

Democracy in Danger S2 E4 Threadbare Country

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

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

Will Hitchcock [00:00:07] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:13] Will last season we spent a lot of time talking about the destructive legacy of slavery and racism in America. You know how the country's institutions systematically unraveled efforts to build real equality after the civil war, during reconstruction. We also talked about the history of voter suppression. We talked about police brutality and, of course, the long history of xenophobia in America. One of the things we want to do now moving forward in season two is bridge this conversation about racial inequality with another just as important subject: economic material injustice.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:50] Yeah, Siva. I'm sure everybody remembers that right after Trump's election, you know, there was a lot of argument about what had driven voters to embrace this guy. You know, was it his not very subtle racism or was it more somehow that he spoke to the little guy who had been left at the bottom of the economic ladder? And, you know, some people refused to rely on racism as the explanation for Trump. They said, no, no, he succeeded really because of this wage and opportunity gap and so forth. Well, it took us a little while, maybe longer than it should have to arrive at the pretty obvious answer, that it was both.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:28] Yeah. You know, people are always so invested in using whatever is happening in front of them to reinforce what they already believe, what they already want. And we saw so much of that in the early days of Trump as we all tried to figure out what just happened. You know, we have today someone who has really done the reading and the research and the reporting, someone who has thought deeply about the connections between race and class, between racism as a political reality in America and the way it has warped our economic practices, policies and institutions.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:01] Yeah. We're joined today by Eduardo Porter. He's an economics writer for The New York Times and the author most recently of American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise. Eduardo is also the host with Tess Vigeland of his own podcast called The Pie. Eduardo, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Eduardo Porter [00:02:20] Hey, thanks for having me. Great to be here.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:23] So, Eduardo, you open your recent book with a personal story, and I think our listeners would find it pretty moving. You write that you'd spent many years living in Mexico as a young person. You speak Spanish in your household, with your family, with your children. But just after Trump was elected president, your son expressed some anxieties to you about what he was seeing and hearing in the news. Just tell us a little bit of that story.

Eduardo Porter [00:02:50] Yeah, I mean, just to take a step back, I am Mexican-American. My mother is Mexican. I grew up most of my childhood in Mexico all the way through university. And sort of like my Mexican identity is as important to me as my

American identity. And I kind of hope to pass that same sense to my son. And, you know, so we speak Spanish here. He's gone to Mexico a number of times and so forth. And then, of course, our Mexican-nes became part of the political conversation when Donald Trump joined the presidential race, you know, declaring that Mexico was sending a bunch of rapists and thugs to the United States. And what happened, the anecdote you're referring to, is the day after the election we were on the subway and, you know, as usual, I was speaking to him in Spanish and he kind of leaned in to me a little bit and said, you know, Dad, maybe we shouldn't speak in Spanish in public anymore. So it's this notion that our Mexican-nes this was now dangerous. Right. Was one of the immediate kind of like consequences of the 2016 election.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:56] Yeah. It's amazing to think how many people were having some version of that conversation at that moment.

Eduardo Porter [00:04:00] Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:04:01] A sense of really personal vulnerability, like your family life was suddenly, you know, cast into shadow by the political events of the day.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:04:09] And of course, that was not an empty threat. It came true for so many Americans and so many people who were trying to be Americans. You know, Eduardo, you write in your book, "Racial hostility has blocked the construction of an American social welfare state." Right. I think this is the bridge between this sort of anxiety that so many people felt, that the vulnerability that so many people felt and the fact that we have so little to fall back on. And, you know, one of the most prominent debates that commentators had, as we said in the introduction, right after Trump's ascendancy in 2016, was about the role of economic inequality and wage stagnation, the hollowing out of the working class, all of which is true and documented. And yet the perception was that this was a white problem. Right. How would you weigh the relative impact of the economic state of this early century and the long standing racism that is embedded in American institutions in helping us understand how Trump happened?

Eduardo Porter [00:05:18] If we just look at the election itself, Trump wasn't brought to power by marginalized Americans, by like the poor who were really kind of like left out of American prosperity. In fact, like, if you look more carefully at Trump's vote, I mean, it was there were a lot of people that were, you know, squarely middle class that voted for Trump. And so when I try to think through how these -how racism interacted with economic anxiety in that election - I think that the better frame is to think about fear of loss of status. And there, you know, the idea that my good job might be gone or that it's more difficult to have and the idea of loss of status of my racial group as this country goes through enormous demographic change, which is going to leave, you know, non Hispanic whites in the minority a couple of decades from now. Those two things, I think, really could create a very powerful feeling of fear and produce an enormous animus that is very, very racialized. So, I mean, if you ask me that, you put it in order, I would argue that race is first and foremost. But I would say that economic anxiety helps to trigger these kind of like feelings of racial hostility.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:40] So while the wages of so many white people might have been stagnant for the past few decades, the wages of whiteness certainly seemed to be worth less.

Eduardo Porter [00:06:51] Yeah, or on their way to be worth less. I mean, the sense that we've heard so much, we heard it in January when the crowds stormed the Capitol, these white crowds storming the Capitol, the sense that they are losing their country. So the privilege, the power that came from whiteness is under threat. And I think that is a very powerful motivator. But obviously, these things interact and, you know, vast economic inequality creates enormous social distance and it also creates groups of power that are extremely powerful and are absolutely unwilling to change the social institutions that govern us. So dealing with economic inequality is, I think, very much a part of the challenge. I would argue that what we need is to create a new idea of what being American is, what a mainstream American is. It's a way more diverse, complicated, messy identity than the one espoused by people that went to Washington in January to take the Capitol. So the policies that help build that identity, I think a lot of them are about creating economic opportunity and sharing economic opportunity better. You know, this idea that black families on average have like one tenth of the wealth of white families. So evidently, we need to make more progress on issues of economic equality as part of this. But I argue that it's within a broad kind of like notion of what is this new economic and social space that we have to create where we all fit.

Will Hitchcock [00:08:31] You know, Eduardo, one of the things that I learned about in your book is, is the problem of working class solidarity. I mean, let's be honest. It seems from all the scholarship and the analysis that many people have done, including yourself, race trumps class again and again. And here is this country with a great deal of diversity at the bottom of the economic ladder. And yet there is relatively little cross racial solidarity among people who are struggling. You know, why? Why is this the case? Why do Americans who are trying to better themselves still feel so hostile towards their their neighbor, who might look different from them? And they also still often feel hostile towards the government, which could be a resource in their climb up the economic ladder.

Eduardo Porter [00:09:17] That's a very difficult but fundamental question. And to be totally honest, my first answer is I don't really know. But racial barriers are extremely powerful, not just in the United States, but around the world. And they're not just extremely powerful now. They're as old as the hills. And so this idea of you forming barriers around your ethnic group or your racial group or your religious group or your linguistic group or your cultural group, these kinds of strategies have been with us for, you know, thousands of years. In the United States they are particularly powerful, I think, because the United States is rather unique in that it is very diverse, you know, you look around and you think, wow, in this country most people are not like me. And no matter who you are in the United States, that's probably true. Most people in the United States are not like you. And that's quite rare. And I think that that is to some extent why race has become such a powerful force in shaping our institutions. So say I mean, I would just compare it to, like, I don't know, Sweden. When Sweden is building a welfare state, it's a bunch of, you know, tall, blond, blue eyed people building a welfare state for other tall, blond, blue eyed people. And so the barriers to solidarity created by, you know, ethnic differences and racial differences are not there, which kind of like helps building this notion of a collective good. In the United States, building public goods is often stymied by the idea that I'm paying something for them - for some other.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:03] Right. Of course, Sweden doesn't have the American legacy of slavery and reconstruction.

Eduardo Porter [00:11:07] And indeed, there are specificities. Yes. Yes.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:10] Now, your reporting has taken you to some pretty exclusive places by exclusive I mean, places where people do manage to be around people like them, whether it's because of they're rural and they don't necessarily have people of color in their immediate surroundings or at least in large numbers, or they're self reinforced by Facebook groups or whatever it takes. Right. And you noticed, though, that the hostility toward others seems to be higher where there is less actual interaction with the other. Is that correct?

Eduardo Porter [00:11:45] Yes. I mean, that is kind of like one of the peculiar features of racial animus that it flares up where there are no others. And you could see this in the 2016 election where a lot of the vote for President Trump turned out to be not in areas where there were lots of immigrants. So it kind of like this fear of immigration. This hostility towards immigrants seemed to flourish more readily in places where they were where there weren't that many of them. And you're referring to some trips that I've done. I went to Kentucky. I've been to the far west of Virginia and places where there are very, very few immigrants or people of color in general, and where you can sense this fear that we cannot build a big safety net, we cannot build a social welfare state because it might be abused. And underlying this idea that it will be abused is the idea there's some other out there that will abuse it. And I you know, I do wonder why this happens, why in a place I was in Harlan, Kentucky, for, I think it's 98 percent non Hispanic white. And there were, you know, thoughts about how immigrants could, you know, abuse Medicaid. And I think it just reminds us of the power of political rhetoric. Right, how a political entrepreneur can bring things into the conversation. And since I think the conversation about the social safety net in the United States has been so long prone to these characterizations since, you know, Ronald Reagan talked about the welfare queen, this idea of, you know, the social safety net being abused by people of color, that in some big city across the country has become a very, very powerful meme. So you don't even have to see it to believe it because it's just repeated and restated in the political discourse.

Will Hitchcock [00:13:47] But does that explain, Eduardo, why people in Harlan County are also anti-government, even if they benefit from government programs? Or maybe have they turn their back on government programs altogether? I don't think so.

Eduardo Porter [00:14:00] Well, no. I mean, Harlan, the reason I went to Harlan County was it is one of the 10 counties in the United States that rely most on federal money to to survive, you know, on food stamps.

Will Hitchcock [00:14:12] I suspect people don't talk about that all the time.

Eduardo Porter [00:14:16] No, exactly. Not so. There is a myopia. There's a contradiction there about the importance of the government for their individual lives and their and the tension there is between that and the mistrust that they have that they express about government in general as something that is going to help others, is going to abuse them, is going to take from them. And yes, there is a there is a huge contradiction right there.

Will Hitchcock [00:14:45] Let me just ask you a follow up in a kind of different way. You know, let me ask you the Obama question. You know, so we understand the incredible legacy of racism in America, the way it's warped our institutions from top to bottom. And yet this extraordinary thing did happen in 2008 in which the United States elected a black man to the presidency and then reelected that person in 2012 in the midst of significant economic upheaval and change, how does that map onto this larger structural story you're

talking about? Is Obama kind of just like an epiphenomenon or is there are they connected?

[00:15:23] I mean, it is it runs a little bit against the general thesis of kind of like racial animus driving our political choices. But I would argue that that race is an important driver of our political choice. But clearly it is not the only one. And as you pointed out, 2008, notably the election 2008, happened in the middle of an economic cataclysm that I think was very important to deliver the presidency to Obama. I don't know if you guys remember back then, but McCain was absolutely out to lunch on the financial crisis. And there was a kind of like this feeling of competence coming from the Obama team about how to deal with this emergency. And so I can imagine that that was important, too. And also, the turnout among voters of color was very high for Obama. So to some extent, some of the states that flipped to Obama flipped on some kind of like marginal votes, but from voters of color. And so that was also very important. But, yes, I think clearly there is a broader point that that might even, in fact, allow some hope in that, you know, racial hostility, racial animus is not necessarily unconquerable. There is the possibility of us overcoming this powerful force.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:16:39] Yeah, sure. But at the same time, when you look at the results of 2012, you compare them to the results of 2016. It's pretty clear that some voters, right, some not small number of voters, especially in states that were supposed to go for Clinton and had gone for Obama in 2012, must have voted for Obama and then four years later voted for Trump. You know, that's somewhat confusing and weird. Like how how do you make sense of that?

Eduardo Porter [00:17:09] It is confusing and weird. So, I mean, I guess I would say that it's kind of like choose your enemy. So if you think about when Obama is reelected in 2012, Obama is kind of like the populist choice verse in some of these Rust Belt states that he won, he is a populist choice against a clear member of the financial elite who is Mitt Romney. And so if you're just thinking of this in terms of, again, referring back to the economic anxiety that we were talking about a few minutes ago, where it's not that unnatural a path from Obama to Trump, on kind of like economic anxiety grounds, anxiety about outsourcing, about imports from China and stuff like that, you know, especially in some of these very important states which ultimately delivered the presidency to Trump, you know, in the Midwest.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:00] Well, so, you know, we've talked a lot about the role of economic inequality and economic anxiety in American electoral politics. But this podcast is really about the health of democracy. And that's a different question, right? It's not really about which party wins or which party loses, although it's not too hard to use the victory of Donald Trump and the rule of Donald Trump as some sort of proxy for a rejection of democracy or a rebellion against democracy. Right. I mean, those narratives are all too clear, especially here in 2021. But I'm really interested in your thoughts on the ways in which the full flowering of democracy in America, the full recognition that we are equal partners, equal players that we have a shared fate is undermined by economic inequality that seems to me to be designed. Engineered. Just in the sense that there have been specific policies since even the New Deal that deliver resources to some Americans and deny them to others, and that segregation of opportunity and that segregation of wealth. Now, what do you think the effect is on the ideology of democracy, like the American belief in democracy? Do we suspend our disbelief and just proceed as if we are democratic? Is there a relationship between this policy driven inequality and our inability to fully realize democracy?

Eduardo Porter [00:19:37] Yeah, the short answer is yes. But maybe I should just before saying anything else, I should say, I don't really think the United States has ever been a democracy, at least not in the way that it is not it's not a democracy as advertised in any event. There has always been enormous barriers for groups to not be able to exercise their full democratic rights. And those barriers exist to this day. The political system has done everything it can to disenfranchise voters, and that is a stable fact of our political arrangements. You know, and then, yes, of course, inequality is engineered in the sense that the political system will pass legislation and rules and so on, that further the unequal distribution of the fruits of our growth for absolutely sure. From tax laws to laws regarding welfare, we have, at least for the last half century, had a policy set that has been very, very careful to preserve the wealth of the wealthy. And how this interacts with our undemocratic system is, well, you know, I think because the system is undemocratic, it has been in the control of basically economically powerful white subset of Americans. This group has kind of shaped policy to further their own interests and at the same time also to make it more and more difficult for other groups to have a crack at political power. And I think, you know, what we've seen in these last two elections has pretty much shone a light on how concerned kind of like the white power base of this country is about the prospect that there is a non white power base that is growing, and that might actually wrest power from them for the first time in the history of this country.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:25] And America is not a democracy has become kind of a theme of our of our podcast. I mean, it's not for you know, for all the reasons that you said, it's not as advertised. But listen, Eduardo, I mean, I know we're running out of time. I want to ask you a smaller question, a kind of a technical one that that interests me and I think might interest, you know, our listeners. And that's really just about the minimum wage. It's a it's a topic that's hot in the moment. The Biden administration is pushing through a plan for raising the minimum wage, maybe. It hasn't changed for a decade and a half. Do you think that's a big deal or is this kind of stuff on the margins that can't possibly address the much larger historical issues that you've written about?

Eduardo Porter [00:22:07] It's both. I mean, it is a big deal, a minimum wage of fifteen dollars. I mean, if that's where we end up, if that's where the Biden administration is aiming, would be a huge deal for a lot of workers because, you know - maybe not as much in New York - but if you go to like West Virginia, there is a lot of people that are earning less than that. And so it would be very important. It would mean that, you know, people can approach a fairly decent standard of living with a full time job. But is this you know, is this sufficient? Of course not. You know, I mean, the United States safety net and a broad array of institutions to protect the most vulnerable is so threadbare that you really need to do a lot of things to patch it up. I mean, you know, from health insurance to labor standards and minimum wages to improving unemployment insurance to child care, to full political rights, urban policies about housing, battling the expansion of economic segregation through gentrification processes, that is also moving people of color outside of the more affluent, the more desirable neighborhoods and resegregating our cities. So I do think that we need policies that look at that, that push against that. I think we need policies that push against the resegregation of public education in the K-12 system. And I think that we need policies that also transform universities from these machines of inequality that they are right now. But it's kind of like in every domain that I'm thinking, every domain. And so I wouldn't put economics first, is what I guess I'm saying. But I would it is part of the policy package.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:59] But I mean, just to finish that thought policy is the key to getting any of these problems unwound, even to make a start on them. And that in itself cuts against the very notion of the American identity that you were just talking about, which embraces the idea that at the end of the day, the free market can solve anything. And I mean, that is a fundamental belief that cuts across class and race and politics. People believe this notion that opportunity will resolve everything. And I mean, you know, that would be nice if it was true. But we have a couple hundred years to show that doesn't really resolve everything. We do actually need legislation. We need creativity and some government role. And I think that's a huge stumbling block for the kind of people that you're interviewing in Kentucky and Nebraska.

Eduardo Porter [00:24:42] I mean, yeah, I mean, free markets. It's one of those concepts that do not really exist in the real world.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:51] It turns out there's no such thing.

Eduardo Porter [00:24:53] There's no such thing. At first for the point that you mentioned is that they live embedded in a set of institutions that we actually have to build the design and then maintain. And enforce. But also, I mean, just an experience of the United States, it's a little bit like this notion of America being a democracy. The American economy kind of being driven by a free market is another kind of big fallacy. You know, we have all sorts of policies that try to stymie free markets in the service of corporate or entrenched interests. You know, so like over the last 30 years, we have pretty much decimated antitrust policy, which has allowed for the emergence of very, very large firms that dominate their markets. And just now we're starting to think maybe we shouldn't have done that? You know, but that's not like, you know, the operation of free markets in a way that is from policy actually moving against the guarantee of more competitive market.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:49] That's right. That's why in the sort of myth busting habit that we're in, in this conversation, whenever someone says that a system is broken, I like to remind them that more often than not, it's working as designed.

Eduardo Porter [00:26:04] That's right. Yeah, exactly.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:06] Well, Eduardo Porter, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Eduardo Porter [00:26:11] Thank you, guys. This was a lot of fun. I hope it worked for you.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:13] Definitely.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:21] That was Eduardo Porter, a New York Times journalist and the author of American Poison. He also co-hosts a podcast called The Pie.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:30] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group podcast network visit democracygroup.com to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:55] You know, Eduardo Porter was in prime myth busting mode in our conversation, and I think that the one thing we can take away from his book and all that he writes for The New York Times is that we have to be honest with ourselves about the relationship between inequality and democracy. And we have to be honest with

ourselves about the fact that we have not created or maintained the systems that we purport to believe in.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:22] Yeah, I mean, one of the things that I take away from his work is this notion that until we are willing to begin to embrace both our history but also a new American identity, with all of the faults and the flaws that we know about, we're really not going to be able to address them in any kind of sustained policy way. But I like the idea that if we could begin to talk about America as a democracy that is unfinished, that is never been fulfilled, or as a marketplace that is filled with obstacles to achievement, obstacles to opportunity, once we can begin with that as a kind of baseline, then it becomes much more appealing to talk about the ways to fix it. What are the policy solutions for income inequality? What are the policy solutions for segregation in public housing and in suburbanization? These things are real. That's where individual lives can be changed. And I think rather than being afraid, I welcome his myth busting so that we can actually get on to the business of fixing democracy.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:23] Yeah, I mean, hey myth busting is what we all want to do and wish we could do better. And look, the United States just came through a series of really deep shocks starting in 2001 when our vulnerabilities to the global systems we've built were made all too clear, continuing through the economic collapse of the George W. Bush years. Watching what happened in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina and seeing just how incompetent this elaborate American power had become. And then trying our best to rebuild for a few years, only to see our deepest, most ancient flaws and sins flex themselves to the point where they carried Donald Trump into power and then, without any shame to watch Donald Trump and his most devoted followers just directly assault American democracy to the point where they openly advocated for an ethno state. And, you know, we should be angry and we should be motivated. And we really have to take the lessons of the work of people like Eduardo Porter and say, look, this is an economic reform program and a social reform program and a philosophical reform program. But, man, we just all need to wake up and face the gravity of the situation.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:41] I'll just add that one of the other myths that he took on was the melting pot myth. That is another thing that we're all taught in school, that America is a melting pot. Whoever you are, wherever you come from, you come here and you lose all of that identity, or at least you can subsume it if you choose to in this glorious, multicolored tapestry. Once again, he shows that a melting pot basically has worked for white people. It has not worked very well for people of color. And that the social safety net, you know, when white legislators invented the social safety net, then they became reluctant to share it with people of color at the bottom of the economic ladder. So the melting pot has kind of frozen and it has stopped melting. So figuring out the intersection between our past, our history and our need for wise communal solutions to these everyday problems, that's where the conjuncture really is. That's where our political life is converging. And I'm optimistic, but I have no doubt about the scale of the problem.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:43] That's all we have this week on Democracy in Danger. Next time, we will talk to our colleague Jim Ryan.

Jim Ryan [00:30:50] Not just students have been involved in activism. Faculty have been involved in it as well.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:55] He's the president of the University of Virginia and he will be here to talk about the role of education in fostering a healthy democracy.

Jim Ryan [00:31:02] Living wage, for example, or admission of DACA students and undocumented students. Has that helped? Yeah, absolutely, insofar as it brings attention to the issue.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:17] In the meantime, don't be a stranger, shoot us a tweet @DinDpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast. Let us know what you think about racial justice and economic inequality in America and take a moment to visit our home page DinDanger.org and make sure to subscribe to our show on your favorite audio app. Do Your Part to save democracy. Leave us a review and a few stars.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:42] Democracy in Danger is produced by Roberto Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:50] 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. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast Network of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:32:08] And I'm Will Hitchcock. Please join us again next time.