

Democracy in Danger S1E13 TheFWord

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia is Deliberative Media Lab. This is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] Will, a really important goal for us in this show has been to take a broad look at anti-democratic trends around the world. And then for us to connect them back to some disturbing things we're seeing here at home in the United States. And lately, there's been a lot of references to a political ideology that is right in your historical wheelhouse. You might call it the F word, by which I mean, of course, fascism.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:38] Yeah. I mean, look, some governments around the world see that today are being compared pretty openly to the classic cases of 20th century fascism, you know, from Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. There's Hungary, for example, where, you know, some analysts say that Viktor Orban has basically killed democracy. And we can think of India, where Narendra Modi's nationalist government is openly hostile to Muslims. And, you know, as a historian, Siva, hey, I'm delighted that people are suddenly, you know, interested in the history behind these ideological movements of a century ago. But it is really unsettling to see so many people today buying into this stuff, even in some cases taking up arms in the name of political systems that we associate with genocide, with war, with dictatorship.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:26] Well, today's guest has done a lot of work on these questions. We're very fortunate to be joined today by Jason Stanley. He's a professor at Yale University in the philosophy department and he's the author most recently of the book How Fascism Works: The Politics of US and Them. Jason, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Jason Stanley [00:01:48] Thank you so much for having me on. What a delight to be in conversation with both of you.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:53] Jason, the subject of fascism that you've been writing about and talking about how fascism works is not just an academic topic for you. It's personal as well. And you write about this in the opening lines of your book. Can you just tell us a little bit about how you came to study the history of fascist politics, why it seems so urgent to you now and a little bit about your family's history.

Jason Stanley [00:02:18] So both my parents are refugees from Europe. My father came in August 1939 from Berlin, where he'd been hiding after Kastenlauf. He was just about to turn seven. And my mother lived through the war. She's born in 1940 and lived for the first five years in a Siberian labor camp and then was repatriated back to Poland in 1945. And then after my grandfather was beaten almost to death by anti-Semites in the streets of Warsaw, they received a visa to the United States. So they are European Jewish survivors, not of death camps, but of the Holocaust. And my father was a sociologist and devoted really his academic career to antifascist work. His dissertation was on British colonialism, evocative of part two of Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism, on imperialism which is a central feature and cause of fascism. And his later works was on

democracy. And so various elements of different kinds of authoritarianism, I would say. So at the dinner table, we regularly discussed scholars of fascism, such as Hannah Arendt, Adorno, Wilhelm Reich. And indeed my initial interest in entering the field of philosophy was because my father was teaching Habermas and would ridicule Habermas at the table, although he deeply respected him of course, for thinking that Speech Act Theory would save democracy. So I remember thinking at a quite early age, I'll show my father that Speech Act Theory will save democracy. And that's probably one reason I became a philosopher of language. But just to finish the personal history, my mother was a court stenographer in Manhattan criminal courts, and she repeatedly emphasized the similarities and overlaps between her experience, particularly in postwar Poland, as a Polish Jew and what she was seeing in the United States.

Will Hitchcock [00:04:24] So, Jason, one of the things that, you know, even though you are a philosopher, is that historians love to argue, not that philosophers don't argue, mind you.

Jason Stanley [00:04:33] (Laughter).

Will Hitchcock [00:04:33] One of the things that we argue about a lot is what is fascism? And there's a gigantic scholarship on this. Some have argued, look, fascism is appropriate only in a couple specific cases. In Italy of the Mussolini era and Nazi Germany. But you have a much more elastic working definition of fascism, I think. And you see at least elements of the politics and the style popping up all over the world. So, you know, just for our listeners, what do you see going on around the world today and in the United States that you see as particularly fascist rather than just, say, authoritarian or populist or just sort of corrupt?

Jason Stanley [00:05:13] Right. So to take the last element of corruption, I think there's sort of a false dichotomy here in the sense that the fascism literature written by philosophers in the mid 20th century in the Frankfurt school consistently makes analogies between mob bosses and fascist leaders. So power, loyalty corrupts schemes. This is the lifeblood of both mob organizations and fascist ideology, which is a cult of the leader who promises national restoration because of supposed humiliation brought on by immigrants, minorities who are being manipulated by radical Marxists seeking to bring Marxism and socialism to the nation.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:01] You know, we like to think that healthy democracies have developed some antibodies against fascist rhetoric, you know, or at least some sort of historical memory. Right. That, you know, democracies, because they embrace diversity of opinion and value a free press and free speech and have regular elections and, you know, foster universities and public education and so on are supposed to be able to filter out noxious ideas, dangerous ideas like this. But lately, from what you're saying, it seems that rhetoric borrowed from the fascist playbook is taking hold in many democracies. You know, the world's biggest democracy like India, deeply established social democracies like Sweden, Italy and Spain and Brazil, where at least in Spain and Brazil, most adults have some living memory of living under fascist regimes. All right. But, of course, even in the United States now, you've documented that these fascist rhetorical tropes are being normalized. So what's going on here? I mean, were we mistaken to think that democracies were well designed to defend against this sort of movement or are, in fact, democracies soft targets for fascist politics?

Jason Stanley [00:07:16] Soft targets, I would say. I mean, obviously, as you know, Weimar Germany was a democracy. There was an extensive study of how cities in Germany, towns and cities and areas went from voting so largely social democratic to voting for the NSDAP the Nazi party. So fascist politics works in democracies. It works in very particular ways. The Nazi party came to power with an incredibly vibrant free press. So I trace this all the way back to Book Eight of Plato's Republic. Plato argues that democracy will straightforwardly lead to tyranny. And that's because of the freedom of speech, because democracy enables a tyrant to say whatever they want. And, as he says, to sow fear of groups in society and present himself as the protector of those groups. And I see fascism as a post 19th, early 20th century version of the anti-democratic ideology that has its roots in Book Eight of the Republic.

Will Hitchcock [00:08:27] You know, one of the key arguments is captured in the subtitle of your book, which is The Politics of US and Them. And, you know, it's a very intriguing subtitle. And certainly, you know, when we reflect back on some of the guests we've had on our show, we know that the United States has a lot of experience with us versus them politics. Slavery, of course, is the keynote of the founding of the country and its development over centuries. And we've had Erika Lee, who came on the show and talked a lot about the history of immigration and hostility of settlers in the United States to indigenous peoples and then later towards Catholics, Jews, Chinese, all the way to our contemporary Muslim ban. So, you know, racial othering is, it seems, a permanent feature of American national history. And I'm wondering if fascism presents something different about us versus them? What's uniquely fascist about that, us versus them sort of rhetoric and practice that's different from what the United States has been up to for 400 years?

Jason Stanley [00:09:28] So my book is rooted in U.S. history and it's rooted in the black intellectual tradition, which has never shied away from using the term fascism to describe the American racial hierarchy. Of course, my colleague Jim Wittman's 2017 book, Hitler's American Model, documents the way the Nuremberg laws banned marriages between Arians and Jews. These were based on studying our anti miscegenation laws. Dubois and Black Reconstruction in chapter two about the white working class uses the term fascism to describe the ideology that separates poor whites from poor blacks and draws poor whites into a coalition with a planter class and the white industrialists that runs counter to their economic interests. And he uses the term fascism to describe that. Toni Morrison in her 1995 speech at Howard University, 'Racism and Fascism', unapologetically uses the word fascism here. She speaks of the United States as seeking fascist solutions to national problems, as having a history of that. So I think there's a false dichotomy here. Some of the critics of my methodology argue that I mistake the preconditions or elements of fascism for fascism itself. But I believe that actually you don't have these disparate disaggregated elements. Fascism is about traditional patriarchy. This is an element emphasized by Wilhelm Reich in the mass psychology of fascism. And if you look at the work of say Ida B. Wells in Southern Horrors, she emphasizes the way that patriarchy is central to the ideology behind lynching. As she says, this whole thing is about protecting white womanhood. She's very explicit about that in 1892. She says this is not a view that regards white women as having agency. So patriarchy, racism, nationalism. I mean, let's not forget that the Ku Klux Klan is often regarded as the first fascist organization. And as Sarah Churchwell has documented extensively on the Italian fascists arose, numerous newspapers in the United States describe them as a kind of Italian Klu Klux Klan.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:54] Jason, speaking of patriarchy and traditional male gender roles, I mean, how do we see this playing out around the world? For instance, in India, right where you have very conservative Hindu fundamentalists and very conservative

Muslim minorities who are both very embedded in traditional gender roles. How does fascism get a foothold along those lines in a place like India?

Jason Stanley [00:12:18] So Charu Gupta has written powerfully about the connection between Nazi anti feminism and what's happening in India right now. What you have in India is classic. You have the various panics about the so-called love jihad, where Muslim men are supposedly being encouraged to marry Hindu women and draw them into the Muslim religion. Of course, you've had a great deal of sectarian violence that is fomented by the thought that Muslims are somehow rapists or dangers to Hindu women. You have this backlash to feminism. In Nazi Germany, Hitler said Jews are responsible for the women's movement, women's equality, which I'm happy to take credit for. But in the case of India, the idea that women's equality, feminism, these are brought in by hostile foreign forces, they're against the national traditions. They are going to destroy the national traditions. The idea that the minority men are threats to the women of the majority. These are all traditional elements of fascism. The idea that you're going to lose your culture to this threat of interbreeding. The sort of twist that you have in India, is that, you know, many Muslims are from the same ethnic background as Hindus. And so you have this extra twist that Muslims, Indians of Muslim faith, have been somehow violently converted hundreds of years ago by Muslim invaders. So as is the case with all these fascist movements, you need to look at the individual local sources. And so that's the particular structure it takes in the case of India.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:14:18] Well, so let's look at some other local context. We don't tend to think of Northern Europe as being hung up on sexual anxiety. And yet, you know, as you said, there is a rise in this fascist temperament, even in places that should be fairly immune to it. And we've seen incidents in Norway, we've seen movements in Sweden. We've seen dangerous movements in Germany, but also the United States, which certainly has a lot more hang ups than Northern Europe about sex and gender. We've had sexual anxiety play out here as well. Can you talk a little bit about how these local contexts differ and how these sorts of anxieties play out, especially in the United States?

Jason Stanley [00:14:56] So in the case of the United States, you know, you find that ideology at the very center in president Trump's campaign for reelection. The ideology is that black men are a threat to white women. And we need a strong leader to protect us from this threat. Trump, in an interview, I believe, with Laura Ingram, said, you know, in the suburbs, Biden is going to bring low income housing. And then he adds just out of the blue, there are women in the suburbs. And then he says, and Cory Booker is going to be placed in charge. Now, needless to say, none of this has any factual basis. Corey Booker has not been mentioned as playing any such role at all. But Corey Booker is a tall, black male senator. And the idea that low income housing, which, of course, is racially coded like terms like welfare, are. So he's obviously using racially coded words to say the Democrats are going to bring black men into the suburbs and they're going to threaten women. So that is nothing other than the longstanding American racial ideology. That's the very particular racialized form it takes here.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:13] So these are very suggestive and worrisome trends. But there is a difference between rhetoric and fascist style in politics and the actual seizing of power and the transformation of a state along fascist lines. And I'm just going to ask you a little bit about Hungary, because it's a case that interests me. I've been there a number of times as a tourist and as a visitor. It feels like I'm in, you know, a recognizable portion of southeastern Europe. Hungary is a fascinating country, et cetera, et cetera. But something really very serious is happening to the structures of government in that country. And

maybe this is a canary in the coal mine for other Western democracies. Can you just talk a little bit about how you see Hungary maybe as indicating what happens when rhetoric actually takes power?

Jason Stanley [00:16:59] So Hungary is a very problematic case, as you know. I mean, they have now entirely eliminated the free press in Hungary. They have not used violent means. They have used the means of the state to force the press to sell themselves to Orban's friends. The friends of Viktor Orban, the prime minister of Hungary. Viktor Orban has set up a regime that looks like it's not going to give up power anytime soon or ever. He has rewritten the constitution, the fundamental law, in highly arch conservative, far right ways. He has banned the teaching of gender studies across the country to return to our theme of gender. So in Hungary, you have a kind of soft fascism where there is no free press anymore, they politicized the education system, they've changed the teaching in public schools. So there's a great amount of focus on sort of ultra nationalist authors and traditional Hungarian folk songs and things like this. They are changing the teaching of history. And you look at the United States, where local school boards have long been a focus point for conservative activism. You see the ways in which the teaching of our past becomes twisted to reflect just the dominant perspective, which is the hallmark of this kind of regime.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:35] Well, Jason, let me ask you, the big dumb question. Here in the United States, as an India, there are leaders who dabble in fascist style rhetoric and as you've documented, and others have documented, a clear normalization of fascist rhetoric or quasi fascist rhetoric. But in both countries, for the most part, they have free speech. They have a free press. They have universities that still host public debate and engage in some manner of intellectual freedom. They're still an independent judiciary in both countries. And as of yet, Kashmir accepted in India, there's no gulag for political opponents of the government. So, you know, aren't you addressing this challenge? We've already talked about whether you're doing it historically or ahistorically, but perhaps hyperbolically to claim that we are on a drift? I mean, what is new here?

Jason Stanley [00:19:37] So a lot of my work involves emphasizing continuities. So we've we have these longstanding fascist features. I think the continuities here are stronger than in the case of India, where BJP has really quite quickly moved to change things. What is new is fascism is a cult of the leader. So what we have is one of our political parties being entirely dominated by one political figure. This political figure is now worldwide being taken as a representative of the extreme right. So there was an article in The New York Times September 8th on how Trump is being taken as an icon by the neo fascist German extreme right. So we have a leader there, the RNC, the Republican Party, didn't even have a platform. It's only platform is whatever Trump wants. You speak of the courts. The courts are highly partisan in the United States to go back to the Hungary question, in the case of Hungary and now Poland, the courts have been a focal point. The takeover of the courts has been key to the transition in the regime. That's why the Orbán regime is able to use the courts to force media organizations to be sold to our bonds friends and force universities to close down like Central European University. We have a takeover of the court system in the United States, a partisan takeover. You know, Arendt in Origins talks about a stage of authoritarianism being the shift from loyalty to party over parties. And so that's what we have here. We first had the Republican Party - and I blame this on Newt Gingrich - treating the Democratic Party as illegitimate political opponents. Then that transformed into the Republican Party being a unified cult of one person alone, Donald Trump, who is running on essentially a Ku Klux Klan ideology that is familiar in the United States, things that Hitler admired about the United States, as well as a cult of the leader.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:50] There's no doubt that this powerful, strange, weird, magnetic, repellent, polarizing figure of Donald Trump has generated such incredible buzz in our heads, trying to figure out where he fits in the history of ideology. Is he fascist? Is he authoritarian? Is he populist? Is he just kind of crime boss? Is he a little bit of all of these things? OK, but here's the question. If Trump loses his reelection, does all of this stuff go away? Is it that Trump is really generating this the appeal of fascism? Do we revert back to a kind of happy liberal democracy? What happens to the fascist sort of DNA that we seem to carry with us if the leader is gone?

Jason Stanley [00:22:30] So I think Trump will remain as Ross Douthat points out in a recent column. Trump will remain a powerful political force as long as he lives. And he has a supporter base that thinks he can do no wrong and regards them as a kind of mythical leader in a classic fascist relationship between leader and supporter. And I think we will be stuck with Trump and Trumpism for a long time. That said, the more interesting part of your question is about other potential leaders. Tucker Carlson, and Ivanka Trump. Tom Cotton. I think Tom Cotton and Tucker Carlson are more classically along the lines of fascistic ideology without calling specifically fascist. And I think that what we've seen is that there is a very large audience for that kind of politics in the United States. And Trump has shown what's possible. And I think that to many of us, I mean, certainly me who were attending to our persistent racial injustice, the prison industrial system, have been cognizant of, which is that there will always be a fascist threat to American democracy.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:50] So, look, if if Plato diagnosed our situation all those centuries ago and de Tocqueville diagnosed our situation, you know, about two hundred years ago, and we don't like their prescriptions. Right. We don't like the royalists or the philosopher king model. We actually like democracy. What are we left with? Like, how do we build up our resistance?

Jason Stanley [00:24:20] I mean, I don't think Rousseau is right on his specific response that you should, like, keep people away from civil society until they're 21 and mature enough to deal with it. But the education system, education system and economic equality, these are the traditional arguments. People have resentments that fascists can exploit when they're anxious and fearful. If we can have strong systems of economic equality that tamp down people's resentments and anxieties, if we can have an education system that brings people together. Gets rid of private schools and educates people in all the histories of their fellow citizens. That is the way to strengthen democracy. You don't just throw people into society and tell them to vote. All of Democratic political philosophy is intermingled with the importance of redistribution and the importance of education. And that's why anti-democratic forces always attack the education system and try to maintain economic inequality.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:33] Jason Stanley, thank you for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Jason Stanley [00:25:38] Thank you so much.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:46] Well, Siva, the thing that resonates for me from Jason's conversation is what he said straightforward - fascist politics works in democracies. Now, let's just chew on that for a minute. I mean, I thought democracies were supposed to be the answer, the antidote to fascist politics. But again, free speech is tricky. And an abundance of freedom and abundance of opinions can sometimes overwhelm people.

They can overwhelm voters and citizens who might feel perhaps that they have no fixed points. They're flooded with different perspectives and they're looking for an answer. Capital A. what is the answer to X, Y or Z problem? And that is where fascist or fascist leaning politicians can manipulate fear, manipulate anxieties, and then propose themselves as having the answer. My sense is that democracies are elastic enough and robust enough to handle these kinds of things. But in times of crisis and we're in a crisis right now, economic inequality, racial division, maybe those are the moments when these tactics are most effective.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:52] Yeah, you know, Will, the last few years watching news in the United States and news around the world has really made me question a lot of my beliefs. What I thought were stable assumptions about the United States and about democracy. I also thought that the trappings of democracy, the structure of democracy allowed for the ability to resist these sorts of trends. I really thought that one of the reasons that the United States, despite temptations, escaped the worst kinds of 1930s fascism was that we had the safety valves that democracy provides. And now I'm not so sure that that's the answer. And for a long time, I thought that the antibodies to fight fascism came from history and memory as well. I thought, well, my gosh, any society that grew up with clear memories of concentration camps and political disappearances and assassinations of political opponents and brutality against journalists and scholars and the rounding up and punishment of ethnic minorities would now, in a democratic context, be resistant, right? Yeah. You know, it would be it would be really difficult to rouse people to return to those horrible times.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:18] Yeah. I mean, one of the things that that Jason points out is the conveyor belt of ideas between America in the 1920s and the rise of extremist politics in Germany in the 1920s and in the early 1930s. And one little historical tidbit is that Adolf Hitler, when he was an unknown Munich based politician trying to form a political party, had a photograph of a portrait of Henry Ford on his wall. And the reason that he had a portrait of Henry Ford was because Ford had translated and widely circulated and published the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. And he ran a newspaper that basically published anti Jewish anti-Semitic conspiracy theories on a weekly basis. The Dearborn Independent. So Hitler looked to the United States and its anti-Semitism, its mainstreaming of anti-Semitism as a model and an inspiration. And the fact that this should be news to us now in the 21st century or that we have to be reminded of these things means that we haven't been attending closely to the authors of the early century - the Ida B. Wells and the Dubois's who signaled early on that there was something fundamental about the American political system that was built around division and suppression and oppression and us versus them. A racist and sexist politics. And Jason is forcing us to go back and reacquaint ourselves with the early critics that called out this stuff 100 years ago. And in a way, it's on us that we're so surprised that these ghosts can be revived in our contemporary political scene today.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:49] I think one of the key lessons we can take from Jason Stanley's work is that we have to be on guard. We might not be close to fascism. We might still be living in a resilient democracy. We still have a tremendous amount going for us as Americans in the early 21st century. And we still have time to correct what has gone wrong. But we have to be on guard and we have to realistically accept that fascism can happen anywhere and can happen at any time. And the worst thing we can do is take democracy for granted.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:41] That's all we have for this episode. Next time on Democracy in Danger, we'll talk more about patriarchy, male privilege and how they work our politics with philosopher Kate Manne.

Kate Manne [00:30:51] I coined the term himpathy, originally, as the excessive or disproportionate sympathy for a male perpetrator of misogyny over his female victim. I think Donald Trump has been the beneficiary of himpathy and he's also doled out a lot of it.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:08] In the meantime, we are going to keep asking the tough questions with our great guests about democracy, authoritarianism and all these other doom and gloom topics. We'll be doing this through the November election and our episodes post every Tuesday, wherever you get your podcasts.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:23] And you can see what we're reading on the Web. Our website is medialab.virginia.edu.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:30] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:37] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab, and we're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective at WTJU Radio in Charlottesville, Virginia. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:57] And I'm Will Hitchcock. We'll see you here next time.