

Book Review: *Marcel Gauchet and the Crisis of Democratic Politics* edited by Natalie J. Doyle and Sean McMorrow

Marcel Gauchet and the Crisis of Democratic Politics

Edited by NATALIE J. DOYLE and SEAN MCMORROW

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The volume *Marcel Gauchet and the Crisis of Democratic Politics* (2022) is a collection of essays by international scholars from Australia, Canada, France, and the US. It is the first edited volume dedicated to Gauchet in the English-speaking world. The French political philosopher Marcel Gauchet (1946–present) is a prominent figure in what is known as the return to political philosophy in France, along with other notable figures such as Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, Pierre Clastres, Miguel Abensour, and Pierre Manent. Gauchet is primarily known in English for his groundbreaking work *The Disenchantment of the World* (1997), prefaced by Charles Taylor, and his dialogue with Alain Badiou in their co-authored book *What Is to Be Done?* (2016). The remarkable contributions gathered in this newly published edited volume will help Anglophone political scientists better understand Gauchet’s work, most notably his theory of democracy.

The two introductory texts by Daniel Tanguay and the editors, Natalie J. Doyle and Sean McMorrow deliver a compelling argument for the relevance of Gauchet’s insights and offer explanations for the lack of reception in English academia. Both texts highlight the guidance that Gauchet provides on the contemporary crisis of democracy. Since the 1970s, liberal democracy has faced many complex challenges, such as climate change, inequality, illiberal ideologies, disruptive new technologies, and racial injustice. We are still in a dire condition, with no dominant political alternative to liberal democracy emerging. Furthermore, the mainstream theories of liberal political philosophy fail to solve the current

crisis insofar as they seem to belong to a bygone era when the most important question confronting liberal democracy was the pursuit of individual rights.

To address the inadequacy of liberal normative theory, Gauchet offers a compelling narrative theory that aims to ground democracy within the process of autonomy at work throughout the whole history of humankind. According to Gauchet, throughout its history, humanity has been structured heteronomously, with societies grounding political legitimacy in external sources of authority such as ancestors, gods, or natural entities. In European modernity, autonomous societies emerged, recognizing that political communities derive their legitimacy only from within. However, the principle of autonomy does not ensure a seamless transition—numerous challenges stem from the ambiguity of what an autonomous society encompasses. Readers can explore Gauchet’s ideas firsthand through two translated essays, which appear as the opening chapters of the volume. The first essay, “Democracy from One Crisis to Another,” compares the current crisis of liberal democracy to the crisis of representation that plagued nascent democracies around the beginning of the 20th century. Serving as an applied case of Gauchet’s grand theory, the second essay, “Populism as Symptom,” provides a nuanced analysis of Trumpism and other contemporary authoritarian populisms.

Stéphane Vibert, Sean McMorrow, and Mark Hewson’s contributions delve into Gauchet’s anthropological reflections on the eclipse of the political, political autonomy, and individualism. Craig Browne’s text is particularly noteworthy as it attempts to reconstitute the theories of modernity within Gauchet and Badiou’s debate (2016). This comparison is particularly insightful, as Browne carefully unpacks Gauchet’s criticisms of Marxism and, most notably, why it fails, in Gauchet’s view, to make sense of the experience of the political within human history.

The essays by Brian C. J. Singer, Paul Blokker, and Julian Martin and Natalie J. Doyle examine Gauchet’s critique of the logic of human rights, which links the depoliticizing effects of the unilateral foundation of politics within human rights with the surge of populism across the West. The argument goes as follows: while human rights are an essential component in the advent of modern democracy, they encourage an unbridled individualism that obscures the social bonds that are the very conditions of political communities and, therefore, of rights themselves. In this light, populism can be understood as a reaction against the progressive disappearance of the political.

Brian C. J. Singer’s contribution stands out as one of the volume’s most interesting, as he not only lauds Gauchet’s theoretical reflections but also attempts to think against

Gauchet, raising sharp criticisms. Indeed, Singer—as well as Vibert—expresses doubts concerning Gauchet’s self-professed “pessimism in the short term/optimism in the long term.” If human rights are so powerful in obfuscating the political—transforming society into a market composed of self-interested monads (a darksome depiction of which can be found in Doyle’s concluding contribution)—how can one hope for autonomous societies to find a solution to the crisis of liberal democracy? Singer’s objection has the merit of pointing out that, despite providing an ambitious analysis of the historical factors that led us to this situation, Gauchet’s theory does not provide clear solutions that might pave the way to a higher form of democracy. Nevertheless, Gauchet’s work offers something unique and rare in political theory nowadays: intelligibility. He manages to coherently bring together a vast array of phenomena that would otherwise seem chaotic and disconnected, and we should praise him for this outstanding achievement.

In summary, Doyle and McMorrow’s remarkable volume successfully shatters the timid apathy surrounding Gauchet’s work in the English-speaking world. While too little of Gauchet’s work is translated and debated in English, this book provides a wealth of insights into his theory of democracy that will be of great interest to political scientists interested in the topics of democracy, populism, liberalism, history of political thought, and French political theory.

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