EDITORIAL

Why Democratic Theory?

Jean-Paul Gagnon and Mark Chou

The post-1945 world is well documented for its surge in the study of and struggles over "democracy". The Eurocentric and then Pacific wars were – and continue to be – in part understood as a fight over ideology. Ideas of fascism, nazism, and empire as well as the totality of the state came face to face with ideas like democracy. Considered the panacea to all the world's political ills, democracy was employed by the West as both stick and carrot. For a system of governance that simply connoted a state restrained by periodic and competitive elections, democracy's value soon became much more significant. Through the rule of law, statespeople and scholars started equating democracy with the protection of the individual's civil, political, economic, social, and cultural freedoms. Some also began aligning democracy with sacred principles relating to no harm, nonviolence, antiweaponry, anticolonialism, anticommunism, and anti-authoritarianism – especially during the postwar international meetings of states and, later, the cultural revolutions of the circa 1960s.

What was clear, as the Cold War progressed, was that the East vs. West confrontation was ostensibly also a confrontation between communism and democracy. But as the Berlin Wall fell, only one ideology triumphed. Empirically, measurably, and despite its ebbs and flows (or waves, as Huntington [1991] put it), democracy soon reached a point where no existing form of government and governance was able to legitimately oppose it. Autocracy, monarchy, oligarchy, communism – once standard systems of governance – fell into political disrepute. Especially in the West, mentions of autocracy or communism aroused suspicion and rebuke. The "triumph of democracy", as it was glibly put more than 20 years ago, had finally come. Despite this, democracy's political ascendency was not without its problems. Niggling, persistent, unexpected, and inexplicable struggles emerged and endured. New and even mature democracies suffered setbacks – often of their own making. Some, not long after declaring themselves democratic, failed or slipped back into their former authoritarian molds.

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Today, democracy continues to face challenges and crises. We still hear in one form or another the dictum John Dewey ([1931–1932] 2008) made famous over 80 years ago: that politics is the shadow cast by big business over society. So long as this shadow darkens a polity, it will remain inhospitable to democracy. And it is true. Plutocrats and timocrats, through their fetishization of profit über alles, are slowly eroding the nature and vitality of democratic politics in places like the United States, but also in Canada, the United Kingdom, and parts of Western Europe, among others (for further context see Holland et al. 2007; Reich 2007; Hamblet 2009). In Australia, which has been long thought of as a beacon of democratic stability in the Asia-Pacific region, there is evidence to suggest that a sizeable portion of the population—especially among the so-called Generation Y—are becoming apathetic to democracy (Chou 2013a). Compared to their supposedly less democratic neighbors in the region, Australians appear more willing to jettison democracy for other forms of nondemocratic government should the perceived economic and political payoffs outweigh potential negatives. In the light of these problems and the mounting evidence that all is not necessarily well with democracy, we are left asking the question: was there ever a triumph of democracy?

Yet such a question, popular as it might be to ask, does not lend itself to particularly constructive answers. If anything, it reveals how little we actually know about democracy. It is a failing that goes to the very heart of the democratic discourse itself. While many scholars of democracy like discussing the failure or crisis of democracy, it is only very recently that they have begun to acknowledge the need for more theoretical precision and nuance when doing so. Recognizing that democracy is neither monolithic nor self-explanatory, theorists are now embedded in debates over just what democracy means. As a beast, it is incredibly difficult to pin down. Its meanings, scopes, and purposes are contested. Problematically, democracy has been, and continues to be, defined as any number of things. This condition makes democracy prone to malleability if not transmutation. Its discourses are many and sometimes contradictory. "If a large part of political scientists' attention has been concentrated on democracy," writes Donatella della Porta (2013: 3) in her book *Can Democracy Be Saved?,* "this does not mean that a unanimously accepted definition of the concept exists." Far from it, as she continues: "There is no doubt that the concept of democracy is not only 'stretched' but also contested." Democracy means different things to different people in different contexts. To draw the conclusion that democracy has triumphed or failed says less about democracy than it does about those who have drawn those conclusions and their specific conceptions (or misconceptions) about democracy.

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This is, above all, a theoretical shortfall. Not only that, it reveals a lack of dialogue: first, between theorists of democracy themselves and, second, between democratic theorists and practitioners. Though we now have countless theories about democracy drawn from philosophies such as liberalism, socialism, deliberation, agonism, and cosmopolitanism, to mention but a few, not enough of these theories speak to each other. Instead, too many speak over or in spite of each other. They proclaim their version of democracy as democracy in toto. Moreover, having outlined the conceptual foundations of democracy, theorists are guilty of failing to relay their discoveries to the lay community. Instead, it has become custom for theorists to speak only to fellow theorists (and often only to those who share their theoretical outlook) through the use of highly technical and exclusive language. There is no acknowledgment – and as such no popular awareness – that how we understand and define democracy will probably always be partial and contestable. When we talk about democracy in everyday discussion, the result is that we frequently do so without realizing that what we now take as a given was once the abstract and highly subjective articulations of a group of philosophers who were seeking to do little else than to set out democracy to reflect their own situations.

This theoretical shortfall has meant that democracy can be too easily reduced to a political weapon, an instrument that is capable of being used to mean one thing and do quite another. As a concept and as a practice, it is thus not uncommon to see democracy both as a veil for hegemonic interests and for the genuine pursuit of freedom and equality. It is not uncommon to see states collate their questionable intentions – whether that be going to war or denying certain perspectives a political voice – with the ideals of democracy. It is not uncommon to see supposedly democratic nations institute exclusionary political practices while ostensibly nondemocratic regimes and movements experiment with participatory and deliberative procedures. And it is not uncommon to see pundits call something a crisis of democracy when in fact there is no crisis at all. As such, there is the need to beware of the stories we are told – as well as the stories we tell ourselves – about democracy. When we do not, we can easily confuse or conflate one form of democracy with another. We can think one specific articulation of what it means to be democratic is actually democracy as such. The dangers of doing this may lead us to unknowingly blur democracy's problems with democracy's potential, and vice versa. This, to paraphrase John Keane (2014) and John Dunn (2014), comes back to what we as an academy of scholars have done to ourselves and to those who are now invested in the trajectory of democracy, which is all of us.

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Now more than ever theorists are required to try to make sense of this concept called "democracy". Every aspect of this concept requires further theoretical inquiry and philosophical analysis. Its origins, genealogies, historiographies, meanings, measurements, practices, problems, risks, and futurisms require treatment through a cosmopolitan method. Each task is one demanding laborious organization (Gagnon 2013). And as David Held (2014) argues, this needs to happen outside of colonized thinking or in recognition of the erroneous claims to universality that people for whatever reason tend to make: be that the Western, the religious, the Eastern, the Southern, the indigenous, or the Other. As editors of this new journal, we follow Ulrich Beck (2014) in arguing that no one person, group, or institution has sufficiently defined or understood democracy. No one has yet solved the puzzle of democracy because it is, by its nature, an open-ended and unfinished project. Finding "the" answer to the question "what is democracy" must, in the globalized age, be done through a global partnership that seeks out potential democratic discourses beyond the current epicenters of democratic authority.

The abovementioned serves both as the justification and objective for *Democratic Theory* as a journal. Though often grouped into the subdiscipline of political theory, democratic theory has now become so multiform that it requires its own specialized forum dedicated to the advancement and organization of knowledge. The many theories and concepts associated with democracy and democratization – including direct democracy, representative democracy, deliberative democracy, agonistic democracy, radical democracy, cosmopolitan democracy, monitory democracy, post-democracies, new authoritarianisms, and even "democide" (Keane 2009; Chou 2013b) – must now speak more to each other as well as to themselves. To do this, theorists have to more openly analyze democracy from historical, critical, comparative, and cosmopolitan perspectives. Scholarship of this nature is, of course, already taking place. But it remains fragmented and spread across a variety of disciplinary journals. *Democratic Theory* aspires to unite this scholarship. It hopes to become the forum where democratic theorists (and practitioners) can develop their ideas and learn from their peers in a sustained fashion.

In short, *Democratic Theory* will foster an approach to democracy that does not take its meaning as monolithic or as stagnant. Alongside the growing body of empirically oriented literature asking publics how they understand democracy, this journal will contribute serious investigations into the theoretical underpinnings of such questions. To this end, the journal encourages philosophical and interdisciplinary contributions to debates about the state of democracies past, present, and future. It challenges theorists and practitioners to ask and hazard answers to the peren-

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nial questions: What is the meaning of democracy? Why is democracy so prominent in the world today? Will democracy continue to expand? Are current forms of democracy sufficient to give voice to "the people" in an increasingly fragmented and divided world? Who leads in democracy? What types of non-Western democratic theories are there? Should democrats always defend democracy? Should democrats be fearful of dedemocratization, postdemocracies, and the rise of hybridized regimes?

To answer these questions, the journal will purposely accommodate a wide range of theoretical perspectives and a multidisciplinary approach to the study of democracy. Only by democratizing the discourse on democracy itself can we glean insights into the various democratic theories, and different democracies, that exist, including: citizenship, representation, democide, deliberation, agonism, participation, e-democracy, neoliberalism, dissent, and so forth; the history (or histories) of democracy; the futures of democracy; the philosophical foundations of democracy; the questions surrounding democracy's anthropocentrism; theorizations about totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and hybrid regimes in contradistinction to democracy; the nation-state, globalization, and democracy; domination and resistance; power and inequality; populism and radical politics; and so on.

Moreover, we hope that the journal will encourage a more intimate debate between what is theory and what is practice and how the two relate. As has already been hinted at, practitioners and policy makers too often forget that what they are doing, that what has become possible for them to do, is a result of what theorists have already done—sometimes decades ago. Similarly, there are theorists who have a habit of ignoring alternate histories, contemporary events, or policy prescriptions when they analyze esoteric philosophical treatises and speak to their closed community of theoretical specialists. We want to show—we want this journal to demonstrate—that theory and practice are inherently related; without the one the other would simply not be possible. The theories we hope *Democratic Theory* will inspire are those that illuminate reality; to borrow from the words of Torbjørn Knutsen (1997: 1), a historian and theorist of international relations, "Theories enlighten." Our hope is that the works produced in this journal will do just that, bringing to light phenomena that may have previously been invisible and, by doing so, enabling us to better comprehend the realm of democratic possibility. To this end, the journal will feature contributions that range from abstract theorizing to applied democratic theory to debates and interviews with leading democratic theorists and practitioners. It will do this in order to demystify theory as well as to reveal the underlying significance of theory even to very practical concerns.

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In this way, *Democratic Theory* will foster an inclusive forum where all types of theoretical questions can be explored systematically and creatively with no respect to disciplines or particular schools of thought. It encourages Western as well as non-Western ideas and is actively based on the premise that there are many forms of democracies and many types of democrats. For too long, the discourse of democracy has been colonized and predetermined by Western powers and thinkers. For too long, we have ignored the multiplicity of democracy. Now more than ever there is a need to globalize – and by extension democratize – how we think about and understand democracy/democracies. *Democratic Theory* will provide the inclusive arena where these debates can germinate and develop.

Before we close this editorial, we want to end with a few words about the specifics of our journal. As a scholarly forum, we are ideally interested in publishing four types of contributions. First and most conventionally, we will be publishing research articles of between 6000 and 8000 words. In this inaugural issue, for instance, we have three research articles: Henry A. Giroux's on the state of democracy in the United States given the forces of predatory capitalism; Simeon Mitropolitski's on the need to go beyond procedural understandings of democracy in order to foster a more egalitarian political culture; and Lauri Rapeli's study into what citizens of a democracy should (but often do not) know. All three articles in this inaugural issue address similar themes, that is, the need for citizens to become more active and critical of what democracy has become.

The second type of contribution we wish to publish is interviews, dialogues and conversations with leading democratic theorists and practitioners. The rationale for this type of contribution is that it enables readers to get an immediate sense of what motivates and troubles key scholars working in the area of democracy today as well as what they see to be the cutting-edge research in their specific areas. To this end, our inaugural issue features excerpts from an interview conducted with Robyn Eckersley on the issue of nature in democratic theory.

The third type of contribution we seek to encourage in *Democratic Theory* is critical commentaries and debates relating to contemporary issues and themes, including those raised in previous issues. We welcome contributions that draw on democratic theory to speak to current political events or works that reflect on the key debates taking place in our discipline. In our next issue we will feature a series of short contributions by scholars working on the issue of the crisis of democracy in our times as a way of introducing readers to the latest scholarship in this area.

Finally, the fourth type of contribution we are after is traditional book reviews and longer form review essays. We welcome any inquiries and

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proposals for essays wishing to dissect democratic theory in the context of recent works. In this issue, we feature reviews of two topical books: the first is David Runciman's *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present,* reviewed by Jack Corbett, and the second is Todd Landman's *Human Rights and Democracy: The Precarious Triumph of Ideals,* reviewed by Tezcan Gumus. In future issues we also plan to feature book symposia where one book is analysed by several scholars, including the author themselves.

Our hope is that each issue of *Democratic Theory* will feature a mix of these different contributions; though from time to time there will be special issues and sections that will focus the journal to examining one particular aspect of democratic theory. To this end, forthcoming issues and sections will be dedicated to exploring such areas as non-Western democratic theories, non-human democracies, indigenous and subaltern democratic theories, hybridized and post-democracies, and feminist democratic theories.

In closing, we want to formally thank the members of our steering committee and editorial board who have helped steer this journal from its inception. In particular, we would like to acknowledge our associate editors, Selen A. Ercan and George Vasilev, who have worked tirelessly to promote the journal. This, we hope, is only the beginning of a long collaboration.

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