

**Tabak: How is it that democratic theorists can contribute to political analysis?**

**Gagnon:** To answer this question we must first address what the political is. What are politics? In general, and for the sake of this discussion, I will term it as a process by which individuals participate in the governance and government of a specific geographically-bounded territory. The nature of politics changes with the nature of government, governance, civil society and a number of other complex factors. In most 'democratic' systems, we see the opportunity for non-elites and all legal minorities to participate in elections and to assemble freely for example (although, in practice, things are not quite as simple as these promises). In a totalitarian system, the obverse is most likely to be 'true'.

I argue that democratic theorists contribute to political analysis because of the 'sunglasses' (as it were) that we offer for analysing politics. We are constantly looking for the means to infer how political activity in any given system impacts equality, communication, law, the selection of officials, the shape of a citizenry, and ultimately the citizenry's sovereignty. And this is very much related to questions of rights, liberties, freedoms,

justice, contemporary political society, republicanism and autonomy. This differs to other means of analysis. For example, in very simple terms, the economics theorist might be wearing sunglasses to determine how a political move is going to shape economic regulation. The international relations theorist has her sunglasses on to see how a political change might come to impact relations with a specific far-away country. The feminist may have his sunglasses on to see how a political decision will come to affect a number of women's rights. All of these processes have ways of changing politics. We seek the democratic change. Of course, thinkers often borrow sunglasses from other camps for interdisciplinary studies that often yield unique and remarkable outcomes in political analysis – so matters are not as simple as I have portrayed them in the examples above.

**Tabak: Would you argue that democracy affects politics in any meaningful way?**

**Gagnon:** Because of our 'sunglasses', or variety of means to analyse the highly contested 'variables' of democracy, I argue that yes, democratic theory acts to democratise politics. We do this best by delegitimizing political actors that could be

argued to have or be machinating against whatever institutions, citizenries, or ideas that are self-labelled or exogenously described as being democratic. John Keane is a very good case if we consider his latest monograph *The Life and Death of Democracy*. Therein he called to account Silvio Berlusconi, John Howard and Thaksin Shinawatra for manipulating existing democratic systems to suit their own power-retaining (or power-increasing) ends. With this attention, and the arguments of several others, we then move forward in politics: those citizens aware of this information realize, for example, that what wily 'ol Berlusconi was up to in the media was undemocratic (this is perhaps one reason why there was dancing in certain Roman streets upon his resignation). Politicians may also come to realize that this behaviour is now illegitimate and could then shore up stronger opposition to otherwise manipulative and un-democratic executive bodies.

We should also consider the way critically developed ideas, both realist and utopian, can impact the way politics come under reform. Thinkers like John Langmore, Larry Diamond, Steven Muhlberger, Bernard Manin, Geoffrey Stokes, and Benjamin Isakhan evaluate the way we understand democracy, the way others understand democracy, the way democracy is practiced, and the possibilities for a better understood democracy or democracies that will operate in some qualitatively better format. Democratic theorists often look to the benefits various systems of democracy (ideas and practices) can bring to politics in the effort to make a given situation better. One example, from Albert Weale and Elinor Ostrom, is the way that democracy was impacted by the 'Green Movement' (not Iran's important women's liberation, but rather the global upsurge in concern over environmental protection) and the way it has contributed to the growth of environmental politics. Sixty years ago environmental protection was nowhere near as potent a political issue as it is today in a wide swathe of countries. Some argue that the severity of the issue (environmental damage) grew democracy (inter-personal dialogue, consensus formation, decision formation) and in turn democracy then grew the issue and altered the political landscape.

Without democratic theorists (those most vested in trying to figure out that nebulous affair of democracy and protect its hard-won rights through both spatial and temporal battles) who else would look to the democratisation of politics? As argued above, John Keane, David Held, Wolfgang Merkel, Roland Axtmann, Klaus von Beyme, Joseph Camilleri, Francis Fukuyama, Simon Tormey and others are the football stars capable of scoring the most goals against tyrants.

**Tabak: Do you think the Arab Spring in the Middle East can be considered as a new wave of democracy?**

**Gagnon:** Like many of the thinkers I've drawn upon thus far in this interview, I'm rather sceptical



about understanding the growth of potential democratic systems through one singular pair of sunglasses. (That is, to try and get to the potential bottom of something we should wear as many sunglasses as possible which may be argued to be a cosmopolitan methodology. That is, wear one pair, then take it off, wear another, and so forth. Whether we can wear two or more pairs at the same time is a difficult question and deals with potentially the realm of experimental social sciences).

But to try to answer this question, I would rather argue that the individual and cross-fertilizing experiments in democracy from Morocco to Afghanistan are more like super-novae. That, like a wave, is a body of complexity. But Huntington's waves are heavily based in a rhetoric to which I do not wholly ascribe. This process of democracy in North Africa (the Tamazgha in Berber) and the Middle East is not as simple as a wave coming in and one that may go back out. The metaphor begs for greater complexity to reflect the reality of the situation. That is, what effect has the wave made in terms of physical change like erosion (in other words, what lasting impressions has it left before it went back to its non-descript sea)?

Super-novae, then, to me as a metaphor sees a very long standing process of physical mutations wherein one period of history could be argued more 'democratic' than others (and at various tiers of government) because of complex chemical interactions affected by thousands of variables but which could be retaken by autocracy and then battled forwards to democracy once more because of a whole other set of complex interactions. (It should be noted that I consider democracy to be the political norm in this process, especially at local levels of governance and government. Autocratic rule is then the exception). There's also a functional utopian hope that this 'dying star' is the coming end of democracy losing ground to autocracy – that is, with every mutation we retain 'democratic' systems as core values which prevent tyrants from slashing our ('the peoples') sovereign throat. When this star eventually explodes, will this be a

zenith for democratic politics in a given bounded space?

It's the function of 'pure' theory, a higher (possibly even potential) goal that we can try to achieve, that makes the supernova different. Waves will always come and go, but when a star mutates and nears its utopian explosion, when revolutions rock the institutional foundations of a society, will things then really change? I would say, hesitantly, a little – and hopefully, as much as possible. (The Arab Spring is probably a mutation like the French Revolution and not the 'star exploding this

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**Tabak: Many students of political science failed to predict the outbreak of the recent revolutions in the Middle East and they did not predict the collapse of Soviet Union or the outbreak of velvet revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. Why do you think political theories failed to make reliable predictions about revolutionary social movements? Do you think this is an issue of ontology or a problem of methodology?**

**Gagnon:** The simplest answer is because political theory is not meant to predict anything. We do not develop methods to look into the future nor are our ontologies crystal balls. To be honest, by dining with Minerva's owl, the revolutions in the Middle East, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and

the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe do not come as a surprise in hindsight. Certainly, when movements occurred and the occupations of public spaces took serious favour with a wide swathe of a citizenry; that was surprising about its shape and timing but not unexpected in its eventuality.

History is like that: if we look to the periods in history where totalitarian or autocratic rule was established, those empires and regimes fell. What has remained is a wide variety of different styles of democracy and, until well after 1945; those were mostly visible and tangible at the local level. As can be seen with the European Union or in country cases like Egypt, we run into significant difficulties when we begin scaling our democracies into higher tiers of politics. I do not think that what could work in a manner that could be widely argued as efficient at a local level would be suitable for a federal or regional level and vice versa. So we're probably going to see, as far as my predictive powers go, a lot of 'growing pains' as the citizenries of the Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Orthodox Eurasia, come to build their institutions to continue horizontalizing power. But anything could happen: the most I can offer is an educated best guess.

**Tabak: China at present is said to be terribly undemocratic, but, you argue that there are hidden roots of democracy in mainland China. How can this be and what does this mean for the contemporary political development of the PRC?**

**Gagnon:** Yes. It is all about looking at tiers of government and governance from a broad reading of what democracy can be. Should we look to the 'national' level of mainland China, we could easily argue through comparative analyses with internationally recognized 'democratic' governments that China is nowhere near democracy. But if we were to look deeper into lower tiers of government, into the local agrarian and indigenous forms of governance in the mainland, there we would come to see unique instances of communication about decision making between individuals. We would come to see varying conceptions of equality in practice, of a development of normative regulations for the ordering of the small society, of implicitly or perhaps even explicitly choosing leaders, and of groups that see themselves as bounded with some powers over their everyday lives.

The obvious argument against this, and one that I think is 'true', is that all of these parameters at the local level are seriously restrained and perhaps even suppressed by different forms of government and governance at the higher levels of politics on the mainland. It's a classic contestation between different forms of politics in a country. Even in 'democratic' countries, like Canada or Sweden, we could argue that there are several different types of democracy in action competing with each other in the exercise to bring power to account and grow the sovereignty of 'the people'. In mainland China, however, one simplistic account sees that it is grassroots Chinese democracy (at the local-end of politics) versus autocratic Party rule (at the 'national'-end of politics).

We must also engage the history of the subject. Shiu-Hing Lo, Pauline Keating, Baogang He, Deng Zhenglai, and Francis Fukuyama are probably



most relevant here. If we take these thinkers and synthesize their works in the history of politics in China (or even the current nature of China's civil society), there are many examples of assemblies, of representative methods, of institutional means to avoid patrimonialization (not that this was done in the name of democracy), and of endogenous monitory systems. As I've hopefully come to convey thus far in this interview, it's all part of the process of democracy contesting non-democracy: of horizontalizing verticalized power.

Now, with this in mind, and looking to Professor Shiu-Hing Lo or Professor He, we can start to appreciate the possibility of the Chinese plurality coming to grips with these endogenous roots of democracy and acting to have the Party support them. We know that liberal 'Western' conceptions of democracy, that language of democratization politics coming out the 'West', is bitter to the taste for Party powers and many in China are arrested for using that kind of rhetoric. But what if Chinese peoples, that beautiful plurality, came to talk about Chinese democracy rooted in Chinese history as differentiated from the 'West'? Could the Party argue against this 'Chinese Way' when it seems to fall into their mandate of cultural preservation?

As we keep uncovering this history and showing the differences and similarities between styles of democracy in time and space, I think such has the very real ability to alter perceptions of what is right in governance and government in China. This I think is not something new. The Chinese plurality has been and will continue to strengthen their sovereignty whether the Party likes it or not. You cannot rule a people that at some stage come to wholly reject your presence: Kings and Emperors have been known to lose their heads when the legitimacy to rule is lost. I think, however, that the Party is clever and will come to mutate over generations and perhaps even become something that today would be called a Chinese institutional form of democracy. In the end, all I am legitimated to do is try to observe and uncover unadulterated facts about China's historical relationship with her own forms of

democracy and to try to convey this to 'the people'. Whatever comes out of that is the Chinese plurality's decision: not the decision of other powers playing imperial politics and knocking heads like goats over access to mineral rights or military zones of influence.

**Tabak: You argue that most countries that label themselves or are labelled by others to be 'democratic' are in many respects disappointments. Certainly, there are a number of very good works occurring, but you worry if these are enough to stymie political decay. Could you give us some examples of how we can make these 'democracies' less disappointing?**

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**Gagnon:** As can be seen in works such as *The Future of Representative Democracy* (Alonso, Keane and Merkel, eds, 2011), we are at a stage wherein the 'West' is no longer a leader of 'democracy' as it (however the 'West' is defined) was during the Cold War. Hong Kong, for example, could today teach New York City a thing or two about institutionalising accountability in governance whereas 15 years ago that would not have been possible. I argue democracies today, even those argued by some to be at the vanguard of democratic politics (the Swedens, Denmarks, Germanys, Canadas, and Icelands) are all disappointing because their realities do not for the most part come close to reflecting the expectations of basic democracy and other forms democracy like monitorism or 'new' representative democracy.

Now, I want to be clear, I am not in any way disparaging the advances and successes made by humans that can be in majority argued 'for democracy' or 'by democracy'. This, for example, includes giving the right to inter-personal 

equality, of people being free to compete with each other, but also the protection of workers, of social nets, and of a growth in global humanitarian compassion. What I am trying to argue here is that we must take these excellent victories and use them as springboards. To offer one example, a number of governments constitutionally guarantee the equality of every individual. Yet, in reality, this is not the case. A financially poor family cannot provide the same benefits to their child as a financially rich family can with theirs despite a government providing the same schooling for each child. That could mean affording to send a child on a school trip, paying for extra-curricular lessons, sending a child to university, and not having certain burdens that poorer children sometimes have to bear (like malnutrition). Furthermore, in other examples, many women are today still not paid for the equivalent work of their male counterparts. Homosexuals in many parts of the world are still not permitted to marry or adopt children. If we look past the veneer that victories are often coated with, and we confront reality, we find disappointment but also the ingredients that build recipes for progress.

In my theory of basic democracy, we see the need for six parameters to be present for at least 40 different types of democracy to exist. The first is a citizenry. That citizenry must be defined

somehow in a democratic manner: that is, the people in a given citizenry must come to their own decision about what they will look like. Right now, a citizenry is something that people are born into and are then shaped by represented realities that were constructed in manners nowhere near democratic. Look at certain islands in the Caribbean. St. Kitts and Nevis for example were two distinct islands with two distinct peoples until European occupation grouped them together. Their identity today is still in large part defined by the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht wherein Britain gained control of St. Kitts and the Treaty of Versailles (1783) which then gave Nevis over to the British Empire. Did the people on these islands then or now have a say in how their citizenries would be bounded? Just like anywhere else in the world, they have not.

The second parameter to consider in basic democracy is that the bounded citizenry is both sovereign and has sovereignty. But when, in the literature, we start to engage what being sovereign and having sovereignty means, the entire picture falls apart. Indeed, until we come to some globally agreed upon conception of what it means to be sovereign and what processes, practices or institutions permit the process of sovereignty to occur, I'm fairly certain we now operate under a benevolent myth. In Ontario, for example, where a number of individuals may wish to buy or sell raw unpasteurized milk for whatever health benefits it may give, they are not permitted by governmental law. But, if the people are sovereign and sovereignty is theirs to exercise, it should be rather straightforward to go to the government (which is only the holder of a temporary power), and declare that, in due course, this issue should be opened for citizen-wide discussion and decision in Ontario. This, nevertheless, is highly improbable. Individuals, the sovereign and the ones wishing to exercise or practice sovereignty, have little to no practical means of accessing the government that (under this telos) serves her. She is then left to expend a great deal of time, effort and potentially capital to try to table her issue – there is no guarantee. In one of this world's most 'celebrated' democracies, ▶



that alone raises the bile in Hobbes' end-game Leviathan.

The third parameter is equality, or rather, conceptions of equality derived from the citizenry. Where, in our political experiences, has the citizenry been extensively surveyed about its conceptions of equality? When, should this have happened, have these conceptions been studied by experts, encouraged for discussion within the citizenry, and come to action upon? It's almost fantastical to propose such a thing in this day and age but is equality not completely central to democracy? Let's look at banks for one example. These institutions, like pharmaceutical corporations (see the works of Hans Lofgren), are now of such importance to the public that they must naturally come under the scrutiny of the public and her power. We should be having discussions about how much a bank should be permitted to make in net capital earnings. We should be the ones to decide where this extra money goes or how to avoid paying these costs into the pockets of, by nature, greedy corporations. Look to the USA wherein Las Vegas or New York City we see a complex variety of homeless peoples next to some of the most affluent individuals in society or some of the most expensive buildings in the world. How can this be so in the fabled land of 'the best democracy' unless that democracy was an inegalitarian one? Is that then not an oxymoron? Yes, these questions are strange but they are of absolute necessity to be asked.

We can group the fourth, fifth and sixth parameters together. They are law, communication and the selection of officials. My question is this: do any given citizenries have the complete capacity to participate in what legal theory is best for them, what methods of communication they want to emphasize most, or how they want to select their officials? Of course not – that's arguably ludicrous. Most would argue that people are not experts and won't be able to make the best judgements. But what if the people were simply more involved, given the political time and space to decide on some core decisions

and to participate with representatives and other extra-parliamentary bodies on making decisions? That then does not sound as ridiculous. Again, however, this is not something that is normatively happening. To offer one example, is there a single country in this world that has surveyed its plural citizenries to come up with a list of its peoples' long-term goals in relation to communication, law or the selection of officials?

This argument is the basis for my point that most, if not all, 'democracies' in this world fail on every parameter of basic democracy. Yes, citizenries, laws, selecting officials, and communication exist, but who decided that they should exist in this manner? Certainly not 'the people' as there is no

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formal proceduralized space for them to do so in. I suppose my main argument at this stage would be for governments to create space for the inclusion of its citizenry as key partners in decision-formation and decision-making. We must encourage and create the space for this participation to happen and come to fulfil our democratic wants by being democratic peoples.

At this stage, we're all hostages of a complex history that has not given us the formal and proceduralized right of collective determination in methods that move beyond the simplicity of referenda and plebiscites. I reason that we must bring our politics through democratic theory into a stage that could rival the impressiveness and functionality of iPads and flat screen 3D televisions. It's damning that affluent living rooms are more impressive than our political systems.

**Tabak: Former Greek Prime Minister Papandreou had recently 'shocked' the EU and** 

**global markets by calling for a Greek referendum on the Sarkozy-Merkel bailout plan. Why was this both an important yet dangerous and perhaps even foolish move? What can we do in the future to make involving the people (an important part of democracy) less dangerous?**

**Gagnon:** This move was important because it sought to involve the Greek plurality (within Greece) or at least those that would have cared to cast a vote. It was also, however, dangerous because the government had not created spaces for formal and proceduralized dialogue and decision formation for the Greek plurality to start to come to some basic understandings on how to proceed with tackling the financial crisis. Despite opinion-polling that Papandreou must have been closely following, the referendum would simply have been a rubber-stamped 'yes' or 'no' from a citizenry that was nowhere near a state of consensus or even quorum formation. Citizenries are not rubber-stampers: we are not cuckolded (this word is meant to work for the opposite gender too) sovereigns with some Rasputin playing with the strings of our destiny. But if we are not allowed to formally make some binding decisions on opinions for our serving representatives to take into account, how then can we know what we want? Are we then the victims, in Foucauldian realism, of a manipulative Rasputin defining our futures? In Greece it was all noise and thunder in the civil sphere's communication: there was no voice of 'the plural people' which is most likely why Papandreou pulled out of the referendum idea. It was simply too risky despite what polling had to say.

To finish, and as can be guessed at, we could make politics less dangerous by formalizing procedures for the complex plurality composing any given citizenry to participate in both decision-forming and decision-making.

### Notes:

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### DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON

Dr. Jean-Paul Gagnon was awarded the Commonwealth of Australia's International Postgraduate Research Scholarship to start his PhD in March, 2007 (which was very kindly supported by the Queensland University of Technology's Faculty Based Award). He proceeded to research his PhD in Political Science, under the masterful supervisions of Professors Clive Bean and Gavin Kendall, which was awarded in November, 2010 (shortly before his 26th birthday).

At the beginning of 2011, he was awarded an Honorary Research Fellowship by the Centre for Greater China Studies housed by the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Dr. Gagnon founded and presently edits the now globally read (and open-access) *Journal of Democratic Theory* which has just established the *International Prize for Research in Democracy* which shall take effect at the beginning of 2013.

His research interests include, but are not limited to: democratic theory (broadly conceived), post-universal social and political theory, experimental social sciences, democratic governance, and democratization. Furthermore, his teaching interests include, but are also not limited to: research-based democratic theory and political theory, public policy and public administration, social theory, and comparative politics.

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