

## Democracy in Danger S1E4: Xenophobia

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

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger. A series about the threats that democracy is facing in the United States and around the world.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:20] We want to start today with a story that historian Erika Lee told us recently about a day trip that she took across the New York Harbor a few years back.

**Erica Lee** [00:00:30] So I was on this trip to Ellis Island, I wanted to see some of the new exhibits focusing on post 1965 immigration. So I'm really there as a tourist. But, of course, as an immigration scholar, I'm looking at everything with a critical eye, including the security line to get onto the boat and the people around me, and the narration through the speakers as we're traveling, you know, first of the Statue of Liberty and then to Ellis Island. And I'm listening to this, you know, very calm, professional voice of the narrator and dulcet tones. I think there's even a musical, you know, background. You know, speaking about Ellis Island as America's symbol of our welcome to immigrants. And, you know, it's such a wonderful story. You almost feel like standing up and, you know, putting your hands on your chest. You know, you feel so patriotic listening to that story. But I feel so divided, and just to set it this discombobulated, because as I am waiting in line to get on to that boat, I'm listening to the news. And it happened 2016, the weekend of the Republican National Convention. And the news newscasters are replaying speeches by Rudy Giuliani.

**Rudy Giuliani** [00:02:36] Hillary Clinton is for Open Borders!

**Erica Lee** [00:02:40] By Jeff Sessions...

**Jeff Sessions** [00:02:42] Excess immigration floods the labor market, reducing job prospects...

**Erica Lee** [00:02:48] And of course by candidate Trump...

**Donald Trump** [00:02:49] Nearly one hundred and eighty thousand illegal immigrants with criminal records...

**Erica Lee** [00:02:55] And then the crowd's response. You know, "Build the wall! Build the wall!" And I am just trying to figure out how do these two Americas fit together, these two extremes? How do we make sense of them?

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:03:24] Of course, a big part of how we make sense of such contradictions is through historical narrative. The telling and retelling of a shared past. This happens in textbooks, movies and art, as well as museums like the one at Ellis Island. Still, as Lee recalled, these efforts can obscure as much as they reveal.

**Erica Lee** [00:03:48] As I went through the exhibits on Ellis Island, I realized that the museum exhibits do a wonderful job painting a, you know, violent and exclusionary history of our xenophobic past.

**Ellis Island Narrator** [00:04:06] After World War One, the fear of outsiders swelled and the door to America really began to swing shut.

**Erica Lee** [00:04:13] But that most treated as over and done with as unfortunate episodes that extremist pushed for, but that we've long since put aside that we've learned our lesson, that there's no way to go back to that time.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:04:52] You know, Siva, this story shows how paradoxical it is that we celebrate America as a nation of immigrants. Yet we see anti-immigrant rhetoric openly deployed to energize and polarize citizens, voters, people. In fact, Erica Lee's work argues that nativism and xenophobia are deeply woven into the fabric of American history.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:05:13] In our conversation with Erica, we explored some of that history and its relevance to what we've seen play out lately under President Trump, who has used nativist language to justify his efforts to ban Muslims from entering the country, to dismantle the Dreamers program and to separate families at the southern border. So, Will, let's pick up that conversation with a question you asked her about the changing nature of xenophobia in America.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:05:41] Take us back in time a little bit. In the early 19th century, as you show, there was an enormous amount of anti Catholic bigotry in the United States. And, you know, immigrants from Germany or Ireland were often the targets of really outrageous hostility. And then that starts to shift in the late 19th century. And it seems that the new "threat" is Chinese immigrants. Now, what is it about Chinese immigrants that Americans found so threatening? And how did this shift occur from concerns about Catholicism to concerns about the new wave of Chinese immigrants?

**Erica Lee** [00:06:23] Xenophobia works and so many ingenious ways. It's about demonizing foreigners based on allegedly, you know, inferior or dangerous traits and then describing an entire group and maligning an entire group based on those traits. And it could be national origin, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation. But it's always been consistently centered around race. The big change that happens is the ability of white immigrants, immigrants from Europe, to become naturalized citizens and to vote. And with that political power, one becomes, you know, one has a seat at the table. One is able to help shape future policy and to lessen the impact on xenophobia on their community. If you have votes to offer to politicians and then when you yourself become a politician, you know, it's it's all about power. Chinese immigrants were the first group of immigrants to come in large numbers, not from Europe. And because the existing laws based all the way back in the 1790 naturalization act, barred nonwhites from becoming naturalized citizens. Chinese were automatically going to be second class citizens along the lines of Native Americans and African-Americans. So it's not only their perceived racial difference, but also how our existing laws and then reaffirmed in the 1882 Chinese exclusion act, barred them from naturalized citizenship and from progressing in the same ways that Irish, Italian, Jewish, other immigrants from Europe could in terms of climbing that political ladder.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:08:31] Your work shows us also that by the 1920s, even those groups, Eastern European Jews, Irish immigrants, other groups are suspect, right? The suspicion and the concern about the increase in immigration and its effect on American

culture, and perhaps the economy, grows even beyond the perceived threat of immigrants from China. So by the 1920s, we enter a new era of lockdown. Can you show us how we got there? What's the intellectual foundation of that movement? Why do we get that anti-immigration movement so strongly in the 1920s?

**Erica Lee** [00:09:14] Yeah. Immigrants from southern, eastern and Central Europe are called racial inferiors. They're still white, but they're not the right kind of white, which is white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. This is all about the ways in which immigration begins to intersect with and drive the science of eugenics. This idea, the scientific racism that identified humans into different categories and then classify them based on a hierarchy of race. So at the bottom was African. Americans than Native Americans, Asians, and then moving up the ladder - southern eastern central Europeans and then the Nordic race, those from northern or Western Europe, was considered the superior race, a race of leaders, of creators, of innovators. Southern and Eastern Europeans were also split into different "races", the Celtic race, the Mediterranean race. And the idea was, again, that each of these groups had biological tendencies, genetic tendencies, inherited traits and characteristics that led them to criminality, to deviance, to immorality, and that as their numbers were increasing, and as the numbers of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were either staying the same or decreasing, some of these new genesis, like Madison Grant and Teddy Roosevelt blamed educated white women for not doing their duty and having enough children. The idea of racial inferiors invading, displacing so-called native whites led to this idea that not only did we need to restrict immigration, but some called for ending immigration altogether.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:11:19] You know, Erica, the University of Virginia in the 1920s was a hotbed - elite leading edge, you might say - in the "science of eugenics". And, you know, this was always come as a shock to my students when I connect the university that they're studying at with this bogus science of race. And I think what they're surprised by is not just that it happened at the University of Virginia, but that it was so celebrated. That UVA bragged about its place in this emerging "science". And a figure like Madison Grant is pretty interesting because we might think today, well, he must have been some kind of quack on the margins of society, but not at all. Right? I mean, he was a grandee of WASP culture.

**Erica Lee** [00:12:04] He was a celebrated scholar. His book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, went through multiple editions. It was taught in so many different courses, not just history, but also anthropology, zoology, English, literature. It was almost used as a Bible by lawmakers who are debating immigration restrictions in the 1920s. And it was literally called "my Bible" by Adolf Hitler, who praised the United States after we passed the 1921 and especially the 1924 Immigration Act, which did institute discriminatory national origins quotas.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:12:53] Let me just follow up with one question on this, which is, it may seem like an obvious point but one I think we should stress, it seems to me like in the 1920s to the 1960s and today, what we're what we're seeing here is a fundamental pairing of racial anxieties with the idea of limiting democracy, constructing a democracy that is limited to people of power and people of a certain racial background. Is that a common thread that's uniting these debates across the century?

**Erica Lee** [00:13:23] I think it is. I think it is, although obviously there are different contexts. World wars. The 1920s were just coming off of World War I, in the 1960s were in the midst of a Cold War. We're very concerned about our international reputation. I think

the same could be said in terms of racial anxieties, immigration, globalization in the early 21st century. We don't seem to be as concerned about our international reputation right now. I think it's true that certain crises, economic, political, international, do allow xenophobia to thrive. But I would not want listeners to come away with this idea that xenophobia is only a thing that happens during times of anxiety. One of the, I think, most surprising elements that I found in writing this book is how xenophobia can flourish during times of peace and war, during times of civil rights and racial strife.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:14:43] You've written that xenophobia is often treated not just by the general public or by public historians, but by academic historians as either an anomaly or something we have grown out of. That they were embarrassing spasms of racism and xenophobia long ago. But by the time we make the turn toward civil rights in the 1960s, that all sluffs away. And then perhaps it just reemerges. It erupts out of nowhere in 2016. And now we're we're in this new flood of sort of pre 1960s, maybe it's 1920s xenophobia. The story I've just told clearly doesn't really match the history of the United States. Could you correct me on that?

**Erica Lee** [00:15:30] Right. I mean, you know, so 1) for listeners who don't know, the 1965 Immigration Act also has an Ellis Island stamp on it. President Lyndon Baines Johnson insisted on signing it on Liberty Island at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. Clearly, the optics were great. You know, it was about reopening up the United States to immigration after 40 years of discriminatory national origins quotas. And the speeches are lofty. It's about civil rights. It's about nondiscrimination. It's about a recommitment to to immigration. And it's a really important law. And it's still forms the basis of our immigration policy. It's the last time that we had comprehensive immigration reform in the United States. And it does abolish discrimination in the government's handing out of visas. So historians, many of whom had been part of the turn in immigration history, to focus on the new groups who were coming in after 1965, those from Latin America, Africa and Asia rightly held up this law as a turn towards obviously a new America, a better America. But, you know, in that celebration of the law, there were too many, too many aspects of the ongoing bitter debate about immigration that was part of the 65 law, as well as the restrictions that remained in place embedded in that law that too many historians either glossed over, obscured or didn't take seriously. And it's really those two those twin aspects of welcome and restriction built in to the 1965 act, which is part of the civil rights movement that helps explain the conundrum - the mess, frankly - that we're in today.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:17:34] So this surprises me a bit, Erica, because my you know, my my own family's story in many ways in this country starts with the 1965 act. My parents were married in 1965. I was born in 1966. And then we began a parade of of uncles and aunts and cousins coming to this country, sponsored by my father.

**Erica Lee** [00:17:58] Chain migration. Say it, chain migration. (laughter)

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:17:59] Yeah. That was a great chain for us, right? Yeah. And in all those cases, we know that the story we tell in our family is that Lyndon Johnson made our lives possible with this 1965 act and that we are part of the incredible rush of civil rights legislation, partial beneficiaries of the rush of civil rights legislation in the mid 1960s, along with the Fair Housing Act and the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act. And so this is news to me that there were elements of the Immigration Act in 1965 that perhaps hit back at a notion of a country ready to embrace difference and diversity.

**Erica Lee** [00:18:42] Right. Yeah. You know, so your family's story echoes the stories of many, many others. But the reality behind the intent of the law is that you guys were probably not meant to come. The design of the law, even with its civil rights language, the design of the law was still meant to maintain the current ethnic makeup of the United States in 1965, which was majority northern and western European. So when the national origins quotas were abolished, we put in place a different preference system. And the idea was family reunification comes first. And since the majority of people in the United States were of northern and Western descent, then the idea was their family also from northern and Western Europe would be first in line to come. Those with skills were given a second priority. And it was very clear in the debates that this was a way to make the outcome of the law still consistent with essentially national origins quotas. But in a presumably nondiscriminatory way, what happened is that for multiple reasons, including the United States economic assistance to northern and Western Europe, Europeans didn't feel the need to come. But many in developing economies in Asia, Latin America and war torn, countries did. And they very astutely used the family preferences to like your family, you know, to build on that chain.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:20:40] So that said, you know, June 16th of 2015, Donald Trump rides his escalator down in Trump Tower and some of the first words out of his mouth when he announces he wants to be president were deeply racist and xenophobic. You know, he talked about Mexicans being rapists and that set the tone. So I know it's difficult and challenging and often unfair to ask a historian to try to make sense of something that happened just four years ago or five years ago. But is this moment when Donald Trump pushes this idea, these set of fears out into full articulation - Is that a rupture in the process or the flow of how Americans thought about immigrants, or was it a continuation and just a nudge that made these passions reemerge?

**Erica Lee** [00:21:43] It's absolutely a continuation. I mean, I think when he did ride that escalator down and did make his speech about rapists and criminals, there was a lot of hand-wringing, a lot of, "Did he say that?" You know, and a lot of disbelief. But in fact, there is no way that you could have a candidate like Trump be so successful in this explicit expression of racism and xenophobia without many, many others before him, including people like Patrick Buchanan, who in the 1990s ran for president and had an America first rhetoric and whose books have continuously talked about the death of the West at the hands of an invasion of immigrants. Or Lou Dobbs or any of the mainstream, it's not extreme, mainstream media personalities and scholars and politicians laying the groundwork. What we're seeing today with immigration during the pandemic is absolutely unprecedented. We essentially have our borders completely closed. The end of asylum. Refugee admissions have been suspended. Immigration has ground to a halt. And one could say these are responsible policies during a time of global pandemic. But in fact, they are only building upon already robust, sweeping, unprecedented changes that the Trump administration has been making throughout its administration. And yes, you know, part of it began from that elevator ride in 2015, but he's building upon certainly generations of rhetoric and policy and precedent.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:23:45] Erica, before we go, I just wanted to get you to reflect a little bit upon the relationship between xenophobia and democracy and illiberalism. We like to think of democracy as inclusive, but in practice in the US, it has often been a battle to expand the franchise. And our debates about xenophobia and immigration have fueled anxieties about who should be included in our democracy. Where are we now and where are we going in this respect? How is the debate about immigration shaping our democracy and what are the steps that we would need to take to overcome these obstacles?

**Erica Lee** [00:24:27] You know, I started writing this book and thinking about the ways in which xenophobia helped to, as you say, really hurt democracy. And my go to line was it threatens the very ideals upon which our democracy was founded, which remains true. But as I finish the book, I realized actually politicians have found it expedient to demonize foreigners as a way of mobilizing voters, where immigration may be just one item in a larger agenda. And then in passing anti immigrant laws. So the question about, you know, what do we do now? I think we really need to ask, is this the kind of democracy that we want? And I hope that when people think about xenophobia, that they realize or they consider how it's not just something that happens to immigrants. In that way, it's so easy to ignore it. You know, you might get excited about it when you read something in the news, but then think about how it doesn't really impact my life if I myself am not an immigrant or my friends or family are no longer immigrants. But in fact, when xenophobia does it helps to support, sustain, inspire division. It supports white supremacy, white nationalism. It does a disservice to our democracy. The ways in which immigration policy is being made now is by executive order with no congressional oversight. Even though public opinion polls, even during the pandemic, show that Americans, a majority of Americans support immigration, believe that immigrants in general and especially undocumented immigrants are doing jobs that Americans do not want. This doesn't seem to be a good reflection of what the people's will is right now.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:26:55] That was Erica Lee, a historian at the University of Minnesota and the author of numerous books, including, most recently *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States*.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:27:13] You know, Will, it's really important as we talk about the history of immigration in America and especially the most recent decades and this rise, or the rerise of xenophobia in America, that the United States is not the only place where this is all playing out. We have seen similar xenophobic movements. We've seen major politicians and parties in countries like France and the Netherlands, in the United Kingdom, in Italy. We have seen xenophobia take over and twist Hungary to the point where it's walled off from most of the rest of the world in a way that explicitly violates the spirit of the European Union, of which it's a member. We're starting to see it in India, where xenophobia against Muslims, both internal and foreign, is at an all time high. So it's really important that we look at this within a global context as well and not imagine that the United States of America is alone. Although America's story of itself as a nation of immigrants, America's pride in the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island puts our immigration story in stark relief.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:28:27] Yeah, America may be a nation of immigrants, but it's not the only country in the world that has to confront a history of xenophobia. And I was really struck by something Erica said about the way in which xenophobia and American democracy have been wound together. I'd like to think that American democracy is a kind of an ideal notion of inclusion and transparency. But the fact of the matter is, as she shows in her book, that the way democracy has been constructed in America has been entirely in sync with xenophobia and racism. And what we're up against in the in the 21st century is figuring out how to unwind these two strands in order to make democracy more inclusive and more transparent and in a way to figure out how to unload ourselves of this burden off of a couple of hundred years of fear of foreigners.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:29:22] And in many cases, as you can see, even today, the major xenophobic movements of the 2020s, like the 1920s, were just as concerned with

keeping American democracy white as anything else. In other words, democracy will only work for the majority culture if the vote is not overwhelmed by these new voters, new potential voters. Right. So the idea of birthright citizenship, the idea that people born of immigrants are granted U.S. citizenship immediately right, something from that derives from the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, is suddenly controversial because of the idea that in a democracy, certain groups might lose power if everybody gets to vote.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:30:20] Yes. And another thing that I was struck by in her account of this arc of American xenophobia and how it's influenced immigration policy, we love to point to the 1965 Immigration Act as a moment of enlightened policymaking. Look, we turned our back on the racism of the 1920s, but it did great a whole other set of barriers because it was built around skills. It was built around essentially access to education from key foreign groups that were designated as desirable, people with something to contribute. But that had the effect of making people who were maybe without skills or without wealth or without education suddenly appear to be undesirable. And many of those people were from Central and South America. So in a way, although race was written out of those laws, it had the effect of accentuating difference all over again.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:31:09] It did. At the same time, as Erica pointed out, it had this unpredicted affect - a sort of a side effect - of changing the nature and origins of the vast swaths of immigration to the United States. So that post 1965, immigrants tended to be from East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Africa, Central or South America in numbers never seen before. And that has certainly changed so much about daily life in America. You know, made it wonderful in so many ways, but generated tremendous anxiety among those who take deep pride in their family's own immigrant experience, perhaps earlier in the 20th century or in the 19th century.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:32:00] What a story. And boy, America for Americans is one of those catch phrases that you can use to cast a light on these kind of dark pockets of American history and what we find is both fascinating and at times quite alarming.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:32:35] That's it this time for Democracy in Danger. Join us next week for our conversation with Leah Wright Rigueur of the Harvard Kennedy School. Leah will help us think a lot about policing, political activism and race in America.

**Leah Wright Rigueur** [00:32:49] So African-Americans are simply having a different experience than the rest of the nation. And it's one that is fundamentally about the failures of America as a Democratic project and the American state.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:33:02] We'd love to hear from you in the meantime. Have you been the target of xenophobia? What has been your experience of immigration? What does it look like and felt like? You can find us on Twitter @UVAMediaLab or online at [medialab.virginia.edu](http://medialab.virginia.edu).

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:33:19] Democracy in Danger is available on Stitcher, on Spotify, on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. So subscribe to our show and do your part to save democracy. You can tell your friends and your colleagues about what you're hearing and what you're learning from our show.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:33:35] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Kara Peters and Denzel Mitchell.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:33:44] 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 Deliberative Media Lab. Were distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective at WTJU Radio. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:34:02] And I'm Will Hitchcock. Until next time.