Bryan Garsten of Yale University was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2025. In this video, Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Prof. Garsten about how argument and persuasion are deeply rooted in human nature, how the university expresses something important about the society in which it lives and why the social dynamic within a university can change much faster than we might think.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello everybody. I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and I have with me today Bryan Garsten of Yale University, one of our Academy members. Bryan, thank you so much for being with us.

Brian Garsten, Yale University

Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

Forster

Let me begin by asking, what are some underappreciated ways in which the work in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being?

Garsten

I study political philosophy and the history of political thought, and for many people that means that I study books, which is true. I study John Locke or Rousseau or Plato or Aristotle. But I have always thought of the field as more than that, and in fact, I was drawn into it originally out of a sense that these studies also help us understand ourselves, that our ideas, even our patterns of feeling and perceiving, actually have a history. There is a whole set of assumptions that we all carry around with us, and those assumptions have a history. We can't actually engage in time travel, but we can study very carefully how people thought in different times, and we often discover them making decisions that affect us and especially our thought world.

Sometimes in these old books, we discover things that seem very similar. I always remember the passage in Plato's *Republic* when he's talking about democracy, and he's describing what life is like in a democracy, and there's mention of people going on and off diets and exercise programs. My first thought was, wow, things were so similar even then. This is a recognizably human tendency that we want to improve ourselves but are unsure how and sometimes lack the resolution to follow through on things. There's a continuity of human nature that you can see in those moments in these old texts.

Then I realized actually there was another point. At that moment in Plato's *Republic*, the point actually is not that all human beings diet and exercise in these cycles, but that this is a particular pattern in democracies, that there's something about democratic life that inclines us to this behavior, which really seems to have nothing to do with politics. That's a provocative thought; it makes you think how much of

our way of life is particular to our political culture. How does politics affect our way of life? Those are the sorts of things, aside from just learning the intellectual history and the details of these books, that have always drawn me into the field.

Forster

I'm trying to remember who said that philosophy is the study of its own history. There's a sense in which that's true, because we do spend all our time reading the books that are the history of our field. And yet, the purpose is not for historical understanding alone. Obviously, we love our colleagues in the history department, we value what they bring. But as philosophers, our goal is an understanding that goes beyond historical consciousness. Yet we, as human beings, have to understand our history to understand ourselves. There's no stepping outside that time stream. When you mentioned Plato's observations about democratic character, it put me in mind of Tocqueville, who also talked about democracy as much more than a system of government, but as an ethos, one that he thought had many good sides and also many dangers.

Garsten

Tocqueville is another favorite of mine. I've written about him and taught him a lot. It's really striking; Alexis de Tocqueville, the "de" reminds us that he was from an aristocratic family, so he sees democracy, as he says, somewhat from the outside. He calls himself a friend of democracy, but that's different from being a democrat. It's striking what someone who's just a bit outside the assumptions of our dominant mode can see. Striking too, that we, even though we're born into democracies and imbibe them, can still recognize the truth and the sharpness of many of his observations and sometimes their limits: that recognition of commonality, but then of difference, the things that are human that persist, but that we are historical beings also deeply constituted by our cultures. All that is some of what drew me to this.

There's one other thing I would add, which is, the seeds of political philosophy are around us every day, even if we're not philosophical at all, especially in politics. Politics is the realm of arguing. We disagree with each other. We fall into different parties, but we don't just assert or grunt. We make arguments about why our side is right. In those arguments, which are often incomplete, you see the beginning of political philosophy, which tries to ask how satisfactory those arguments are and what they're missing. It's not just found in the books, is what I'm saying. The seeds of it are found in politics.

Forster

I'm reminded of one political theorist in the 20th century who pointed out everyone makes arguments to justify their position. This is why political philosophy is deeply rooted in human nature. He said that communists and fascists make arguments. Religious fanatics who want to kill you make arguments. Criminals make arguments. Everybody makes an argument for their way of life. In a sense, that's the seed, hopefully less the criminals than more responsible voices.

I feel like we've set up my next question really well with all this talk about the democratic ethos and Tocqueville and his reflections on the future of things in a democratic society. How would you describe the mission of the university? And why is that important?

Garsten

Every human being has, to a greater or lesser degree, a more thoughtful side of themselves. Individually, we're not always at our most thoughtful, but there are moments – we can go for a walk, we can talk with certain friends, we can set up certain environments that bring out our thoughtful side. I like to think of universities as society at its most thoughtful. That's what they should be. They should be places that give us time and space to think well. Now, sometimes that means research into either history or the hard sciences or the many other fields. But not only research, because turns out that we are helped in being thoughtful often by a certain kind of conversation with other people. Universities should make a certain kind of probing, open conversation really central to their university culture.

This thoughtfulness is a precious commodity, really, in all kinds of societies. Certainly in modern democratic America, where there's so much focus on practicality, you make special effort to protect time and space for thought. But really, in most societies, because thought can be critical of accepted norms, there's always some pressure. Thoughtful people often feel shy, or they realize that their thoughtfulness is not always valued. It's not always valuable in other pursuits. Sometimes a bold practicality is needed. Universities are places that should be for thoughtful people, or for everyone out there, most thoughtful. So that's, to speak really abstractly, how I think of them.

Forster

Who else but a philosopher should be abstract? On the relationship between the university and democracy, a good point in your defense would be the university has been around for 1,000 years. For almost all that time, Europe was not democratic, and yet the university was no less subject to all sorts of controversies and pressures and people demanding that it do this or that because they think the university ought to do this or that. There's nothing unique to democracy in that way.

I really appreciate how your articulation of the mission situates the university in its cultural context, because you didn't just say people at their most thoughtful, but a society at its most thoughtful. A university here in the United States strives to be not just people being thoughtful, but Americans in America being thoughtful. There's always been this love-hate relationship between, on both sides, the university and its cultural surrounding.

Garsten

Absolutely. Tocqueville's so good on the practicality of Americans, but the reason I am drawn back to him again and again is he also thinks that there are ideas and patterns of thought that are really central to democracy and to American democracy in particular. Part of what universities here should do is to be a way of making our society aware of itself, aware of its own commitments, its history. In our case, there's a sense of an unfinished project of self-government. This is a kind of self-awareness that isn't always available in the everyday back and forth of politics in DC. You're trying to get a certain policy

passed, or you're in business, you're trying to get a certain business up and going, but you also don't want the whole society to lose track of its fundamental nature and history.

Forster

All politics may depend on persuasion, but democratic politics depends on it far more, in part because it lacks other institutions that serve some of those functions. We *have* to persuade people; there's not much else you can do in a democracy.

Let me ask you my last question. What has pleasantly surprised you in the last five years?

Garsten

One feature of working at universities that I appreciate more and more over time is that there are always new students. They keep coming, and it's exhausting at times, but actually it's a source of incredible hope for me because the generations of thinking pass very quickly. You get a fad, you get a whole movement in one direction, but very quickly, a new set of students comes in and that's kind of old for them already, and they want to question that, and questioning is what we're good at doing here. I do have a sense that between 2021 and 2026, there's already more ferment and questioning inside of some of the verities of 2020 than people on the outside might realize. I don't know if people on the outside realize just how quickly things change. That's interesting intellectually because it means even if you're teaching the same books again and again, there are always new readings, or people notice different things, they build different arguments. Politically, it's encouraging because as long as these places maintain this kind of open, probing conversation, there will be a constant influx of new questions and new ideas.

Forster

We think of the life of the university as slow moving, and in some ways, it really is slow moving. My dean is always complaining that it's too slow moving, that things that ought to be done quickly take a year to do, so there's a reality to that. But there are other ways in which it can be much more dynamic than it appears from the outside, especially since what the students are interested in has to be so important to our role as teachers. A hundred years ago, maybe you could stand up and give a 45-minute lecture that had nothing to do with anything the students care about, and they'd still be obligated to take you seriously. But these days, if you don't connect with something students care about, you're dead on arrival. So, if the students are constantly changing, we have to be constantly asking, what do these students need, and how can we serve them well?

Garsten

It's true, and it's not even only about serving the students, although that's important, but it is an intellectual challenge. I want to understand the generation now; if you think about when they were born, when they came to consciousness, the scope of their political experience is very different from mine when I was coming up. What beliefs and questions might that suggest about politics? It takes real work. I won't claim to stay current, but still to even understand a bit of what might be compelling to them. I

just had a student in my office a few minutes ago who was telling me about a debate among his friends about how to understand America. It was quite different from any debate I had at his age. It takes some work for me to understand just why it feels pressing to them, but it does. It's an intellectual challenge to figure out how to address that constellation of views.

Forster

I think here of Aristotle and how he saw political philosophy as architectonic, and there's literally nothing that doesn't very quickly get up to that level of thinking about how we live together. Of course, as a fellow political theorist, I would think that everything is really about our discipline.

Bryan, thank you so much for being with us.

Garsten

Happy to be here.