

## Democracy in Danger

### S1 E14 Culture of Himpathy

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

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidhyathan. And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:00:13] Well, first, let me apologize for the weakness and shakiness in my voice. I am recovering from Covid, and it's had me pretty much wiped out the last couple of weeks. But, you know, I'm super excited. I wasn't going to miss this interview. We were going to be speaking with our second philosopher in a row. Last week, we talked about fascism with Jason Stanley, who's a philosopher at Yale University. This week, we're talking to another philosopher who has taken on public issues with a fervor that is really deeply impressive. And she's going to help us explore in greater depth the patriarchal ideals and norms that fuel anti-democratic practices in the United States and around the world.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:00] Well Siva it is great to have you on the show despite your difficult voice. You're sounding good to me and your dynamism is absolutely central to our efforts in saving democracy. So welcome back. Our guest today has written that male entitlement is a pervasive social problem and it has serious consequences for our democracy. Kate Manne is an associate professor at Cornell University who has written widely about this problem. She's the author most recently of Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women. Kate, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Kate Manne** [00:01:33] Thanks so much for having me. Especially under the circumstances, Siva. I hope you feel better very soon.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:01:40] Thank you.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:42] Kate, from the start of President Trump's last campaign for president way back in 2015, we knew without sexism and misogyny were going to be a core feature of his run for office. I mean, he said as much. Here is a man who has a long and credible array of accusations against him for sexual harassment and sexual assault. And he was caught on tape glorifying predatory behavior toward women. In your judgment, how has this kind of misogyny that he has really embraced and exhibited, how does it shape our politics? How does it shape our democracy the way that we govern ourselves?

**Kate Manne** [00:02:19] Yeah, absolutely. It's an important observation that right from the beginning it's not that's Trump's misogyny has been a bug, it's been a feature of his politics. And I think what we've seen is a way in which he has systematically emboldened people who have misogynistic tendencies and dispositions. I mean, we can trace this back to kind of notorious moments now where he said to Megan Kelly or of Megan Kelly after she questioned him over his record with women and he said that she had blood coming out of her eyes and her "wherever" and thereby kind of coining a euphemism for the vagina - I think primarily word finding difficulties on Trump's part. But ever since then, there's been a way in which he has kind of unleashed such a misogynistic American view.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:03:26] Kate, your work suggests that our political discourse is infused with gender coded language and some issues, for instance, health care and education and climate change often get coded as feminine issues. While issues such as

law and order, militarism, foreign policy are coded male. How did we get to that point and what are the consequences? I think that's really the important question. What are the consequences for the sort of gendered coding and policy and how does that affect how we choose to govern ourselves?

**Kate Manne** [00:03:59] I think there's something afoot with American politics that goes well beyond Trump's, you know, peculiar and particular reign and kind of extends to the GOP in general. And that's a kind of systematic valorization of anything masculine coded. So when it comes to things like waging war, protecting borders, protecting so-called gun rights and also policing people, locking people up, all of these highly masculine coded activities and practices are seen as the proper province of the government, you know. So we have all these, you know, anti-abortion forms of policing which are part of this. And at the same time, this devaluation of any feminine coded activity that the state might have otherwise pursued, things like caring for people's health, especially in a pandemic. So, the Affordable Care Act and the kind of the war on the Affordable Care Act is one example, but also a failure to do anything like a sufficient amount to control the pandemic, a failure to protect and care for our environment and the environment that will be enjoyed or not by future generations. And things like education and for that matter, food systems, anything that is kind of perceived as women's work ends up being something which is perceived as not the proper province of this what I think of as this macho state.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:05:37] Kate, you in your latest book coined the term Himpathy, and it really puts your finger right on a phenomenon that we are all familiar with. But you crystallize that down into one word, this one word, himpathy. And I guess it's a combination of empathy and him. And it's a really useful term these days. And as you describe it, it's a phenomenon in which a male attacker, a rapist, is transformed into a victim and and society is asked to empathize with the terrible costs upon the reputation of the attacker should he be brought into any kind of public accounting or shame or whatever, his reputation will be tarnished. And you, of course, direct our attention to the case of Brett Kavanaugh, whose Supreme Court hearings involved bringing up accusations of sexual assault. Just tell us a little bit more about where you see this phenomenon happening and what work is it doing in our culture, in our politics?

**Kate Manne** [00:06:42] Yeah, absolutely. And I really I appreciate the question. So I coined the term himpathy originally, I think I was back in 2016, and it was a concept that was crystallized for me by the case of Brock Turner, who was a student at Stanford who was caught in the act of sexually assaulting a young woman, Chanel Miller, behind a dumpster after a Stanford frat party. And despite there being really no doubt whatsoever about his guilt, given that he'd been caught in the act by two Swedish graduate students who had essentially performed a citizen's arrest, there was enormous hand-wringing about actually holding Turner accountable. Everyone from his parents to friends to people in the media, to the judge, it just endlessly waxed lyrical about his bright future and the loss thereof. Rather than worrying about his actual and potential victims since he was a sexual assailant. So I think this notion of himpathy, which I kind of define, just as you nicely brought out, as the excessive or disproportionate sympathy for a male perpetrator of misogyny over his female victim. No, I think we see this all the time in our political world as well. I think Donald Trump has been the beneficiary of himpathy. And I think more interestingly, he's also doled out a lot of it. You know, he was someone who talked about when Brett Kavanaugh was going through the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, he talked about ruining a man's life by even investigating the credible accusations of sexual assault that had been leveled against him by Christine Blasey Ford. So I think it's a pretty extreme and important phenomenon in contemporary politics where there is this tendency

that we have to battle against to side with the accused or even someone who we fully believe is a sexual assailant over the people who they harm and victimize.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:53] Look, can I just follow up with that? Because it's such an important point for our political sphere. So accountability is supposed to be the bedrock of democracy in many ways. The voters hold a person accountable for his or her actions. And what you're saying is that that empathy has turned the whole thing on its head, that in a sense, it's a strategy for avoiding accountability. You can always say I'm the victim here. And this seems to have sort of eroded any sense of boundaries or norms. It is this what you're witnessing and what you're describing? Is this part of our general political atmosphere in which accountability of any kind is evaded and is resented essentially by people with power?

**Kate Manne** [00:09:35] Yeah, I know. I love that observation. I think that's exactly right. And it nests in a certain way. So you see privileged and powerful men like Ian Buruma, who is the former editor of New York Review of Books, publishes a piece by who can be fairly said, known sexual abuser Jian Ghomeshi called Jian Ghomeshi on Joan Ghomeshi. You know, writing a self-indulgent treatise about his experiences, ultimately being not convicted in Canadian courts. And then you get Ian Buruma - the attempt to hold him accountable for that poor editorial decision, and people then having empathy for Ian Buruma who had published Jian Ghomeshi. I mean, you get these kinds of epicycles where powerful and privileged men being bolstered by others and also, it must be said, by white women and upholding deeply patriarchal, often outright misogynistic institutions and practices. And kind of preserving a way of life for each other that is deeply resistant to and antithetical to adequate accountability in the political sphere.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:10:49] Kate, in your earlier book *Down Girl*, you define misogyny and you distinguished it from sexism. This is a brilliant insight. And it threw you into the public conversation at just the right moment. And now at this moment, as we are recording this conversation, the Senate is holding hearings on the third Donald Trump nominee for the Supreme Court Judge Amy Coney Barrett. And it's pretty clear that she is going to be the vote that overturns *Roe versus Wade* and any number of other laws and previous decisions that have benefited women throughout American history. How did we get to this point? Can you talk a bit about the role that women have played in supporting this sort of male hierarchy and privilege and in this case, control over women's bodies?

**Kate Manne** [00:11:41] Yeah, absolutely. I think that's such an important point. So just to give listeners a sense of how I define misogyny versus, say, sexism, I think of misogyny, metaphorically speaking, as the law enforcement branch of patriarchy. And more specifically, a system which exposes girls and women to hostility and hatred in as much as they violate patriarchal norms and expectations. That's sort of the paradigm case. And that's different from sexism, which I think of as an ideology, essentially, that rationalizes and naturalizes a gender hierarchy and patriarchal norms and expectations. So just to backtrack a little bit to Donald Trump, I actually am not sure he's particularly sexist. I think he believes women can be highly competent in business, in politics. He has many women, you know, in very high ranking positions in his administration as well as previously in his businesses. What he is a rank misogynist who will smack them down in disproportionate and also particularly gendered ways if they thwart him or cross him or challenge him. So he's someone who kind of believes in women's talents but wants to exploit those talents and really believes women have to be loyal, deferential, quote unquote, good women by the likes of patriarchal values. And it's not surprising in view of that kind of misogyny that there are women, many women, especially white women, in a white supremacist hetero

patriarchy who internalize these values themselves and essentially are trying to be, quote unquote, good women. The kind of good woman that a reconstructed patriarch like Donald Trump or, you know, for a slightly more traditional model, you know, a Mike Pence would approve of and value and think of as wonderful. So, you know, misogyny, I think it's vital to see that it's not about hating any and every woman. It's about singling out women who are perceived as out of line and out of order. And it involves many women. I think Amy Coney Barrett is a prime example who are going to do the policing and enforcing of misogyny and of patriarchal institutions by visiting those expectations on other women as well as holding themselves to those standards.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:14:19] Kate, as you're talking, I'm thinking about this notion of policing the boundaries as well as policing women's bodies. And this practice, when it's conducted by public figures, whether it's a president or a Supreme Court justice, can have enormous influence I can only guess on the rest of society, especially much less distinguished figures who are sort of learning how to behave by watching these public figures model this sort of action. And I'm thinking here about one of the portraits that you write about in your book, The phenomena of the Incel. You know, these young men who are online and who kind of create a fantasy for themselves in which they are left out of the adoration by females that they feel they deserve, that they are entitled to. Can you connect the two? You know, the phenomenon of the incel with this performing, of policing, of rules, of hierarchy, of patriarchy. Are they learning from one another? I mean, how does this how do the pieces fit together?

**Kate Manne** [00:15:19] Yeah. Incels, for listeners who don't know the term involuntary celibates, these are usually youngish, invariably heterosexual men who feel they're entitled to women's care, admiration and sexual favors. And, you know, they don't just feel disappointed that they've been lonely in life or would like a girlfriend or whatever, which is perfectly normal and understandable human emotion. It's rather that they feel they're being deprived of something that they're owed, something they have a right to. And that manifests itself in phenomena like Elliot Rodger, who ended up killing six people. This is in 2014, May 23, 2014 in Isla Vista, California, out of the sense that he had to seek revenge on both the, quote, hot blond sluts who had refused to have sex with him, something he was owed. And also on the supposedly alpha men who he perceived as kind of besting him in the intramasculine hierarchy. It is, if you like, a kind of moral order that deems men - most notably powerful and privileged men - entitled to reproductive caregiving, domestic and child bearing labor, as well as sex. And that, sadly, women often buy into.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:16:48] Kate, in the book, you deploy the term gaslighting quite effectively. Can you describe gaslighting for us? What does it mean? Where does it come from? Is it always gendered? And what do people mean when they say that Donald Trump is gaslighting America?

**Kate Manne** [00:17:04] Yeah, absolutely. So I think in the paradigm case, gaslighting is something which as an interlocutor or as an audience member, it makes you feel crazy or immoral for questioning the narrative that's being sold, no matter how false, pernicious, no matter how obviously it's a lie. There's something about being told, something blatantly uninsured in a super calm, confident manner that makes you feel nuts for going what?? It's like. It's just it's contrary to the norms of communication that lies should be that kind of stark and bold faced. And so the dynamic, I think, is that you're meant to question yourselves and you're meant to feel like you're a bad or defective or irrational or hysterical person for tripping up on that lie and for not just swallowing it.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:17:59] And it comes from it comes from a play from 1938.

**Kate Manne** [00:18:03] Yeah. And it's such a good play. I really recommend those who haven't read it, read it. It's, I think, a much subtler than the film that it was made into in the 40s. Both the US and a UK version of the play. But the play is by Patrick Hamilton written in 1938. And it's just chilling portrait of domestic terrorism, really. This husband, who both chips away at his wife's sanity, but in a way still more interestingly, makes her out to be a horrible person, a horrible, cruel person who's even gone so far as to hurt their beloved pet dog in ways that are designed to make her stop questioning him.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:18:49] It's pretty amazing to think that this play, which had tremendous influence in the nineteen forties, once it came out as a film and it had Ingrid Bergman, it had Joseph Cotten. I mean the biggest stars. And yet this really powerful description of ideology from gaslighting did not puncture our political consciousness until Donald Trump showed up. That's a pretty stunning thing, because if you look back before Donald Trump, there were hundreds of examples of the sort of misogynistic gaslighting where women's stories are turned into well, how does it affect him? Why did it take so long?

**Kate Manne** [00:19:30] I think it's because it started to affect everyone and not just women, because to go back and answer part of your earlier question, I think, you know, it's not invariably a gender dynamic. I mean, certainly women can gaslight other women. And I think occasionally women managed to gaslight men. It's more just it's a paradigmatically gender dynamic that is particularly weaponized by men against women in ways that are of a piece with being dominant and hierarchical and, you know, just generally domineering. And what's really distinctive about Donald Trump is, yes, he is a misogynist, but he also extends a lot of his domineering dynamics to everyone around him. And that now means all of us as you know, his unwilling audience. And I think, you know, because women have so regularly, just as you point out, been gaslit. You know, I'm thinking of, you know, a paradigm case would be Anita Hill or being dismissed as a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty. That's like just absolutely exactly what gaslighting aims to do is depict the person involved, whether to them, or of them, whether second personally or third personally, as bad and mad for saying something that goes against the kind of the general line people want you to take, which is Clarence Thomas is fine in her case. And, you know, now we see both these kinds of dynamics playing out in a much more general way, which encourages us to name it. And there's also a sense in which once it's named, it's so much easier to capture in your palm, because another aspect of gaslighting is it resists its own naming. Because if gaslighting is about being resistant to questioning and challenge, then to call it out is just another form of the very thing that gaslighting forbids.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:21:28] You know, a subset of gaslighting, I guess, is the allegation that a critic of Trump is suffering from Trump Derangement Syndrome. And that's another way in which the the nature of an imbalance of power is made explicit. I mean, who hasn't felt a some degree of Trump Derangement Syndrome? But suddenly you feel that, you know you know, you're instructed that you're obviously crazy for doubting Trump's version of reality, which is exactly what gaslighting is supposed to do, is to make you feel like you're the problem.

**Kate Manne** [00:21:59] Exactly. And I mean, even saying fake news is another very gaslighting move, because what gaslighter tend to have in their arsenal is a range of ways of getting kind of instant dominance over the narrative. Instant dismissal of counter narratives. And they'll have all these quick, short, sharp jabs which prevent any one

around them from challenging what they have to say or what they, in a way don't even believe, but command you to adopt as the story, their story, upon you know, which always makes out that they're great and wonderful and, you know, and a good person.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:22:42] Kate, let me pull back to the contemporary moment that we're in, where we're at the very end of a presidential election cycle, where least we think we're at the end of it. Who knows? Maybe it'll go on forever. But I just wanted to ask you just to say a word or two about what was happening and read what's happening through the lens of gender. I mean, this was a year 2020, which saw a lot of highly qualified women running for president. But at the end of the day, the Democratic Party selected a rather moderate 77 year old straight male white male as its nominee. And I you know, we can all remember that, you know, some of these extraordinarily talented women who ran for president always wound up having something wrong with them. Amy Klobuchar had an anger problem. Infamously, she was criticized for eating salad with a comb. Kirsten Gillibrand caught flak because she was too critical of Senator Al Franken. And, you know, compelled his resignation because he'd been caught molesting a colleague. Elizabeth Warren was too prepared, too smart to be president, maybe. I mean, it went on and on and on. And I just wondered if you could address the simple question of whether or not you think a woman can be elected president. A woman, of course, has already succeeded in getting the most votes for president in 2016, Hillary Clinton. But I guess let me rephrase that question by asking what needs to be overcome? What barriers need to be broken in order for a woman to be elected president of the United States?

**Kate Manne** [00:24:15] Yeah, I mean, there is something tragic about this year. As you point out, we have immensely talented female candidates. There's no secret for anyone who's followed me on Twitter or similar that I was all in for Elizabeth Warren. And yeah, we did end up with a pretty bland, middle of the road, white cis man who also is kind of inappropriate with women, oftentimes. I don't feel we should be too thrilled about the outcome, even though there's no doubt we should be voting for Biden. But in terms of how we got here, I think there are enormous biases against women under fairly specific circumstances when they seek power of the kind that is the ultimate masculine coded authority position like the presidency. So women can do very well in lower level races. And we've seen that time and time again. And studies have shown women running for Congress, even for the Senate, and not necessarily at any grave or even sometimes even they're not even at any disadvantage. But when running for the president, you know, I think there are many empirical studies that show that when men and women go head to head for these kinds of masculine coded authority positions, roughly 85 percent of people will favor the man over the woman, will think that he is more competent unless there's unequivocal information given that they're equally competent, in which case he'll find her a less likable. And I should say, you know, I'm using him here, but women as well as men share these biases. And so until there is a kind of widespread awareness of these biases and equally importantly, a commitment to give them up rather than just sort of shrugging their shoulders and calling a woman unelectable as if the fault lies in her and not with us as voters. I think it's going to be tremendously hard to have a woman president, especially a woman Democratic president, because as we're seeing, women can be more acceptable on the right by embracing supposedly so-called family values.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:26:27] Well Kate, of course, the path to justice doesn't have to go down Pennsylvania Avenue and you close your book entitled on a note of hope. And I was a bit surprised by this. It's certainly in contrast with the gloom that pervades your previous book, *Down Girl*. And I was inspired by this. Right. All of a sudden, you were telling me that there is reason to be optimistic about the potential for gender justice, not

just in America, but elsewhere. Why should we share a sense of hope at all for a political and social system that might foster truly gender justice?

**Kate Manne** [00:27:10] Yeah, you know, I want to distance myself from the idea of hope or even optimism. I think what I want to commit to there and what I wanted to do in that last chapter was really do something that I haven't done before and something that's quite emotionally hard to do, which is to commit kind of fully and go all in for the fight for gender justice. You know, I've always been committed to understanding it and doing my best. But I kind of gave up in the conclusion of my last book, *Down Girl*, my first book. I said I give up. You know, I wish I could offer a more hopeful message, but I really felt like the chances of getting people to take misogyny seriously were so slim and so fraught with danger and hazards. And I guess since writing that book, two things happened. One was that I found actually there are enormous number of people who are committed to the fight for gender justice. You know, I'm speaking among people who are in that fight. And an enormous amount of my readers have encouraged me to think that, you know, there is such a fight that we're in together. But the other thing that happened was just the more personal thing of, you know, I wrote my second book while being pregnant with my daughter, who is now nearly 11 months. And it just kind of forced me to think of despair as this luxury that I couldn't afford anymore. So even though it's very difficult to stave off despair these days, I try to focus on the people who I am with in this shared fight, as difficult as it will be. I want to believe that will ultimately prevail.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:29:02] Well, Kate Manne, you know, we also really deeply want to believe that things are going to get better. So thank you so much for all your guidance and your wisdom today and for joining us on *Democracy in Danger*.

**Kate Manne** [00:29:18] Thank you so much. I'm so grateful to both of you both for your work and for doing this incredible podcast. And I'm just honored to be a part of it.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:29:36] Well, that was a really, I think, important conversation that we had with Kate. You know, she has over the course of two very concise and disciplined books laid out for us some thoughts that should have helped define so much of what ails American democracy in general. Right. We have we have 52 percent of the population that has been systematically denied full access to power. That more often than not finds its issues minimized, ridiculed often. That has been unable to fully benefit from the economic dynamism of this country. And so in matters of policy and politics, time and time again, there is clearly something at work here. Something deep and systematic.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:30:27] I mean, one of the things that we've done a lot in our show is talk about race and about white privilege and about the legacy of racism and slavery that still permeates our democracy. But I think today I feel as if I've opened up a door on an absolutely central perspective about our politics, which is the role that male entitlement plays. I mean, that's the title of her book *Entitled*. And it just makes me feel as if it's a framework that explains so much, not just about Donald Trump. Of course, he's a, you know, a figure for whom most so much of this resonates. But but just about the sense of privilege that powerful males possess in our political sphere and the ways in which some powerful men have taken advantage of that to exploit a certain kind of power relationship for their own benefit. So one example of this is, at our current moment, and Siva where you personally can, you know, can relate - is the battle over masking. And, you know, I should be entitled to go in public without a mask because that's who I am. As if, you know, we don't have an obligation towards others we have only entitlements for

ourselves. And if we don't deal with that problem, we're going to have a very difficult time keeping our civil society together.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:31:49] And of course, we see time and time again that it is men who most often and most vocally resist that we take care of each other as a community, that we not spread this disease farther than we need to. And, you know, there's just something deeply wrong with what we train men to expect. And I think that Kate Mann's work gives us a chance to rethink what we have allowed men to assume. And hopefully we can reset and address some of these imbalances of power quite urgently. There has to be something deeper. There has to be something more systematic and more theoretical that we have to address.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:32:42] That's it this week for Democracy in Danger. On our next episode, we'll pick up our conversation about the Supreme Court with one of our colleagues and friends, UVA law school dean, Risa Goluboff.

**Risa Goluboff** [00:32:54] Every time there are new appointees, with the exception of the two Clinton appointees and the two Obama appointees, it looks like the court is going to get more conservative. And it looks like those New Deal and Warren Court precedents are going to be overturned. And somehow they haven't been.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:33:09] How do you see misogyny at work in your life? How does it influence your politics? We'd like to know. You can find us on Twitter @UVA Media Lab, or to read more about this show and to see what we're reading and to find all our past episodes, visit us on the Web at [medialab.virginia.edu](http://medialab.virginia.edu).

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:33:30] You can subscribe to this show wherever you get your podcasts and you can use them in your virtual classrooms, you can share them on social media. Tell your friends all about it. We have episodes about xenophobia, episodes about electronic bots and trolls, about mass incarceration, voter suppression and all sorts of other cheerful subjects.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:33:49] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:33:58] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from 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. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:34:14] And I'm Will Hitchcock. And I'm here wishing Siva a rapid recovery and good health.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:34:18] Thank you so much. I'm glad I was able to make it through without too much trouble. Surprise.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:34:24] We'll be back here again next time.