Interview – Dan Slater

Dan Slater is James Orin Murfin Professor of Political Science as well as Director of the Centre for Emerging Democracies at the University of Michigan. His research specializes in the history and politics of dictatorships and emerging democracies in the Southeast Asian region. Before receiving his PhD from Emory University, he received a B.A. in International Relations and History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison as well as an M.A. in International Studies from the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. He has spent ten months as a Fulbright scholar in Malaysia in 1998. His most recent book is titled *From Development to Democracy: The Transformation of Modern Asia* (with Joseph Wong, Princeton University Press, 2022), which it explores why rapid development leads to democratization in some Asian countries over others. His published articles can be found in many disciplinary journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science, American Journal of Sociology, Annual Review of Political Science, British Journal of Political Science, Democratization, International Organization, Perspectives on Politics, Social Science History, Studies in Comparative International Development,* and *World Politics*, as well as Asia-oriented journals such as *Critical Asian Studies, Indonesia, Journal of East Asian Studies, South East Asia Research, Taiwan Journal of Democracy,* and *TRANS*. He also has experience working as a consultant and non-resident fellow with international policy organizations such as the American Enterprise Institute, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Freedom House, the OECD, and the World Bank.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think the most exciting research is exciting precisely because it doesn't fit comfortably into any field, or in any one discipline. When historians ask questions that typically motivate political scientists or anthropologists to tackle topics that usually fall under the purview of economics, or vice versa, exciting things tend to happen. If you're writing something that only speaks to people in your own discipline or even your own subfield, you may be doing good science, and that's essential and praiseworthy; but you're probably not doing something I'd consider very exciting.

I find your "research/debates" phrase revealing in this regard, because it captures an important difference. While *research* can and should transcend fields, *debates* typically occur within fields. You could almost define fields as sets of people engaging in debate with each other. That being said, I'm especially excited by debates that academics are having that policymakers aren't having, because it infuses necessary oxygen into stale and stagnant political discourse. For example, scholars are having interesting debates about how to manage the colossal and complex consequences of China's economic rise, while policymakers – at least in Washington – seem to have come to a consensus that China just needs to be blocked or slowed, as if that won't have negative consequences of its own. There are also interesting, historically-informed debates about how to defeat the rising forces of authoritarianism and the far-right. Should authoritarian politicians be banned from democratic elections – what we call "militant democracy"? Should centrist politicians adopt more restrictive positions on issues like immigration to take the issue away from the far right, or will that only "normalize" nativist sentiment and make things worse? These are hard and pressing questions. Hopefully policymakers will listen to what scholars have to say about them.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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I'll give you one example from my interests in development and another from my research on democracy. My first obsession as a college student was development, and at Wisconsin we really got steeped in dependency theory, which essentially argued that poor countries were poor because rich countries exploited them. Which certainly has a lot of truth to it. But then I took a summer class on development between my junior and senior years with Edward Friedman, who delivered a line in lecture that just floored me: "The only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited." It was such a great Churchillian take on global capitalism, I thought; it's the worst economic system except all the others, in essence. That really motivated me to think about how to make the world economy work better for its poorest participants, rather than raging against the system for all the damage it causes.

As for democracy, I think all the global setbacks of the past decade have made it impossible for any of us to think about it in the same way. Majorities aren't always tolerant. Protesters aren't always democrats. Liberalization empowers illiberal actors as surely as liberal ones. Elections – even fully free and fair ones – provide basically no protection from abuses against people's fundamental political rights. Violent repression can sadly be incredibly popular. None of these realizations makes me less committed to democracy or less convinced that authoritarianism always represents a disaster in the making, when it isn't an ongoing disaster already. But they make me much less sanguine that the things I push for in the world will actually produce smashingly good results. Put more simply, I used to think the greatest purpose of politics was maximizing freedom and fairness; now I think it might just be minimizing cruelty.

In your book on development and democracy in Asia, you use the term 'Developmental Asia'. Given the vast size of the continent, what precisely constitutes 'Developmental Asia' and what criteria do you use?

Something truly remarkable has happened across Northeast and Southeast Asia over the past half-century or so, and it didn't begin with China. Its seeds were first sown in Japan in the late 19th century. The idea was that state intervention could galvanize rapid national economic development, not by keeping markets and the world economy at bay, but through strategic integration with the most dynamic forces of global productivity. "Developmental Asia" is the set of countries that took this idea to heart, emanating outward from Japan, usually attracting lots of Japanese manufacturing investment, eventually reaching as far as Cambodia and even arguably Myanmar before the 2021 coup, though obviously the developmentalism dissipates in intensity as it spreads. When looking at economic development in this part of Asia, it's essential to appreciate that China isn't a leader but a latecomer.

Could you elaborate on how you conceptualize 'strength' and 'weakness' as methods of democratization?

The basic idea is that some authoritarian regimes build up substantial institutional capacity – especially strong conservative parties and capable bureaucratic states – as well as impressive economic track records. Those authoritarian regimes are ideally positioned to democratize from a position of strength, and capitalize on their past successes to win free and fair elections. For weaker authoritarian regimes, democratization will mean instant defeat and relegation to opposition, and in some cases legal punishment. A key lesson here is that dictatorships aren't necessarily getting closer to democratization as they get weaker; they may be moving further away.

You divide several East and Southeast Asian countries into developmental 'clusters'. Have you observed specific trends of democratization among different sets of nations or do these countries tend to follow individually unique developmental patterns?

One of our biggest "Eureka" moments when writing the book was the recognition that developmental clusters and democratic clusters in Asia overlapped perfectly. Which is to say, countries in two of the four clusters had all experimented with democratic reforms from positions of relative strength, while in the other two clusters, none of them had. Intriguingly, this couldn't be explained by levels of economic development. One of our rich clusters had democratized from strength (Japan, Taiwan, South Korea) while the other rich cluster resisted democratic reforms when they were at or near their historical apex of power (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong). The same could be said of our clusters of more intermediate wealth, with one cluster pursuing democratic experiments (Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar) and the other eschewing them (China, Vietnam, Cambodia). The bottom line is that when considering how

development shapes democracy, we should be thinking not so much about *levels* of development, but how *types* of development shape regime types.

How does your work account for certain outlier cases in the region such as North Korea and East Timor or neighbouring economic powerhouses like India?

I think our framework helps makes sense of India in its early phase of democracy, the Congress era. As in the cases of Japan and Malaysia in our book, departing colonizers in India felt comfortable opening up a competitive democratic process because they were confident that moderate forces would win. National elites shared that confidence, and rightly so, which helped democracy take root. Why would Congress, UMNO, or the LDP resist democratization in the 1950s when it was the best way to solidify their hegemony through repeated electoral landslides? We can fruitfully compare departing colonial powers with electoral authoritarian regimes, and see that democracy has its best prospects when those powers are confident rather than terrified about what full democratic competition may bring.

As for East Timor and North Korea, they're not so much outliers as examples of very different regime categories. East Timor became a democracy through decolonization and the collapse of an occupying authoritarian power, Indonesia. Classic democracy through weakness. North Korea is a remnant of the Cold War and the communist reaction to the depredations and atrocities of imperialism and world war. Pretty classic revolutionary authoritarian regime.

Which doesn't mean changing categories is impossible. As we say in our book, China before reform looked a lot more like North Korea than South Korea, and after reform it was the other way around. Still, China's enduring identity as a "developmental socialist" regime means it's capable of asserting state control over the economy in ways that arguably smack more of North Korea than South Korea. The Xi Jinping regime is still a far cry from that, but its movement in that general direction is meaningful and unmistakable.

What aspects of the democratization process in Asia do you feel get overlooked or understudied, whether by academia or policymakers?

In academia I think the entire phenomenon and the entire region get overlooked and understudied. Asia has played virtually no role in the evolution of democratization theory. It's like people's globes don't spin. In the policy world, there's a very unfortunate tendency to flatten Asia into just China, particularly America's rivalry with China. This has lessened somewhat with all the increased recent attention to America's allies in Asia, but even here, the typical idea is that these countries are geopolitical ballast for countering China rather than worthy, important, sovereign allies in their own right. Imagine how crazy it would be if America's rivalry with Russia totally defined its relationships and purposes in Europe; that's basically how it works right now for America when it comes to China and Asia.

What are your main takeaways from the consultation work you have done for international policy organisations? How has it informed your research?

I think my biggest takeaway is that you need to listen before talking. Your job when consulting is not so much to give advice as it is to help people puzzle things through. It's also important to recognize that the people you're speaking with will have wildly different levels of background and preparation, so you need to calibrate quickly to make sure you're neither insulting people by belaboring the blindingly obvious nor losing your audience by speaking at an excessively abstract level. A grimmer takeaway I have is that politicians are largely driven by their animus toward each other. Pit the world's most ambitious people against other, equally ambitious people, and you generate a lot of hatred. Unfortunately, I think that hatred drives a lot of decisions that politicians make.

As for how it informs my research, I think it's reinforced my view that coalitions lie at the heart of political outcomes. Whether I'm entering a topic from a policy or academic perspective, an essential early task is to identify the coalitions who are driving and resisting reform.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

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It's never too early to cultivate your ideas and start putting them in writing. For at least a decade after I finished my Ph.D. I was still mostly publishing ideas that I first had in grad school. Keep a file with ideas you want to work on and arguments you'd like to develop, even if you don't have time to do extensive work on them now. Every second you spend writing is a second well-spent. You might think you're wasting time or energy by writing things that will never see the light of day, but the more you write now, the better you'll write when you're ready to produce for – and need for professional reasons to produce for – an academic audience. Most importantly, work on the questions that fascinate you most. Whether you're in your first year or your final year of your academic career, that should never change.