

Tanya Domey: Hi, this is Tanya Domey. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Philip Kasinitz is the Presidential Professor of Sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He specializes in immigration, ethnicity, race relations, urban social life, and the nature of contemporary cities. Welcome to the Thought Project podcast, Professor Kasinitz.

Philip K.: Thanks for inviting me.

Tanya Domey: You are an expert on immigration. When Donald Trump made "illegal immigration" his first [inaudible 00:01:09] of politics in his 2016 Presidential campaign, did you imagine he would upend US immigration policy to the extent that we've witnessed in the past nearly two years?

Philip K.: No, I'm afraid that like everybody else who claims some expertise in this area, I was caught my surprise at the degree of ferocity, and just how central immigration became as an issue. I mean, up until this time, there had been various forces, mostly from the right, that had tried to make a bigger issue of immigration. But until relatively recently, most Americans, those who believe we have too many immigrants, those who believe that we don't, never rated it as a particularly high priority issue. And what's really happened the last few years, and particularly since the 2016 Presidential campaign is, it's really been much more prominent, in terms of public opinion, and just on the national policy agenda.

Tanya Domey: Yes. From the minute he began his campaign, he demonized Mexicans, calling them criminals and rapists, and really pre-judged and polarized really, the electorate on this question, did he not?

Philip K.: Absolutely. And I think one of the interesting, and in some ways horrifying, parts of that is the degree to which there's been a conflation of immigrants, with undocumented immigrants, with criminal. And the whole idea of illegal immigration has really been something that they've focused on, the Trump Administration has focused on, in an attempt to essentially, blur the line between migration and criminality.

Tanya Domey: Indeed, indeed.

Philip K.: What's really strange about that, of course, is that actual undocumented immigration is fallen quite dramatically. So, in some ways, this is sort of a chasing fantasies and phantoms kind of issue.

Tanya Domey: I mean, that was antecedent to his campaign, correct?

Philip K.: Exactly.

Tanya Domey: That occurred during the Obama Administration, and Obama deported probably the most people at that point in US history. Is that not correct?

Philip K.: Yeah, and I believe it's still true, actually. The Trump Administration has actually arrested more people than they were doing in the Obama Administration, apprehended more undocumented immigrants. They haven't actually deported that many ... Well, they've deported quite a few, but less than Obama did at his height, which was 2012, in part out of sheer incompetence. They really haven't, the cases have not been proceeding that quickly. But as a result, we have more people in immigration detention than we ever did before.

Tanya Domey: Right. So, with regard to these policy changes, they include the very unpopular child separation policy, that appears at this point to have morphed into longer detentions of families altogether, with people in horrible conditions. These dog cages that have been described and photographs. The cutback in the number of H-1B Visas. The cap of refugees, the all-time low number allowed to enter the United States at 30,000, that the Secretary of State asserted was due to "the daunting operational reality" of addressing humanitarian crises involving people who have to claim asylum in the United States. That combination is rather breathtaking, isn't it?

Philip K.: It is. And I would also throw in the elimination, or attempts to eliminate temporary protective services for large groups of people. Now, that's recently been stopped by the courts. But we don't know for how long.

Tanya Domey: Like domestic violence, the gang issue?

Philip K.: Well, also, TPS, Temporary Protective Services, is also the status that's usually used when you have people who are in the country, who are legally deportable, but there's good reason not to deport them right now.

Tanya Domey: Like the Haitians, for example.

Philip K.: Exactly. So, after the hurricane, after the earthquake, Haitians were in a situation where the best thing the United States could do, in terms of coming to the aid of Haitians after the earthquake, was not to dump large numbers of impoverished deportees back on a country that had absolutely no capacity to absorb them at that moment.

Tanya Domey: Right.

Philip K.: Similarly, this has happened with coups and civil wars. There's a considerable South Sudanese population that have been granted temporary protective service, status, rather. I'm not even sure there is a functioning airport in South Sudan. I don't know how you would actually do the deportation.

Tanya Domey: Right. I actually have worked there, and it's the most underdeveloped country on the face of the earth, and it's in the middle of a civil war.

Philip K.: Exactly.

Tanya Domey: An ongoing civil war.

Philip K.: So, if you are a student, or someone who's on a tourist visa or whatever else, in a situation like that, your visa has expired, you're supposed to go home, you can't go home. So, Temporary Protective Services was a convenient way, rather than say every single claim, like you would do with an asylum claim and individually do it, to take this whole category of people. Let's put them in a status where they can work, they can stay here, they are not illegal, but at the same time, we are not granting them permanent residence in the United States.

Tanya Domey: Right.

Philip K.: So, it's a very convenient thing that administrations have. And the problem with it has been, particularly in the case of Haiti and Central America, which is the bulk of the people, is sometimes these crises aren't really temporary.

Tanya Domey: Right, they are chronic.

Philip K.: Exactly. When, exactly, is Haiti or Honduras going to be in a position to reincorporate these folks? And after 10, 15 years, shouldn't there be some mechanism after these people have made lives in the United States, to allow them to stay and to legalize their stay? Instead, we've been going in the opposite direction, and the administration's been trying to revoke that status of people have been here, very often, for decades.

Tanya Domey: In the case of the South Sudanese, we are talking about over two generations of war.

Philip K.: Exactly. There are cases where legitimately, temporary protective status is temporary. Kuwait. Saddam invaded Kuwait. There were Kuwaitis here on business visas, tourist visas. It didn't make sense to tell them to go home in the middle of the war. Grant them the status, and then just allow them to live here and make a living here while we're waiting. And then, Saddam was no longer in Kuwait, you can lift the status, they can go home. But that's actually the less typical situation. The more typical situation is the one like Honduras, where it's not clear when the problem is gonna clear up, and people have to live their lives.

Tanya Domey: It's really troubling. I mean, these announcements dribble out. Every once in a while you'll hear an announcement. The most recent indicators appear really, that the Trump Administration really wants all immigration to cease, unless your white and you're educated, able-bodied, educated. So, this is a rhetorical

question, but is it a moment that we should return the Statue of Liberty to France?

Philip K.: Or perhaps turn it around so it faces New Jersey? I don't know.

Tanya Domey: Exactly.

Philip K.: Exactly. Well, I think that the, like so much about this administration, policy's filled with its own internal contradictions. There's been a lot of discussion of the idea that we should have higher-educated immigrants, and that we should select immigrants mildly basis of human capital.

Tanya Domey: Like the Canadian-

Philip K.: Like the Canadian system.

Tanya Domey: The Canadian system, right. I'm using asterisks here, to our listeners audience, because they, too, accept lots of refugees-

Philip K.: Right.

Tanya Domey: ... in Canada.

Philip K.: Plus, on a per capita basis, they accept many more immigrants than we do. And immigration is generally, popular in Canada. That having been said, the idea that you're going to adjust the system to take in more highly-educated, high human capital immigrants almost certainly means that you're not gonna take them from Europe, or white countries, quote/unquote white countries, because many of the best well-educated, the best-educated, best-qualified, most skilled immigrants are coming from some of the poorest countries. Nigeria's one of the biggest contributors of very highly-educated immigrants to the US. India's the-

Tanya Domey: India.

Philip K.: ... the obvious case, where we are taking more and more ... basically, highly-educated, highly-skilled, highly-successful Norwegians have no reason to want to come to the US.

Tanya Domey: Exactly. And the other thing that they are doing, and you're talking about these contradictions, is with Indians and Pakistanis, for example, like doctors that were on H-1B visas to go to places like North Dakota, Montana, where you need doctors in the rural areas.

Philip K.: Right.

Tanya Domey: They are not, now they have changed the policy where they are not issuing a spousal visa.

Philip K.: Yeah.

Tanya Domey: So that's a disincentive to somebody who's a doctor, or a scientist, or somebody who works in Silicon Valley, not to come.

Philip K.: Exactly. And what this means, although it's obviously intended to discourage people from coming, it means that the most highly-educated, most mobile potential migrants in the world are precisely the people that we are competing for, are going to decide that, well, maybe Canada makes sense. Maybe Northern Europe makes sense. Maybe Australia makes sense. I mean, we are effectively gonna lose the competition for the ... One of the keys to America's success over the years has been, as somebody once put it, we get the first round draft pick of every country on the planet. And that's becoming much less true.

Things like the cutbacks on family reunification pieces, which is something the Trump Administration's advocated in becoming more skills based, in terms of how the visas are issued, large numbers of people are going to be very discouraged from coming here, highly-skilled people, if that means that they'll never be able to bring their aged parents, or they'll never be able to bring close relatives. That's a real disincentive.

Tanya Domey: So, this goes back to my original question. I think they really don't want to have any substantial immigration. They just don't really want it.

Philip K.: I think that's probably true. I think they certainly, most of the plans that have come out of the White House have basically, meant the almost complete elimination of family reunification, a serious crackdown on what's now undocumented, unauthorized migration, and keeping the number of highly-skilled migrants about the same, though also cutting back on the H programs, the skill-based programs.

Tanya Domey: Right, skill-based.

Philip K.: So that is really, what it amounts to as a whole, is a radical cutback. I don't think it would be possible to ever cut back-

Tanya Domey: Completely.

Philip K.: ... to zero.

Tanya Domey: Completely.

Philip K.: I think American business would never tolerate that. But the need for skilled personnel, in fact the need for unskilled personnel is so high, that we are unlikely to get to that point. But again, I'm not even 100% sure that it's being thought through quite at that level. I think that this is more about domestic American politics than it really is about-

Tanya Domey: About whether or not an immigration system works.

Philip K.: Exactly. I don't think anyone is thinking all that much about the immigration system, itself. I mean, if you look at all the attention that the Southern Border is getting right now, and obviously, the stories coming out of the Southern Border are horrendous. But the number of undocumented people coming across the Southern Border is really quite low. Net migration to Mexico by most estimates, has been negative for really, since the Great Recession. It's come back a little in the last two years, because a non-employment rate under 4%, you would expect it to come back a little.

But it's really been the lowest it's been in a very long time. And the Central Americans coming across, often with small children, and in some cases as unaccompanied minors, the stories are extremely dramatic. The stories are sometimes very heart-rending. And of course, there's great fear, in terms of some of these Central American youth, in terms of gang violence and things like that. But the total numbers are actually really quite trivial, compared to what the numbers were just a decade ago, in terms of regular Mexican labor migration. So, I think it's more symbolic than real.

Tanya Domey: I agree. It's a politically constructed crisis.

Philip K.: Exactly.

Tanya Domey: Without a doubt. So, speaking of immigration, this is connected, although sometimes people don't think about it. But connecting to the Decennial Census in 2020, the Administration has decided to place a question, they're attempting to place a question, I don't know if it's a done deal yet, with respect to, is the survey participant a citizen of the United States or not. What are they doing here, and to what consequence will this yield?

Philip K.: Well, the rationale that they're offering is deeply paradoxical. They're saying that you can actually enforce the Voting Rights Act without some knowledge of how many citizens there are. Now, this is the first time anyone had heard of this administration being a real strong advocate of the Voting Rights Act, or planning to have really aggressive Voting Rights Act enforcement, right?

But what it's probably really supposed to do is discourage noncitizens from answering the Census, and thus being counted when we count the population for apportionment, in terms of legislative districts. And that's a real, real problem. But it's very much a piece of the way, and this is not just the Trump Administration, frankly. I think this has been sort of Republican policy for quite some time at this point, is attempting to make a smaller electorate. I mean, essentially, given demographic changes in the United States, given increased urbanization, the Republican Party really is facing-

Tanya Domey: Extinction.

Philip K.: Well, extinction might be too strong.

Tanya Domey: Okay.

Philip K.: But a permanent minority party could be the problem.

Tanya Domey: Exactly. I mean, if the heart of your party are white men-

Philip K.: Right.

Tanya Domey: ... well-

Philip K.: ... or getting older.

Tanya Domey: ... or getting older, you're really not, and you're not expanding your party because you want to exclude all minorities.

Philip K.: Exactly. And if that's your strategy, well, you're got a few advantages, because there are ... The way, of course, the United States Senate functions and the way the Electoral College functions, gives considerable extra weight to under-populated, mostly white rural areas in the US.

Tanya Domey: Historically, slave states.

Philip K.: Historically, slave states, but also, I think a lot of the ... I mean, there are six states in the Upper Midwest, so 12 senators-

Tanya Domey: True.

Philip K.: ... from a place-

Tanya Domey: True. North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana.

Philip K.: Exactly.

Tanya Domey: Right, right.

Philip K.: Combine all six, you got less people than New York City. Actually, I think the bottom four are about the same population as Brooklyn. And this is a land mass that doesn't have a single one of the nation's 100 largest cities, doesn't have a major league sports franchise, doesn't have a symphony orchestra or jazz club worth discussing.

Tanya Domey: [inaudible 00:18:22]

Philip K.: But somehow, it covers up land mass bigger than Western Europe. And somehow, the empty quarter gets 12 senators. So, this is an enormous bias

that's built right into the system. That having been said, even with that, Democrats get more votes than Republicans very-

Tanya Domey:

Right.

Philip K.:

... consistently. In all the recent congressional elections, in the US Presidential election.

Tanya Domey:

And ultimately, have less representation.

Philip K.:

And have less representation, because of, well, gerrymandering to some degree, because of this bias it's built into the Constitution arrangements in the Senate.

Tanya Domey:

You also ... I would say, Phil, you also add in the Voter ID repression-

Philip K.:

Right.

Tanya Domey:

... which was principally, in Republican-controlled states. We are talking about 14 to 16 states. You make fewer people eligible to vote-

Philip K.:

Right.

Tanya Domey:

... by purging them from the voter registers.

Philip K.:

And in many ways, this is a, I think an underappreciated historical trend. Because if we think of the way in which, until recently, we told American history was often about an expanding electorate, right? It wasn't that we were perfect, or that we had, I mean, everyone recognized that "We the people" didn't mean all the people. But it starts out as white land-owning men, and then it becomes all white men, and then it becomes all white men and some African-Americans, and then it becomes the inclusion of women. And you have 18-year-olds.

There was a story that we told for a long time, of an imperfect but expanding conception of who the polity was. In recent decades, the Republican Party has quite openly, for the first time in a long time, embraced the idea of restricting the polity. "We need less voters, and we need ... So, ways of discouraging poor people from voting, ways of making voter," and no other democracy in the world makes the voting is inconvenient as we do. "Let's make voting hard. Let's make naturalization take longer-

Tanya Domey:

Longer.

Philip K.:

... "and be more expensive-

Tanya Domey:

Exactly.

Philip K.: ... "than it used to be. Make more paperwork involved." All kinds of little strategies to effectively reduce the size of the polity, so the polity doesn't look like the population. And that's a very, very depressing and dangerous precedent for any democracy, is to have a polity that doesn't look like the population.

Tanya Domey: So then, you add in a question on the Census-

Philip K.: Right.

Tanya Domey: ... and-

Philip K.: And the most recent variant on this, because even with all of those things that have been going on for decades, the numbers, the demography, keeps moving in the other direction. So, here is yet another way of trying to discourage people who are not US citizens from not answering the Census at all. It's not a question of whether they say yes or no, it's a question that they won't even answer. We won't collect data on them.

Tanya Domey: So, that means that potentially, a city would get less funds for infrastructure, for schools, and hospitals, because not everybody's counted.

Philip K.: Right. We are gonna reduce the representation of those parts of the country that have large numbers of immigrants, basically. We're gonna not count the people who are not US citizens. Now, it's pretty clear the Constitution didn't envision this. I mean, from the very beginning, the Constitution made it very clear that the count was supposed to include people who were not citizens, who were not voting. That's the reason they counted slaves, though they only factored them in for representation at a 3/5 level.

But all persons included all kinds of people that the framers had absolutely no intention of letting vote. But I do think that there has been all along, a very clear idea that you simply needed to have an accurate count of the number of people, if only to know what services were needed, what services were required, and also to grant some sort of equal representation. Again, in the distant past, that was often used by, for example, slave owners, to maximize their representation. Slaves don't vote, but they do count in the 3/5 ratio, in terms of the population.

But here, we're reversing now. We're trying to say, "Let's have fewer people from all of those places counted. Let's pretend that the population's smaller than it really is because we want to eliminate, we want to reduce the power of the parts of the country that have more immigrants.

Tanya Domey: So, going back to your point making it smaller, the electorate smaller, in fact, when we look into the future, according to the demographics, we are expected to become a majority minority country sometime in the 2040s. And so, as you said, all the data's going the opposite direction. And so, this issue keeps spiking

up in discussion, in the public square, about, "What's going to happen when white people are the minority?"

Philip K.: Yeah. And, I have to say, that may be the single most overrated demographic fact in current American discourse. Obviously, it's important that the demography of the country's changing. But we really need to take a deep breath here. And our colleague, Richard Alba, of course, has written very convincingly on this. But it's funny, I mean, to some degree, the Multicultural Left and the Chicken Little Right have both kind of co-inspired and agreed to exaggerate the importance of non-whites becoming 51% of the population. The first thing you have to ask yourself is, "Well, so what?" I mean, obviously, if African-Americans were the majority of the population, that would be a huge cultural shift in American life. But they are not going to be.

Tanya Domey: Right, right.

Philip K.: Basically, whites would continue to be a plurality for a very, very long time.

Tanya Domey: We're talking about multicultural, I mean multiracial-

Philip K.: Right.

Tanya Domey: ... where white people, where races are mixing.

Philip K.: Right.

Tanya Domey: They're intermarriage. The intermarriage, it's reflected in the millennial cohort. It's the most multiracial generation in US history.

Philip K.: Exactly. And that's a new development, no doubt. But the notion that somehow it reverses all, the panic that somehow this is this major cultural [inaudible 00:25:16] change for American whites, there's a certain white fragility involved in all of that. I mean, if you think about it, one of the findings that's most consistent is that ... Well, almost all of these demographic projections are based on counting all people descended from folks who now consider themselves Latino or Asian, as Latino or Asian, even if they are also descended from whites. Because the rates of intermarriage have grown substantially.

Tanya Domey: And as Richard says, many times, people who are multiracial, they usually yield to the white, living in a white way.

Philip K.: I'm not sure I agree with him 100% on that.

Tanya Domey: Okay, but that is this point. That is the point he makes.

Philip K.: Exactly. One of the arguments that he's made is that people who are of mixed Asian White ancestry, or people who are of mixed Latino White ancestry, in

terms of most of the things that are easy for a socio-scientist to measure, look more like Whites than they do like Asians or Latinos. I mean, that they're growing up in a largely White communities, that they are, in terms of income, in terms of the kind of jobs they have, in terms of their location in the country, they look a lot more like the White majority, which will eventually become a White plurality, except when you're counting them in this way. Now, people who are of mixed African-American White ancestry. And that's interesting.

Tanya Domey: Right.

Philip K.: They tend to continue to look more like other African-Americans. In some ways, the one drop rule continues to be employed practically, for most African-Americans. Probably not all. Social class has a lot to do with it. But I think that's generally the case in the African-American community. It's not the case for the other groups. And so, the issue really, is to what extent does somebody with Ecuadorian grandparent in the year 2045 consider themselves to be Latino?

And maybe they will. I mean, it's hard to know what that will mean. Certainly, Donald Trump seems to be creating situations under which maybe they will consider themselves Latino. Again, to what extent would Asian Americans, or people who are half or quarter Asian American at that point consider themselves to be a distinct minority group? Well, Donald Trump may in fact, create a situation where that is the case. But it's hardly the most likely outcome, nor the one I would bet on. I suspect that what we are seeing is a lot more blurriness within those categories.

Tanya Domey: Exactly. And I think that, while we are obsessed with our American experience right now, we're looking, all of us are looking at this with horror, and we're obsessed with it, and we are about 27 days from a significant election. In many ways, this is going on in Europe, for example, where EU countries like Hungary, and coming up through the Southern Balkans, entering into the Schengen Zone, there is a, sort of an ongoing contested issue around immigration in the EU. And in some ways, they are similar to us, and in some ways they're not. But why don't you tell our listeners sort of, what's going on with the Dutch, and the Scandinavians, and maybe even the French?

Philip K.: Well, it's certainly true that many of the same ideas that you see the rise of a kind of populist nationalism is occurring in a great many different countries. We certainly see it in the US, but we see it in most of Western Europe, most of Northern Europe, and increasingly, we are seeing it in Eastern Europe, as well. Paradoxically, it's occurring in places that have incorporated huge numbers of new migrants. It's also occurring in some places like Hungary and Poland, which have actually incorporated very few.

So, in some ways they're real common themes that you can see. And one of the things that makes the present moment perhaps, different from the past is that just as immigrant activists in all of these countries are often in touch with each

other, via the Internet, and ideas within migrant communities or ideas within other religious communities, or ideas within Islamic communities, for example, now bounce around the various countries because of the Internet. So does right-wing populism bounce around. So, Pepe the Frog, as a symbol of right-wing nationalism in France, starts to enter into discourse in the United States. There's all sorts of ways in which ideas now float out of their normal context and end up in politics and other places.

That having been said, there really are very different political histories here. And I do think one thing to bear in mind is that despite the negative reaction to large numbers of migrants coming into Europe that we've certainly seen the last couple of years, Europe has still admitted far more refugees than the US has. And I think it's important to have a little bit of, I'm not sure empathy is the right word, but at least understanding of the fact that, here we've cut down the total number of refugees to 30,000. And Germany, with a population of less than a third of ours, has incorporated over a million. So, a little empathy, just for the fact that the Europeans really are, at least in terms of Middle Eastern and African refugees coming, and the Syrian crisis-

Tanya Domey: Even in Belgrade, my area of research, they've announced, the government's announced, that 300 Syrian children started school this fall in Serbian schools.

Philip K.: And they're in a country that doesn't ... Unlike the United States, or France, or Great Britain, this is a country that has a very little tradition of immigrant incorporation.

Tanya Domey: Absolutely.

Philip K.: So, I think that's one of the key differences, I think is important to look at, is this is a place that has, there are now places incorporating immigrants that have very little historical record of how you do this, and very little infrastructure for doing it. And then there are other places that have developed a fairly advanced infrastructure over time. There's also questions of, people are concerned about incorporation, and do people integrate into our society or our culture, which automatically raises the next question of, "Exactly, well, what is our culture, anyway?" And I think one of the problems in the United States is, that's a really hard question to answer.

Tanya Domey: Because we are so multicultural.

Philip K.: Precisely. And so, in Germany, there's a great debate over what they call the Leitkultur, the notion of a leading culture. And about 20 years ago, a certain conservative politician started to propose this idea of, "Well, we should welcome immigrants, but they should accept the German Leitkultur." Eventually, of course, this came to the point of, well, exactly what does the German Leitkultur consist of?

Tanya Domey: Right.

Philip K.: And some of the things are values that would seem unassailable, respect for the rights of the individual, equality for women, respect for religious freedom. It's kind of hard to see that as a traditional German value, but okay, if they want to endorse it, fine. But there's also things like Christian Heritage, and Oktoberfest, and which soccer team you root for. Goethe and Bach get listed as elements of the Leitkultur. I'm not sure most Americans would agree on that kind of cultural paraphernalia.

And so, you do have, these things play differently in different situations. I mean, right-wing populace in the Netherlands often point to the lack of tolerance of LGBT communities and opposition to gay marriage among fundamentalist Muslims as a reason that Muslims are not assimilable into Dutch society. Well, American right-wing populists would have a very hard time seeing that as the primary reason for rejecting Muslims.

Tanya Domey: Without a doubt.

Philip K.: Yeah. In France, for example, the idea of kind of a broad secularism and barring obviously, religious dress is kind of broadly popular, including, to some degree, among the left.

Tanya Domey: Exactly. I mean, the idea of being French means that you don't cover your head. This is sort of the discourse-

Philip K.: Right.

Tanya Domey: ... of France at this moment.

Philip K.: Whereas, we'd have a hard time, I think, accepting ... Even conservatives in the United States have a sufficiently Libertarian tradition that if the state starts to tell people how to dress in public, they would probably, an awful lot of Right-wing people in the US would consider that a real big governmental overreach.

Tanya Domey: Without a doubt. So, thank you for this really interesting conversation. And this conversation can probably change after the midterm elections. We'll have to have you back.

Philip K.: Indeed. I'd very much like that.

Tanya Domey: Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Presidential Professor Phil Kasinitz of the Graduate Center CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domey. Tune in next week.

