

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON, PRESENTER: Welcome to this interview with Dr. Benjamin Isakhan.

Dr. Isakhan is currently a research associate with the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University in Australia. His latest works include several forthcoming books: *Democracy in Iraq* is a monograph soon to be released; whilst *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy* and *The Secret History of Democracy*, both done in concert with Stephen Stockwell, are edited collections. His most recent articles include "Targeting the Symbolic Dimension of Baathist Iraq," "Measuring Islam in Australia" and "Manufacturing Consent in Iraq." For further information regarding Dr. Isakhan and his works, please visit his website, www.benjaminisakhan.com.

This interview will be discussing *The Secret History of Democracy* and is conducted by Dr. Jean-Paul Gagnon.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON, PRESENTER: Although the goal of *The Secret History* was not to define democracy, could you be more specific about the concept of democracy used in the work?

DR. BENJAMIN ISAKHAN, GUEST: Sure. I guess I should start by clarifying that, as you said, it's not really our goal in *The Secret History* to offer up a robust kind of definition of democracy, or even a new definition of democracy or anything like that. And we were quite keen not – this is Steve Stockwell and myself – to get bogged down in debating all of the different nuances, and definitions and the pros and cons of each of them; because we felt that that really wasn't the central impetus of the study. And that scholars in the field who wanted to do so, could easily find a lot of literature on exactly what democracy is and the various debates and so on.

So we were keen to kind of avoid that too much because we thought we had many other things that were greater contributions to the literature. We did briefly talk about how there's kind of two over-arching views on how democracy should be defined. We referred to the first one as kind of a minimalist, almost scientific definition of democracy. And this definition goes back really to Thomas Hobbes. It's found in the works of other scholars, like Joseph Schumpeter and also John Rawls, where we find that there's an inherent elitism and that's kind of a tradeoff for functionality - to get civil rights, and justice, and liberty and so on. So long as we're getting this it's okay if elites are in power.

And then there's of course a whole school which we've talked about where democracy should be really much more about the people and they should be actively involved in decision-making, etcetera. This is kind of a Habermasian view if you like, Laclau and others have done some work on this too.

So, you know, there really are two over-arching schools. But what I think is in

common with both these schools and with really any definition of democracy no matter which way you take it, is the definition that we offer with three basic tenants. Firstly, there has to be a willingness to participate. If the people don't want democracy then democracy doesn't work. And I think, actually, that's curiously absent sometimes from definitions of democracy. So that's the first one. That's crucial. Secondly, there should be an equality of access to information, freedom of speech and other rights, and also to voting, or at least in participating, in some way or another in the function of the state. And then thirdly and I think this is a very important one too and sometimes overlooked, there must be a kind of civic virtue in a democracy. You must be willing to listen to others, to appreciate others' arguments, to accept the rule or law, to be bound by the will of the majority, and to play your part in a democracy.

But moving along from all of that, as I said, our goal wasn't really to define democracy as such, because in our view, it didn't really matter so much how you define democracy. What mattered to Steve and myself was that really no matter which way you define it, there is now so much evidence that it's happened repeatedly throughout human history and much more so than we normally acknowledge and that this was the exciting thing to us. This was the thing that needed to be recounted and needs to be explored further.

However you really define democracy it is simply inconceivable that it's only happened in a handful of isolated historical epochs. If you take whatever definition you come with and apply it to the history of human existence, you'll find that we've practiced it a remarkable number of times and that it's often present in human history. That it is not this kind of rare gem that only appears in a couple of isolated instances but in fact is a recurring human phenomenon. And this is the exciting thing.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON: In your opinion, where has democracy come from? This core of human ingenuity that allowed us to act spontaneously to the needs of our day?

DR. BENJAMIN ISAKHAN: Well, in my opinion, democracy is really about the human story; as is despotism, as is tyranny, as are other forms of governance, good and bad. Human society needs governance of one type or another. So all types of governance are human. And there are a number of interesting studies on this. Christopher Boehm has talked – has written widely, in fact, on the democratic impetus found in our common ancestors, all four great African apes. They exhibit counter domination and collective action toward the common good and all of these fundamental aspects that we come to term democracy, much later in our social and political evolution. And that we see the earliest signs of this according to him about a quarter of a million years ago. So democracy is a very old story and predates the modern homo-sapien.

And then moving forward, there's also studies by people like Ronald Glassman who've talked about democracy and despotism in primitive societies. And here he argues that before civilization as we know it, in these sorts of primitive tribal societies, there were two, really strong forces always at play. And this was, as we've come to term them, democracy and despotism. That at times, when the conditions were right, and when the environment was right and when things were going well, at least quasi-democratic tendencies emerged. But when they're not – when societies are not functioning well, when there's all kinds of different constraints or certain situations, then despotism becomes normalized. So we have these two competing types of governance.

And of course, from these primitive societies, we move forward to the birth of civilization and these two competing elements: the tendency towards despotism or the tendency towards democracy. If we see them as two polar opposites, then we can kind of map the story of human civilization at any given time, to one degree or the other.

And we see this through the stories of Mesopotamia or Egypt or the Indus valley in sort of earlier signs of human civilization. And the argument here is not to say, "Look, they were great examples of democracy. They were really democratic, that they did all of these wonderful things, well before the Greeks". The point is to say that, at certain times and in certain places, they did things that are familiar to us in contemporary understandings of what democracy is. And this is true of human civilization from its very beginning. Of course, we have the other side where we see despotism emerge, we see these terrible tyrants ruling with fear and bloodshed. And then at other times, we have more peaceful and more open and more democratic societies. And I think that this story, this story of human civilization is carried through until the present. We only have to look at the history of the twentieth century to see that these twin forces, that is despotism and democracy, are still very much alive in our world.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON: And how is this at odds to currently taught democratic history? I remember learning it rather differently during my undergraduate years. Or even before then in elementary school and so on.

DR. BENJAMIN ISAKHAN:

So in the volume, Steve and I refer to something called the "Standard History of Democracy" and this is the story of democracy with which we're all familiar. This is the story that comes to us in the classroom as we're growing up, through various textbooks, in films, in the popular media and so on. And this was the story that there was this miraculous moment around five hundred or so B.C., where the Greeks invented, quite magically, almost like a mystical kind of thing, this idea of democracy. And that this was the first time that a bridge had ever been built between the people and their governance. And that all of a sudden we see this thing

emerge and that they practice democracy and that they do all of these very democratic things.

Then of course, the narrative goes forward to the far less convincing story of Rome which mostly for much of its history functioned as an oligarchy rather than as a democracy. But nonetheless, we're usually familiar with the idea of the Senate and of some sort of nominally democratic mechanisms at work within Rome.

Then something really curious happens. Then all of a sudden in this standard narrative of what democracy is and where it comes from, there's this enormous gap. All of a sudden with the end of Greece and the end of Rome, we see for a thousand years or more, we're told that democracy was basically wiped off the face of the earth. That this unique thing that occurred was suddenly snuffed out and disappeared.

And of course when you sit down and think about it, it's kind of a ridiculous idea. Does that mean, that nowhere on the entire earth for a thousand years or two thousand years, did people come together and make critical decisions in consultation with one another? Were they no longer participating in any way, in any corner of the world, in any societies? Were they no longer engaged in voting or representing their constituents or making collective decisions towards concerted actions?

Then of course, all of sudden, it reemerges again in England. We see the signing of the Magna Carta, and for a handful of centuries we see the unfolding story of the birth of the parliament and so on.

We then see the American Declaration of Independence, we see the French Revolution. And then the last two: three hundred years have seen the triumphant march of the Western, liberal, model of democracy, particularly following the Second World War. And then after the Cold War we see that democracy becomes the preeminent method of human governance; and one that is familiar to most people across the world. And is usually preferred by most people across the world; particularly, interestingly, those who don't have it.

What we've tried to do here in *The Secret History of Democracy* is to point out a number of flaws with this traditional model of what democracy is and where it comes from. Firstly, the most obvious thing is that it's a very Western story. Really, this is the story of Western civilization. We start in ancient Greece; we have Rome; then we have England and America, France and so on. The modern colonial period, the conquering of the world and right up to the triumph at the end of the Second World War and then the Cold War. This is very much the story of Western civilization as is told by those who've won it.

But what we have to ask at this point is how can non-westerners engage with this story? How do people in non-western quarters of the world engage with this very Eurocentric vision of what democracy is and where it comes from? If it's only happened in Greece or Rome or England or America or France, and then that model has been spread out to the World, then it becomes quite problematic. It becomes part of Western civilization. It becomes attached to the story of that civilization and its emergence and its dominance today. And it doesn't take into account that other people may have done democracy in quite different ways perhaps to how it's been done in the West. But have certainly have done it recurringly throughout their history. And that they have their own narrative, and their own stories, and that they have at least nominally democratic mechanisms and ideas within them.

Of course, the story of Western civilization itself, we know is problematic. Because it's embedded with these very deep discourses about, if you like, Western exceptionalism. That it's the pinnacle of human civilization. And underneath that are two kinds of competing ideas that are important here. Firstly, that the West has a unique proclivity for democracy and secondly that the Afro-Asiatic world is prone to despotism. Even today this idea is still very much embedded into the way that we view where democracy can happen and where it won't happen.

And we continue to understand it as something that the West has a very strong drive towards. That Western society and Western civilization are egalitarian and democratic and so on. That Afro-Asiatic cultures or non-Western civilizations just can't do it. They're too primitive. They're too backward. They're too barbaric. And they're simply incapable of understanding or having the cultural practices or whatever it is needed in order to do democracy. And what we're arguing here is that one of the reasons we continue to think this is because democracy is told as if it's a Western thing. As if it only comes from the West. That it's only a Grecian invention. That it only happened at the French or American revolutions. That it only occurred in these certain Western epochs.

And when you tell it like that, then it's no wonder that we view it as a Western thing. And that we generally view the Afro-Asiatic world as incapable of democracy. Well, this is completely flawed. If you look at their history and culture then you'll find that through their long and complex political history, there are moments where people have been engaged in their governance; and have played a direct and important role in their own societies. And that there is a democratic history there, that there's a democratic impetus.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON: What impact might this new evidence have on current politics?

DR. BENJAMIN ISAKHAN: Well, I think Stephen and I were, from the very beginning, excited by the implications of this, and the sort of philosophical implications of this to the broader debate about what democracy is and where it comes from. But from the very

beginning, we also saw it as something with definite pragmatic, practical and political applications. In fact our argument really is that by acknowledging that democracy has a much broader and deeper history than is usually conceded, we can get away from notions which suggest that it's an exclusively Western thing and doesn't work in non-Western societies.

When people engage with their own democratic histories, when people in, for example, in any given Afro-Asiatic context, look into their myths, or epics; their own customs and traditions, or their own ways of doing governance at a tribal or a local or even a state level: people all over the world may come to feel a stronger sense of ownership over democracy, rather than having to kind of read Aristotle, for example. And say, "Well, here's this thing that the Greeks did all these years ago."

Rather than having to read the Declaration of Independence, or rather than having to read contemporary Western intellectuals about what democracy is and where it comes from, people across the non-Western world should look inside their own histories and able to hold them up to scrutiny and to look for moments when they were doing democracy in even their most ancient history through to their more contemporary history. If they're able to unearth these moments and bring them into popular parlance and make them part of political discourse and historical discourse, then democracy will no longer seem this foreign, Western exercise that is futile in the Afro-Asiatic, but instead something that is indigenous, that comes from here. That has a legitimate part of our own history. And by tapping into that, you can use that as a powerful discourse to bring people into the polling booths, to bring people to want to be engaged in governance, to bring people to want to participate in their own system and to want to get rid of corruption and nepotism and all of these kinds of anti-democratic forces that exist.

You know, this is really one of the problems. This mistaken history of democracy continues, I argue, to have a major impact over the way that people in non-Western civilizations view democracy and the way that they engage with it. They continue to see it as this kind of western thing that's being imposed. And if instead, they view it as something that comes from within their own historical lineage, then they don't need to see it as something that's being imposed but something that's indigenous to their own society.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON: This certainly is very exciting. I really can't wait for that book to come out in February 2011. I think it's going to make a very big impact.

DR. BENJAMIN ISAKHAN: Great.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON: We're going into the second part of this interview. And we're really just interested to see how, or perhaps, why it's taken this long to provide a more inclusive and ultimately correct – in my opinion again, or perhaps our opinions –

history of democracy? Is it because political theory or political history needed to get to this stage? Did we have to depend on a sort of cosmopolitanism of intellectual works? The translation and research that goes into bringing these documents from other cultures, perhaps to the English fora?

DR. BENJAMIN ISAKHAN: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think that's a big part of it. I think that I would probably argue that really this is not just about the history of democracy. More broadly, the entire history of the social sciences and humanities is very much grappling with the discourses that were woven into it during the colonial period. That as Europe is conquering and supposedly civilizing the rest of the world; the social sciences and the humanities played a part of that machine. And as they played a part of that machine, they were embedded with these ideas of Western superiority and Eastern backwardness.

Of course this isn't new. I take great inspiration here from the work of Edward Said whose work on Orientalism really points to this idea that as colonial Europe was spreading out, it was premised on these assumptions and these assumptions are evident in all kinds of texts. And he talks about visual arts, through to political discourse, through to novels and so on.

And I think we're very much recovering from that period. The colonial period, it's often forgotten, only ended sort of fifty, sixty years ago. And in some ways we're still engaged in the colonial period, if you look at the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and so on.

So we're not wholly disentangled from that colonial past yet. And the social sciences and the humanities still take as their starting point that the West has got it or more less, right. And that if we can only make the others conform to our model then the world will be a much better and safer place.

But we cannot isolate political theory and say, "Well, it's the only one that's ignored non-Western discourse." We would have to say that in the contemporary Western world, the entire collection of social science and humanities are embedded with these kinds of stories. And that these stories continue to be problems. There's a lot of work left to be done. To unearth a different view of the world that doesn't take as its primary assumption that the West has basically got civilization right and that the rest really need to wake up to themselves and meet us in the modern, democratic, world. These assumptions are not easily disentangled because they are enmeshed into the great array of discourse that surrounds us.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON: Now what impact did John Keane's *Life and Death of Democracy* have on *The Secret History*?

DR. BENJAMIN ISAKHAN: Well, Steve Stockwell and I have admired John Keane's work for many

years. We've certainly been in close contact with him over the last couple of years. And he's been very kind to us. He's given us a lot of encouragement and guidance. He's also contributed a chapter to *The Secret History* and another volume that we're working on at the moment. So he's been an integral part of the last few years and how we've come about reaching this point with *The Secret History of Democracy*.

However, I would point out that Steve Stockwell and myself had these ideas, and were working on the ideas that were in *The Secret History of Democracy* for a couple of years before we were in touch with John Keane; and well before the release of *The Life and Death of Democracy*. It's just that the tide is turning and that there are a number of different people right across the world and some of them are in our volume, who are thinking differently about democracy and its history. And John Keane is one of the leaders of that movement, certainly, but we were very engaged with that idea from a number of years ago.

DR. JEAN-PAUL GAGNON: This now concludes our interview with Dr. Benjamin Isakhan. From the members of the Journal, we hope that you have enjoyed reading this interview and that it was informative and pleasant.