◀ INTERVIEW ▶

Democracies in the Ethnosphere *An Anthropologist's Lived Experiences of Indigenous Democratic Cultures*

Wade Davis and Jean-Paul Gagnon

► **Abstract:** Anthropology meets democratic theory in this conversation that explores indigeneity, diversity, and the potentialities of democratic practices as exist in the non-Western world. Wade Davis draws readers into the ethnosphere—the sum total of human knowledge and experience—to highlight the extinction events that are wiping out some half of human ethnic diversity. Gagnon worries over what is lost to how we can understand and practice democracy in this unprecedented, globally occurring, ethnocide.

► **Keywords:** anthropology, cultures, democracy, democratic theory, ethnography, ethnosphere, Wade Davis

Gagnon: How do you define democracy, and what is the ethnosphere?

Davis: They're very different questions. When I think of democracy, I'm always reminded of the lines inscribed on my favorite monument in Washington, DC, which is the Jefferson Memorial. At the top is written: "I swear upon the altar of almighty God to fight against all forms of tyranny over the mind of man." The fascinating thing about that line, coming from the author of the *Declaration of Independence in the States*, who was a real child of the enlightenment, is the fact that Jefferson is hedging his bets. He's on that cusp where people are, through the enlightenment, trying to liberate themselves from the tyranny of absolute faith. But, at the same time, they are not quite prepared to let go of it. I therefore see democracy as an ever-changing allocation of power that was very much a product of not just the enlightenment but of a particular lineage of it.

One of the things that anthropology tries to suggest is that all cultures are famously myopic in that they tend to stay faithful to their own interpretation of reality. If, to give an example, you translate the name that most indigenous people give for “the people,” it means themselves, with the implication being that the blokes over the hill, who are not “the people,” are savages. This cultural myopia has been the curse of humanity since the dawn of its awareness. I think, as a result, that democracy has been very much tied to a Western European intellectual tradition because in that tradition “the people” meant Europeans.

Gagnon: I’ve never thought of it that way before. I’ve always taken the “demos,” which is just another term for “the people,” as free from its roots, its anchor, in the European doxa of democracy studies – perhaps as I was trained in this convention but from the outside-in. It makes sense though, as you explain it, that demos parsed to European peoples since our global history is littered with examples of Europeans telling those who are *not* European that they must make themselves up in the image of the Western elite to qualify as (a) human and (b) agents ready to “receive” democracy.

Davis: Of course and this practice changed through time. Initially those who got the ballot were males who owned land, then most males, and then eventually the half of humanity that happened to be women, and eventually it spread to include universal suffrage. But I see democracy, the Western conceptions of it at any rate, as very much a product of a particular worldview that has become very dominant. Its ubiquity and power, however, should not imply that it’s a norm in human affairs. It’s by no means the norm when you look at it through the anthropological lens.

It’s important to remember that we are ourselves, you and me, a product of our own history, a history that goes way back, at least in terms of the quest to liberate the individual from the collective. This liberation comes to the fore in the Enlightenment with René Descartes’ statement that “all that exists is mind and matter” becoming its signal gesture. In trying to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of absolute faith, he swept away all notions of myth, magic, mysticism, but essentially and most importantly, metaphor.

The idea, for example, that the flight of a bird could have meaning was dismissed as ridiculous. And in time, science, as Saul Bellow said, would “make a house cleaning of belief” due to Descartes’ assertion. As we came to see the human species as being not just a part but the singular player on a stage upon which other forms of sentient life were

just props in the human drama, we began to completely de-animate the world – and *that* has had real consequences. If you look around the world, most societies engage *not* in an extractive model that is based on an inner earth ready to be exploited, but rather are driven by notions of reciprocity, all of which are oriented around the fundamental idea that the earth owes its bounty to humans, but humans, in turn, owe their fidelity to the earth.

Gagnon: This leads me to think of the nature of democratic polities in that they can be extractive vis-à-vis the earth to, for example, redistribute wealth if the people running that show are more socially inclined. Otherwise, they might be doing this if their understanding of democracy parses to economic growth and a freer type of economic competition – which is an understanding, it seems, many in this world hold. Both approaches are different to the reciprocal model of democracy, which is, as I understand it, focused more on the give and take, the balance, especially between humans and the earth.

Davis: Yes, but I'm not delving into hippie ethnography here: what I mean is that there's a fundamental idea that the earth is animate. You and I, and probably most readers of this conversation, were raised to believe that a mountain was a pile of rock. I was raised in the forests of British Columbia to believe that these forests existed to be cut. That was the fundamental science of the ideology of forestry. These trees were board, feet and cellulose. Now that made me profoundly different to my friends amongst the *Kwakwaka'wakw*, who were raised to believe these forests were the abode of *Wuikinuxv* and the Crooked Beak of Heaven and the Cannibal Spirits that had to be embraced during the *Hamatsa* initiation. The most important thing is that those belief systems as metaphors mediated the relationship between this society and the natural environment, which has led to profoundly different consequences for the environment.

Gagnon: Yes, I think of how many people are, for example, changing to vegetarian and vegan diets but also preferencing locally grown, organic, no-till, heritage, low-impact, etcetera, food production systems in ways that are critical of hype and suspicious of marketing.

Davis: The way I was raised to think about forests and mountains made me, again, very different than my godchildren in the mountains of the Andes who were raised to believe that a mountain was an earth deity that would direct their destiny.

It's important to note that it's not about who's right and who's wrong, but rather to understand that the consequences of how we are raised in relation to natural things are profound in terms of the ecological footprint of the people. There's no more powerful an example of this than from where you are speaking to me from.

When the British arrived on the shores of what we now call "Australia," they saw people who looked strange to them, who had, from the British gaze, a simple material technology. And although there was a tremendous amount of diversity in that civilization, to the British everybody seemed somewhat similar in that they had no interest whatsoever in improving upon the material lot. It was this, more than anything, that offended the British. And so the British, in their inimitable way, concluded that all the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia weren't, therefore, human.

As recently as 1902 it was debated, in Melbourne in Victoria's state parliament, as to whether aborigines were human or not. As recently as the 1950s in Australia, ranchers had quotas as to how many aborigines who trespassed upon their land could be shot with impunity. As recently as the 1960s, a schoolbook that was used in the curriculum across the country, called "A Treasury of Fauna of Australia," included the Aboriginal people as among the interesting forms of wildlife in the continent.

Gagnon: Indeed, a story told to me by a Jagera/Yaggera man, an indigenous activist in Brisbane back in 2012, is that the city's "boundary street" (you can see it on maps of South Brisbane) is an overhang from a time, in the early nineteenth century or so, when indigenous persons were press-ganged into construction labor and could, if that boundary were crossed without colonist permission, be shot. That's an anecdote, of course, so whilst details may vary here or there against the historical record (written in the main by colonists), I take it as fact given how it is not dissimilar in its description to the elsewhere documented atrocities such as between the Sydney colony and indigenous persons to the west of it or the war that took place between indigenous people on the island now called "Tasmania" and the colonists who eventually annihilated them (see Rogers and Bain 2016).

Davis: What was missing from this was the colonists' ability to understand the devotional philosophy that was perhaps too subtle for the British imagination, and that was *The Dreaming*. *The Dreaming*, of course, is not a dream in our common sense. It is the notion that the world both exists and is, as yet, eternally waiting to be born.

Not one, for example, of the 670 dialects and languages of Australia uses a word for past, present, future, or time. *The Dreaming* was a state of unfolding existence. What the British didn't understand of that

civilization was, in fact, the antithesis of progress and self-improvement. And those values were indeed the values of Victorian Europe at the time of the invasion, but they had nothing to do with the worldview of the Aboriginal peoples, who above all valued stasis, constancy, as the whole key to The Dreaming is that the purpose in life is not to change anything, it was to do the ritual gestures along the song line that ran through your clan territory, song lines that mark the trajectory of the ancestors when they sang the world into existence.

To do the ritual gesture is deemed to be necessary to keep the world exactly as it was at the time of its dawning. It'd be as if all of Western European thought had gone into pruning the shrubs in the garden of Eden to keep it just as it was when Adam and Eve had their fateful conversation.

The issue, again, isn't to say who's right and who's wrong. Had we followed as a species that intellectual trajectory, that devotional philosophy, we wouldn't have put a man on the moon. But on the other hand, we wouldn't be talking about climate change and our capacity to transform the biophysical foundations of life on the planet. From the long-term perspective, say 50,000 years, it's hard not to say that just perhaps the first peoples of Australia got it right.

Gagnon: Yes! We likely wouldn't be concerned with preserving relics of humanity and life on earth on the moon (as with Israel's failed Beresheet mission) or colonizing (escaping to?) other planets in our solar system as Elon Musk via SpaceX seems intent on doing. . . .

Davis: In all, I see Western conceptions of democracy as an expression of a narrow sub-cohort of the human experience. In most of the non-Western societies that I've been spending time with, that concept really has no meaning.

Think, for example, of the nomadic Penan in the forests of Sarawak or even the Inuit of the circumpolar North, or the Waorani of the forests of Eastern Ecuador: these people are acephalous, they live in non-hierarchical societies where there are no specialists. Far from an ideal world, in these societies you see how the belief systems make for a different way of being. This is what the wonder of the human experience is as brought into being by culture.

Think, for a further example, about how in a nomadic society of the rainforest, in which there is not only no incentive to accumulate material objects but there's a disincentive to do so: how do you measure wealth in such a society? Well, among the Penan, wealth is defined explicitly, consciously, as a strength of social relations between people, because if those relations fray, everybody suffers.

For example: if you and I are members of a small hunting group and suddenly I don't get along with you but I do get along with the others, I could force your exclusion. That means that night, after our return from the hunt, your children have much less of a chance to eat from the catch. So in these societies there is a tremendous pressure to maintain social solidarity. And in fact, in the Penan culture and language, there's no word for thank you, because sharing is an automatic reflex. I'll never forget giving a cigarette to an old woman in a Penan encampment and watching her tear it apart to distribute the individual strands of tobacco equitably to every woman in the encampment, rendering the product useless in honoring her obligation to share.

Years later, when as part of a political effort to draw attention to the destruction of their homeland, we brought – at their request – three Penan on a global tour. Quite suddenly, three men who had never left the forest, were with the Grateful Dead in Wembley Stadium, they were meeting with heads of state, addressing the General Assembly of the UN, and being squired around the world by the Prince of Monaco.

Whilst these men had an extraordinary exposure to the world, in a bid to make their message known, nothing, nothing that they saw in all of that journey impressed upon them more than two things. The first is that they were horrified at the idea of raising animals for slaughter. In their forest homeland, they will kill and eat anything that moves. But if an animal enters the kindred, a pet monkey or bird, it becomes a human. To raise chickens or hogs or cows for slaughter is, for them, to eat their own children. The second thing that simply horrified them was homelessness. They could not believe that in such an abundant world such desperate straits could be allowed to exist, because they really do live by the adage that “a poor man shames us all.” We see this ethic repeated in hunting societies such as the Athabaskans of the Boreal forest of Canada, for example.

Gagnon: This relation between culture, language, mores, and being, the diversities of human life and how they fuel the enactments of governance is incredible. I'm thinking, in particular, of how habitual it was for the people I saw in Las Vegas, on “the strip” for instance, to step over homeless people lying in the street to enter, or exit, a store.

Davis: In the language of the Inuit, Inuktitut, there are no swear words. You would never curse. Instead, you express your disapproval by silence. You would never, ever, speak ill of anybody publicly as the solidarity of the group is, again, what matters. Everything has to protect the integrity of the collective.

Now, this doesn't imply always perfect worlds. If we go, for example, into the homeland of the Waorani in the Eastern lowland Amazon forest of Ecuador we would encounter an extraordinary society. Extraordinary in part, because though they live just 150 kilometers from Quito, a city that's been settled for 500 years; they were only first peacefully contacted in 1958.

In 1957, five missionaries attempted contact and made a critical mistake. They dropped from the air 8 x 10 glossy photographs of themselves in what we would say to be friendly gestures, forgetting that the Indians of the forest had never seen anything two dimensional in their lives. They picked up the photographs, looked behind the photographs to try to find the form to the face they saw on them, found nothing, concluded they were calling cards from the devil, and so they promptly speared the five missionaries to death when eventually they met. But they didn't just spear outsiders, they speared each other too. Fifty-four percent of their mortality for men was being killed in an inter-tribal spearing raid. We traced genealogies back eight generations and found only two cases of natural death. One of the fellows we interviewed admitted that one of the deaths in question was about "a man who had gotten so old that he was dying from getting old, so we speared him anyway."

What you see in this is one of the real hazards of acephalous – which just means without head, without leadership – egalitarian societies. They are prone to blood feuds because, of course, there's no ultimate authority. Again, Jean-Paul, if I kill your daughter and you seek revenge by killing my son, and I then argue that my son is worth more as a hunter than your daughter as a mother and you say, "No, quite the opposite," there's no one to adjudicate our dispute. Blood feuds can often thusly be set in motion, and they simply do not go away.

The Waorani have suffered blood feuds for most of their history. So none of these societies or their adaptations are just images of an ideal world any more than any critique of modernity is to condemn the world in which we live. The bounty of the "ethnosphere," we'll get to that term in a moment, is that it gives us pause to reflect on the wonderful revelation that the world in which we live is just one model of reality, the consequence of just one set of adaptive choices that our lineage made however successfully generations ago, but critically the other peoples of the world aren't failed attempts at being us; they're not failed attempts at being modern or human.

Every society is a unique answer to a fundamental question: what does it mean to be human *and* alive? When the peoples, the world, answer that question they do so in the seven thousand voices of humanity. And those answers collectively become our repertoire for dealing with

the problems that will confront us as a species in the coming years. This is a lesson of anthropology: every culture has something to say, each deserves to be heard, just as none has a monopoly on the route to the divine.

Gagnon: I make a similar argument about the democracies in the world. There are thousands of them like liberal democracy, representative democracy, deliberative democracy, open democracy, black democracy, pirate democracy, and so on. They each have one or more meanings, some are quite similar to one another, some like simple majoritarian democracy are common among humans (even amongst certain non-humans!) whilst others are rendered more specialized by this or that lineage. None parse to “democracy” to the exclusion of all the others just as modern Western civilization does not parse to “human” to the exclusion of all other civilizations either.

Davis: Some time ago, when I wrote a book called *The Wayfinders* (2009), an editor added a subtitle, “Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World.” I wasn’t keen on it as it implied that these indigenous cultures were somehow vestigial or frozen in time, when they are in fact living dynamic peoples constantly dancing with all the new possibilities of life. But it did force me to answer the question, which ultimately I did in two words: climate change. Not to suggest that we go back to a pre-industrial past or that any society on earth be kept from the best of the genius of modernity, be that allopathic medicine or science and technology, but rather to suggest that the very existence of these multiple expressions of the human heart and spirit and imagination as brought into being by the diverse cultures of the world puts the lie to those of us in our culture who say that we cannot change, as we all know we must, the fundamental way in which we inhabit the planet.

Climate change has become humanity’s problem. It was not caused by humanity; it was caused by a very narrow subset of humanity, that for only three hundred years now, has been consuming the ancient sunlight of the world. And wherever you go around the world, you see indigenous people who played no role in the creation of this problem, dealing with the consequences more directly, and suffering the consequences more acutely, than any of us are.

This so poignant. In the West climate change is an abstraction for many, a political debate for some, a scientific conundrum, perhaps for others an economic and technical opportunity. But consider how it appears to the vast majority of cultures who literally believe that they are responsible for the well-being of the world. Peoples such as the Barasana

and Makuna in the Northwest Amazon, of the Kogi, Wiwa and Arhuacos of Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. For these cultures people are not the problem but the solution, for it is only through the human imagination that the natural world becomes manifest. At the same time, they believe that through their rituals and ceremonies, they literally maintain the cosmic or ecological balance of life. For these societies, climate change is a profound psychological and existential crisis, for when the earth suffers, it is not just their responsibility but their fault.

You asked about this notion of the ethnosphere. I coined the term some years ago in a book, *Light at the Edge of the World* (Davis 2002). The thought was to come up with a concept that would suggest to people that just as there is a biosphere, a biological web of life, so too there is a cultural fabric that envelops the earth, a cultural web of life. You might think of the ethnosphere as being the sum total of all thoughts and dreams, myths, intuitions, and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. The ethnosphere is humanity's great legacy. It is the product of our dreams, the embodiment of our hopes, the symbol of all that we are and all that we have created as a wildly inquisitive and astonishingly adaptive species.

And just as the biosphere, the biological matrix of life, is today being severely compromised, so too is the ethnosphere. Only, if anything, at a far greater rate of loss. No biologist, for example, would dare suggest that 50 percent of all species of plant and animal are moribund or on the brink of extinction. Yet this, the most apocalyptic projection in the realm of biological diversity, scarcely approaches what we know to be the most optimistic scenario in the realm of cultural diversity. The key indicator is language loss. There are at present some six thousand languages. But of these fully half are not being taught to children. Which means that, effectively, unless something changes, these languages are already dead.

Gagnon: One popularly translated line from Wittgenstein is that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world." However, some readers may think that the point you make here of language loss is overstated if they believe that all languages are just different ways of saying the same thing. But as Guy Deutscher explains in his enlightening book *Through the Language Glass* (2010), that's really not the case. Your connection of language to, for example, culture is true and certainly so insofar as concepts go. The first point on language is more or less accurate when we talk of the sun, a dog, or a tree – common objects that most cultures will have a word for and that those words will share the same referent (e.g., sun, dog, tree). But the minute we ask what the *meaning* of those objects are, their purpose and place in the world, their color even, human cultures, as you

have said, answer such questions in an explosion of diversity, in answers by their thousands.

Davis: Language loss allowed the general public to understand the threat facing the ethnosphere. It's one thing to use an abstract term like the ethnosphere, it's quite another to ask an audience how they would feel to be enveloped in silence, to have no means or ability to pass on the wisdom of their ancestry or anticipate the promise of their descendants. And yet that is the fate of someone every two weeks, because on average, every fortnight, some man and woman somewhere on this planet, slips away into death and carries with them into the grave the last syllables of their language.

And this doesn't have to happen.

Gagnon: Can you tell us more about why this extinction, this halving of humanity's legacy, is happening?

Davis: That's a really important question because even though those of us, Jean-Paul, who are sympathetic with the wonder of culture, we have this idea that these cultures are maybe quaint and colorful but somehow destined to fade away, as if they are failed attempts at being modern, failed attempts to be keeping up. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Gagnon: Even Charles Darwin is responsible for disparaging indigenous people such as the Yaghan of what's today called "Tierra Del Fuego." He called them "miserable, degraded savages" and could not believe "how wide was the difference between savage and civilized man," which, of course, can be read about in his *Voyage of the Beagle*.

Davis: Technology is no threat to culture. The Lakota Sioux did not stop being Lakota when they gave up the bow and arrow for the gun, any more than American farmers stopped being American when they gave up the horse and buggy for the pickup truck. Technology is never a threat to culture. It can have an impact on culture, but it can also liberate culture. And by the same token, change is no threat to culture. All peoples, everywhere, are always dancing with new possibilities of life.

We are not talking about delicate and frail cultures, quaint and colorful but destined to fade away. Quite to the contrary in every instance as these are dynamic living peoples being driven out of existence by identifiable forces. That's actually an optimistic observation because if we recognize that human beings are the agents of cultural destruction, we can surely be the facilitators of cultural survival. The forces that are impacting

these societies are myriad, but certainly egregious development policies and ill-conceived industrial initiatives play their part. Consider the case of the Penan, among the last nomadic peoples of the Southeast Asian rainforests. In a single generation their homeland in the forests of Sarawak has been laid waste, and a way of life morally inspired, inherently right, confident of its own destiny, has been crushed along with the forest that gave it birth. Perhaps an even greater threat to culture is ideology, be it the ubiquitous cult of the modern, or the Marxist-Leninist mania of Beijing.

Take, for example, the role of education as it is a chief element of the development paradigm. The development paradigm is so often just an excuse to disenfranchise individual ethnicities whose presence on a piece of land proves to be a cold inconvenience for the industrial forces that coveted that land. We assume that schooling can only be good, and therefore, so too the imposition of Western education in all quarters of this world.

We know that to be a citizen of the world today requires some basic level of literacy and numeracy, nothing wrong with it. But the problem is that education is always presented in a context that also implies acculturation and assimilation. I'll give you just a simple example. In the Eastern and Northern deserts of Kenya, in the Sub-Saharan Sahel, the dominant political authority, be it the British colonial office or now the state of Kenya, has always tried to get the pastoral nomads to settle down in the wake of a series of devastating droughts and famines. Famine, of course, is caused by humans, drought, a natural phenomenon, led the government to impose a complete conceit of the development community, the tragedy of the commons.

The idea was that nomadic peoples would never look after the landscape if they didn't own it. So the solution was the imposition of a land management scheme drawn from the American West. That implied getting nomads to sell off their herds and settle down. Once the nomadic people settled, it spelled disaster, for the reason they had big herds was to survive the periodic droughts that ate into their capital. The strategy now of all those families to mitigate drought, now herdless, and it's not a cruel anomaly, is to get one child into the cash economy.

That implies sending an eldest son to a local school or a distance school. And those schools, unfortunately, are dominated by missionaries or by the nation state that has contempt for the pastoral nomadic traditions. The child comes in this school, a scion of a rich tradition that goes back 10,000 years, and he acquires a modicum of literacy and mathematical skill, but in a context that teaches him to be ashamed of who he is. He then graduates, not as a nomad but as a clerk, into a federal economy with a 50 percent unemployment rate for high school graduates. He can't

go back because he's been taught to be ashamed of his roots, going forward is to slip to the slums of Nairobi and to try to make a living scratching from the edges of the cash economy.

Gagnon: That's heartbreaking.

Davis: Yes, and yet if you think about it, by all the indices of the development paradigm, things have improved. Urbanization rates have gone up, literacy rates have gone up, per capita income has gone up, but has quality of life improved? The answer, of course, is no.

The blind faith that we have in education was revealed in the astonishing success of *Three Cups of Tea*, written by Greg Mortenson (2006). A mountaineer raised in a family of missionaries, Mortenson recounts in the book his efforts to fund and build schools for young girls in Afghanistan; his premise being that all the problems of the country might be solved if only women had access to education, certainly a noble if naïve sentiment. Americans, their own country engaged in what would become its longest and most futile foreign war, embraced the book as if a lifeline. Inserted in curricula across the nation, it was obligatory reading for a generation of kids already setting aside their pennies for peace, collections that allowed Mortenson's foundation to raise tens of millions of dollars. The government thought so highly of the book that the army provided a free copy to every soldier destined for Afghanistan. The book was just what the country needed; something that would reaffirm America's faith in the inherent simplicity of the world and in the fundamental goodness of the American enterprise. Then, sadly, things began to fall apart for the author. Accounts of his own trials, a kidnapping by the Taliban, for example, turned out to be fabrications. Few schools had actually been built; fewer still were staffed and equipped. Mortenson's foundation was spending more money buying his book at retail to keep it at number one on Amazon.com than constructing schools in Afghanistan. His treasurer accused the author of using the foundation as his personal ATM. In the end, the man became caught in his own lie, his life and reputation forever compromised. His tragic fall, indeed the entire sordid saga, should give us pause and perhaps lead us to examine our ongoing faith in education as purely a force for good, a panacea of the development paradigm.

We, in Canada for example, are going through an agonizing process which you are going through in Australia, that of reconciliation based on the residential schools program. Such programs forced indigenous people away from their families, tore apart siblings, refused to allow them to speak their native language, and put them into these schools run by

priests where the sexual, physical, and psychological abuse was in some settings rampant.

What we must remember is that those schools were established by those with the best intentions. This is the haunting reality. Those in the colonial society who didn't care about indigenous people had little interest in schooling; they would have been fine if all native people had succumbed to disease or simply been shot. They could not have cared less about education. That these schools may have been established with "good" intentions, at least in certain quarters, does not in any way excuse those who supported the policies or mitigate the terrible impact that these institutions had on generations of young men and women. Even those professing the best of intentions can be fully capable of doing evil by their deeds. This is surely among the important lessons to be learned from the dark legacy of residential schools.

But have we learned it? Clearly, no, for the basic pedagogy and culture of the residential schools remains the educational model for school systems throughout the world, most notably in Africa and the subcontinent of India. To this day children are removed from their families, sent away to boarding schools to be taught in the language of the state, obliged to drop their traditional dress, style, and deportment, separated by gender from their siblings, forced to live a regimented life conceived to transform them into a labor force for the national state.

I remember once, in the Northwest Amazon, I was sitting with some elders who had seen their culture brought to the brink of exhaustion because of the pressure of the missionaries in the 1960s and '70s. They finally kicked out the missionaries, secured title to their land, and a whole new dream of culture was reborn. I asked them: "Why did you allow the missionaries, mostly Americans, to come in when you knew their purpose was to subvert your entire way of life?" One elder responded: "Because they promised to make us human."

Gagnon: There is such a strong parallel here with how democratization has, and continues, to play out in the world. Strong powers like the US, the EU, and the UN have preconceived notions of just what democracy is—even when such an assertion, that democracy means one thing, is patently false as it has never meant one thing and therefore, read in this light, is a power play. Nevertheless, the powers package this up into an institutional bundle and press it upon the *others* in the world to use when, in fact, there already are forms of democracy in play in those places the powers are exporting their conception to only the Europeans, the West, they can't see it for that civilizational glaze covering their eyes. The intentions are good, but the program is deeply flawed and, as we're already

seeing, damaging. As regards democratization: I think we're going to be needing a reconciliation of our very own, very soon.

Davis: Such is the essence of colonization, to persuade the colonized of their own inherent inferiority. Consider British rule in India. A mere 1,300 men in the Indian civil service, together with the British officers of a native army of 200,000 spread across a subcontinent, managed to rule a fifth of humanity for well over a century. Mercantile zeal, severe military reprisals, and the subversion of local elites all played a role in the maintenance of the Raj. But what really held it together was the very audacity of the venture, the sheer gall of a small island nation that never set out to rule the world, and yet did so with such flair. The Viceroy Lord Curzon famously had his uniforms designed and sewn by theatrical designers in the West End of London. British pomp and pageantry was all about pretense and intimidation.

Consider the power of Western ideology, not just the cult of the modern, but the influence of Marxism, a philosophy distilled by a German philosopher and written down with pencil, in the British library at the heart of London. Its fantasy about the malleability of social behavior would have been laughable had it not caused so much misery to the world, imposed absurdly on populations as diverse as the Dogon in the cliffs of Mali, the Nenets reindeer herders of Siberia, the Buddhist monks of Laos.

When Mao Tse Tung, the man responsible for the death of more of his own people than Hitler and Stalin combined, famously told a young Tibetan monk that all religion was poison, the fourteenth Dalai Lama knew what to expect. When the red guard took Lhasa in 1959, over a million people were killed for their religious beliefs, even as six thousand monasteries and sacred temples were destroyed. Or when Pol Pot, Brother Number One, set out to create a perfect socialist paradise, killing in the process half the Cambodian nation. I once met a nun in Siem Reap whose hands and feet had been severed from her body for the crime of pursuing her religious faith.

And what was it about the Buddhist Dharma that so offended the Marxist materialists of Beijing? The four noble truths. All life is suffering. By that the Buddha didn't mean that all life is negation; he just understood that negative outcomes occur. The cause of suffering is ignorance. By this he didn't mean stupidity but rather the tendency of people to cling to the cruel illusion of our own centrality in the stream of divine existence. The third of the noble truths proclaims that ignorance can be overcome, and the fourth is the delineation of a spiritual practice that if followed has not only the promise of a transformation of the human heart, but 2,500 years of empirical observation indicating that transformation does

indeed happen. A Lama in Tibet once said to me: “We in Tibet don’t believe that you went to the moon, but you did. You may not believe that we achieve enlightenment in one lifetime, but we do.”

Gagnon: That is so powerful. I’m very much stuck, though, on this question of where we find ourselves now. We have these violent and corrosive lines of history that have fed into the growth of a monolithic type of worldview, which is underscored by capitalism and competition, elections, political parties, parliaments, all of this in a broad sweep, could be called the liberal democratic world order.

And as you know, much ink, much steam from our mouths, has been contributing to the diagnosis that this liberal democratic order is crumbling or that it is diseased. And so we are finding ourselves, and maybe the “we” is too capacious here, maybe I’m speaking from what I know, which is mostly an academic enclave, but people in that enclave are looking for solutions. We know deliberative democracy is popular. We know direct democracy is on the rise in electronic guise. We are now trialing all sorts of different democratic techniques and technologies to revive liberalism or rescue parliamentary democracies. These democratic innovations are being looked to as saviors. But I wonder: what about the rest of the democracies in the world, those that come to us from the ethnosphere – those acephalous renditions of non-hierarchized governance. Can they rescue liberal democracy too?

Davis: We have to remember that democracy as its popularly known has a relatively shallow history. It really gets back to the question of the nature of being human. For most of our history, agency was not associated with the individual. If you look at the organization of the Spartans, they were more like worker bees in a single collective enterprise. For most of history, the collective has dominated the individual because, without the comfort of the collective, the individual was vulnerable.

The great Western experiment, what my anthropology tutor David Maybury-Lewis always described as a sociological equivalent of splitting the atom, is when we liberated the individual from the community. And that goes hand in hand with the development of Western democracy. Again, democracy in the West hasn’t been static. In America, it began with only the wealthy landowners being able to vote. And then the franchise gradually expanded. Eventually it takes in women, eventually, at least aspires, to take in people of color in a fair and just way. But again, it doesn’t represent the norm in the history of the organization of human populations.

Paradoxically, the liberation of the individual has also created challenges for democratic exercises in the West. In the piece that I wrote for

Rolling Stone in the summer of 2020, I used the lens of COVID-19 to ponder what had become of America (see Davis 2020). Americans look into the mirror and see only the myth of their exceptionalism. They do not appreciate, in what they see reflected, what has actually become of their society in the post-World war II era.

We know that democracy in America is in serious trouble. It has been a long time coming. But it is no time to gloat. When the torch of history passes to Asia, and China becomes truly ascendant, with its harsh treatment of ethnicities, its contempt for the democratic process, its social index for each one of its citizens, we're going to be nostalgic for the best years of the American century.

Gagnon: Many of our readers will doubtless consider themselves part of that “we,” but I’m not sure that I do, at least not wholesale. For instance, I’m not sure what the best years of the “American century” were nor that “China” necessarily parses to “bad” in relation to democratic governance, even though I do agree with you that the social index system is not to be followed nor is the illiberalism found among certain factions in the Party or the country’s internal colonization policies, punitive and destructive as they are (even if this is done in the name of “peace” and “harmony”).

Davis: One of the things I find fascinating in the Chinese example is their social index where one’s value is quantified based on their orthodoxy, on their willingness to go along with the conventions of the state. That social index literally determines whether your children can get entrance into schools, whether you can get a ticket on the high-speed railways, and where they’re allowed to fly in a commercial plane. It’s a level of state intervention that is surely the antithesis of the European democratic instinct.

And yet most Chinese are very comfortable with that system. Exporting our democratic process when it seems to struggle even at home, has many people around the world looking at us with some skepticism. I always say that if a Martian arrived in the United States, he/she/it would see many wonderful things. And if the measure of success was technological wizardry, the American experiment would really shine. But if the Martian turned to more subtle issues of spiritual contentment or social solidarity, they’d see some curious things. They’d see the fact that half our marriages end in divorce, that only 6 percent of Americans are prepared to have grandparents live beneath the same roof as their grandchildren, that they worshiped the cult of the workplace with slogans like 24/7, such that the average American father spends perhaps an hour a day in direct communication with a child, contributing to the fact that by the age of

18. the average American young man or woman has spent three full years looking at the glass of a video screen of one sort or another contributing to an obesity epidemic so severe that the joint chiefs of staff call it a national security crisis. The country that thinks of itself as exceptional consumes two thirds of the world's antipsychotic drugs, with the leading cause of death for those under the age of 50 being the misuse of opiates. The top 1 percent of Americans have \$30 trillion in assets whilst the lower half of the society have more debt than assets. The three richest Americans control more wealth than the poorest 160 million Americans. This is a culture that has lost sense of community and solidarity. Everybody has to fight for everything. No one deserves anything.

You saw this with the consequences of COVID-19. On July 30th, 2020, the Americans announced 59,767 cases of the virus. That same day in all of British Columbia, a vast province with a concentrated metropolitan population in Vancouver – an Asian city – with dozens of flights landing from China every day, just three hours up the road from Seattle where the pandemic landed in North America, and on that very day as the US announced nearly 60,000 cases, we had but five Covid patients in all of our hospitals. Now these figures have changed, and Canada has certainly had its problems. But in general rates of mortality and morbidity have been dramatically lower.

So what's going on? Canada is not a perfect society, but there is a strong sense of consilience in the community. We recognize that the wealth of a society is not the currency accumulated by the lucky few, but the strength of social relations and the bonds of reciprocity that link us all in common purpose. We have a healthcare system that caters to the collective not the individual, and certainly not the private investor who views every hospital bed as if a rental property.

When Americans defied science, flocking to the beaches and bars, they displayed not strength but the weakness of a people who lacked both the stoicism to endure the pandemic and the fortitude to defeat it. In the most recent presidential elections, 75 million Americans voted their indignation, casting their votes for a buffoon of man, a bone spur of a warrior, a coward with a backbone of a bully. A man who had transparently no credentials for one of the most important jobs in the world. But this didn't matter. In a thriving democracy, a nation on the rise, voters respond to a higher calling, recognizing the responsibility that comes with the ballot, reaching beyond themselves to vote for the candidate who they truly believe will be best for the country and the world. I know this may sound naïve, but there is truth in it. When people instead feel that their votes are so meaningless that they can be tossed away on a candidate whose only qualification is his willingness to reinforce their hatreds, give meaning

to their fears, and target their enemies real and imagined, that surely is a sign of decadence. What then, in this light, is one to make of that thing called democracy in America? That even more people who vote for Trump in 2020 than four years before, having experienced his rule, and knowing all that is known about his character, corruption, and venality, his failure to pay taxes, multiple bankruptcies, the tens of thousands of lies, you have to wonder about the entire American democratic experiment.

When you have a situation where a country that solved the medical challenges of the century – like polio and smallpox; but then you have healthcare workers desperately awaiting emergency flights of supplies from China or refusing to take the vaccination, you can almost hear the hinge of history creak open to the Asian century. When people around the world for the first time, as the *Irish Times* reported, expressed an emotion never before expressed about in the United States of America – pity – something is changing (see O'Toole, 2020). When America turned its back on its own myths, its moral charters, as the land of opportunity and the home of the brave, by turning around and building a wall across its Southern border. America turned away mothers only to tear their children from them – there were still as late as October 525 children, separated from their families, in custody on the Mexican border – only to lose track of where their parents are. Surely betraying the fundamental values of the nation is as much an act of treason as selling secrets to an enemy.

Gagnon: What would be the lesson for us here, from how people govern or organize themselves in the ethnosphere? In other words, in reflecting on everything you've said about the United States of America, what lessons would you prescribe for us from the rest of the world?

Davis: First of all, none of this is to idealize indigenous people or to denigrate our own culture. The issue is not the traditional versus the modern, but the right of free people to choose the components of their lives. Nobody is suggesting that we go back to a pre-industrial past or that anyone be kept in the genius of the modern. The point is not to deny access to anything but rather to ensure that all peoples are able to benefit from the genius of modernity on their own terms, and without that engagement demanding the death of their ethnicity.

And the reason for that is very simple: culture is not trivial. It is not decoration or artifice, the songs we sing, or even the prayers we chant. It is a blanket of comfort that gives meaning to lives. It is a body of knowledge that allows the individual to make sense out of the infinite sensations of consciousness, to find meaning and order in a universe that ultimately has neither.

Culture is a body of laws and traditions, a moral and ethical code that insulates a people from the barbaric heart that history suggests lies just beneath the surface of all human societies and indeed all human beings. Culture alone allows us to reach, as Abraham Lincoln said, for the better angels of our nature. It is culture that mitigates the worst impulses of the individual.

And if you want to see what happens when culture is lost, when the constraints of culture are abandoned, where individuals perhaps out of volition, or perhaps driven by coercion, are cast to drift in a world of uncertainty, of alienation and disaffection, perhaps securing only the bottom rung of an economic ladder that goes nowhere, you just have to look at the points of conflict around the world. Every conflict is a clash of culture or a reflection of the consequences of the breakdown of culture. And so culture isn't trivial; it's a glue for society and the hope of civilization.

In this sense, all of my arguments, I guess, are profoundly conservative in a certain way. But that's what culture represents, it's the great hope of humanity, it's what makes us who we are.

Gagnon: We have this need, this requirement, which is an inherent good, of having a diversity of culture in the world, a richly variegated ethnosphere in other words. It's those interstices, in the experiences of peoples coming to know each other, that I think are a key site for cultures to learn about democracy from one another.

You mentioned the tour of those three indigenous persons and how they remarked upon the horrors of industrialized animal consumption and also the tragedy of homelessness. And it's those moments, when cultures meet, that can produce a moment of shock, where you go, "Oh, gods, I've never thought about that. I never even considered it in my most wondrous dreams or even in my work despite specializing in the area," which is true for many political theorists or social theorists.

Would you say that that's one side of value for us, in terms of generating new ideas for where we can go to save or improve or salvage the liberal democratic order? I would argue that we desperately need these surprising conversations between cultures or else we are left with what: the crumbling order of liberal democracy and a technocratic authoritarianism to sweep up its fallen plaster?

Davis: The answer comes down to a question. What kind of world do we want live in? How do we generate true pluralism in an interconnected world?

Margaret Mead said her greatest nightmare was that as we drift toward this blandly amorphous generic world view, not only would the

entire range of humanity be reduced to a single modality of thought, but we wake from a dream, having forgotten that there were other possibilities for life itself.

I think, from that light, that it's important to recall the contributions of anthropology. Jean-Paul, if I asked you to name the values, to delineate the values of your great-grandfather, living in Quebec perhaps before the Great War. Values about his ideas about women, the role of men, the place of race in our culture, the interaction between human beings and the environment, whatever. Not one of his certitudes would you endorse today, and many of them you'd find morally reprehensible. In 1911, for example, the superiority of the white male was accepted with such assurance that there was not even an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the word racism. There was not an entry for the word colonialism. There wasn't an entry for homosexuality. Now, flash forward to now, where in our lifetime, women have gone from the kitchen to the boardroom, people of color from the woodshed to the White House, gay people from the closet to the altar.

We tend to think of these three very important social movements as just that, social movements. But they had to begin somewhere. There had to be some light to the spirit that challenged those certitudes and shattered them. And that challenge came from the strange cadre of contrarians who gathered around Franz Boas, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Many of them – Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Zora Neale Hurston – were women. And they were activists. Ruth Benedict famously said that the very purpose of anthropology was to make the world safe for human differences.

These were the people who said: “wait a minute, a family is not man and woman, it can be two men and one woman, two women and one man, all that matters is love in the home.” It was they who said that “race was a total social cultural construct with no root in biology,” an intuition now confirmed absolutely by genetics.

The point here is if you, as a young person, Jean-Paul, living in Canberra, think it's quite normal that a male can love a male as a couple and become married. If you think it's quite normal that two women can be in a household and have a loving family, as long as love is there. If you agree, as I would agree, that race is a total fiction. If you understand what that black American young woman meant famously in the *New York Times*, when she expressed: look at my skin, my skin tells you that my great-great-grandmother was raped by a white overseer. And I am the monument, the confederacy, not these statues we're pulling down (see Williams, 2020). If you understand all of that, you are a child of anthropology. Because it was those intuitions that shattered the European mind.

And that's why Franz Boas ranks with Einstein, Darwin and Freud, as one of the four great pillars of Western thought in the twentieth century.

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