Tanya Domi:
Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of 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.

Luke Elliot-Negri is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the Graduate Center CUNY. He is author of several articles about industrial unionism and his co-author of a policy report on Connecticut's paid sick leave days. His dissertation analyzes the history and prospects of the New York-based Working Families Party against the backdrop of literature on American exceptionalism with respect to party formation. And he has co-authored a book project about social movement success and failure, which is now under review at Oxford University Press. Welcome to the Thought Project, Luke Elliott-Negri.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Thanks so much for inviting me to be on it. I'm just excited to get to chat.

Tanya Domi:
Well, I am too. And you have edified me to the point to tell me that yes, while you're a doctoral candidate in sociology, you're a wanna-be political scientist and historian. I admire that ambition, and actually, I have somewhat of an understanding of it too, in my own life.

But anyway, this is terrific to have you on. You are a multi-hatted person at the Graduate Center. You're not only a PhD candidate, but you're also a leader in PSC CUNY. And we're going to talk about the Professional Staff Congress and the budget cuts that are facing not only our union, but the entire city and public employees at large. But first of all, I wanted to congratulate you on your being awarded a grant from the Washington Center for Equitable Growth in DC. You're working with professor Ruth Milkman, doing research on collective labor action in businesses where work has been more dangerous, given the coronavirus pandemic. And what's also interesting to me about this grant research is that you're sharing the grant with Columbia University faculty, Suresh Naidu and Adam Reich. You and Professor Milkman will work with them in conducting some surveys about the role customers might play into source of support and power for workers who strike in working conditions. Can you tell us more about this research grant, and where you see it going, and what are aiming for in outcomes?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
I would be happy to talk about it. I'm really excited about the project. I should say it's a continuation of some ongoing work that wound up being, sadly, well-timed for this pandemic. So, previously, Ruth and I, Adam Reich, and also his then graduate student, Kathleen Griesbach, I think I'm pronouncing her name properly, who's now at a post-doc in Europe. But the four of us ran a survey of food delivery workers, and have published a couple papers about the experience of work at Instacart, specifically, and are still doing some work off of that data, but we collected that not long before the coronavirus pandemic kicked off. And in fact, had written the initial grant proposal to CEG before coronavirus started. And of course, when the lockdowns began, how people accessed food became just a much more salient issue.

Instacart, for example, hired, and I use the term hire loosely because, of course, Instacart uses independent contractors, not traditional standard W2 employees, but half a million new delivery workers at the peak of the pandemic, to meet the demand that many consumers had to have groceries delivered to their homes rather than to have to go to the grocery store themselves. And so, we worked with CEG and reworked some of what we were proposing to do. And so, at this point, and we're still
finalizing the survey instrument and the experimental designs that are embedded in them. We're first going to run a survey on a representative sample of just consumers.

So, basically, of the full US population. And we'll embed a number of experiments in there that expose the survey respondents to different types of workers, essentially, with different grievances in the workplace, and to see how experimentally manipulating those conditions changes their level of support for workers. And then we're going to run a worker survey. So, of workers, both in grocery stores and also who do food delivery work, and we're going to report to those workers real levels of support registered by consumers, and then test whether exposure to those real levels of support changes workers' interest in engaging in collective action in the workplace. It's a dual survey using the results of one to inform the experimental designs embedded in [crosstalk 00:05:33].

Tanya Domi:
For the next one. For the next survey. Very interesting, and how fortuitous is that, unfortunately, that you'd started that research pre-pandemic? There's probably a lot to be learned here and I personally feel guilty. I won't do it. I won't pay for that kind of delivery. It just makes me feel badly, personally. I feel badly about doing that.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
I understand very much what you mean. I've thought of the dual emotional concepts of guilt and gratitude for the kind of conflicted feelings that consumers have. Even going to a grocery store, I mean, especially at the peak of the lockdown when unemployment was so horrible. Suresh actually tweeted about this. But that really what was going on for grocery workers was a form of bonded labor, I'm sad to say, because the labor market was a mess. You can't quit your job in most states and be eligible for unemployment. And so, if you're a working person in a grocery store during the peak of the pandemic, your only option was to keep working, or else have no money. [crosstalk 00:06:38] There was not an alternative in the labor market through unemployment. And so, setting aside the food delivery piece of it, I mean, I will say for myself, even feel those feelings going into a grocery store where those of us who work at least at CUNY and in higher education-

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Most of us had the opportunity to work from home. Obviously, grocery store workers did not have that option.

Tanya Domi:
The choice. Right. I find it interesting also that, of course, the Washington Center for Equitable Growth, which is really well regarded and respected, that includes among its staff the imminently regarded Heather Boushey, who's spoken at the Graduate Center, an economist well-known for her work on income inequality. It's interesting that they funded a number of people, including your team. And it seems that they're very strongly focusing on income inequality in general. They really lead.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Yeah, no. CEG, I'm just thrilled to be funded by them and agree completely that they're just a really excellent outfit that does a range of really good work. And I mean, I think you're absolutely right that I think they fund work on inequality. And then I think specifically here, we're investigating what are the forms of organization that lead to average people having the power and capacity to change inequality? I mean, that is often an under addressed question.

Tanya Domi:
True.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
It's one thing to identify inequality and how it works, and then it's another thing to do serious research on means by which people would be able to change that inequality. So, I think we're trying to get at that here.

Tanya Domi:
Well, it's important that you get the data, but I'd also like to have your opinion in general, that I would propose that does not the pandemic expose just gross inequities among us and between all of us in our society. And does this actually present an opportunity in this crisis to really shape shift a future that looks very different from the present?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
You're absolutely right. I think the pandemic has, you and I are not the first people to say this, but it came to me early on, certainly. It exposes existing inequalities that it was easier to brush under the rug, absent the crisis. It amplifies, I would say it makes worse, some of those crises. I mean, I just scanned through a New York Times article not that long ago about something like 1.5 million New Yorkers, I should be cautious before I cite this because I don't remember the details of the article.

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
But accessing food through food pantries, we're in a moment where it's not just exposure.

Tanya Domi:
Hunger is among us.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
It is amplification of those existing crises. And I think you're right. I mean, in my view, the nature of crisis is that it provides opportunities for people of all political stripes to reshape the society. I think crises are contested, and I think it's very possible that, to be blunt, right or center forces may take best advantage of this crisis. But there's also the possibility that those of us concerned with inequality and with political participation, emancipation, that we are able to shape this crisis and use this moment to create a more just and equitable society. I hope that's what we're able to.
That's great. Well, we'll have you back when your research is done, so we can hear about it and the listeners can hear what you've found and what your recommendations are. But given the fact that you believe that you are a wanna-be political scientist and historian, I was really surprised to find out that your dissertation is going to focus on, is focusing on, the Working Families Party, part of fusion politics in New York state. I know they are present in some other states as well. You've written two op-eds at least in the last couple of years on the role of the Working Families Party.

And it just so happens that I got a text from them and I know Saturday they had a conference. I mean, they presented, I guess, their views on where things are politically right now. I wasn't able to listen to the whole presentation, but what compelled you to focus from a sociological standpoint, which I'm sure is going to be intersectional, on the Working Families Party? And when I've told colleagues around the country, or friends even abroad because everybody goes, "Oh, yeah, the United States has two parties only." And I say, "Well, not in New York state. Not in New York State." So, talk to me about this dissertation and in essence, what's your thesis?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Sure. So, there is a long literature that crosses over sociology and political science, but that really is, in some fundamental ways, housed in sociology, that really asks the question that you pointed to, which is why does the United States have such an enduringly two-party system?

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Or the question is sometimes phrased as, why is there no socialism in the United States? I think those two questions are related, although distinct. And it goes back to, Marx and Engels wrote each other letters about the nature of the US party system. And so, those questions emerge from those mid-19th century debates, and they're live in the sociology literature to this day in top journals. So, Barry Island's recent piece, for example, addresses the question of why no labor party in the United States, which is again a slightly distinct but related question.

And so, that literature and those questions are what animated my interest in studying the Working Families Party. And in many way, I view the project, and this is where I appreciate you introducing me as a sociologist who is an amateur historian and political scientist. On the historian piece, I mean, I really wanted to just tell, in detail, the story of the Working Families Party. And so, in the descriptive sense, my dissertation is an accounting of New York politics from the late 1990's through 2018 or so, but against the backdrop of that literature.

And so, my analytic thinking is that deeply studying a single case of a political third party is a way of evaluating a lot of the claims that are made in that literature, in fine grain, historical detail, around a single organization. So, you just see in the chapters of the dissertation, which exists at least in rough form, the party organization grappling with the tensions and dilemmas that the US party system, that it's history, that it's culture presents to a party organization that is trying to just exist and to get things done. So, that's a bit of a summary of the point of it and where it came from.

Tanya Domi:
It's interesting that in both your op-eds you go back to this major turning point around reforming the Rockefeller Drug Laws. And it just so happens, you probably know that Professor Michael Fortner wrote
a book on the adoption of those laws in political science. So, but this is a turning point in how the
Working Families Party emerged. Can you talk about that for a minute?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Yeah. So, I think, go ahead.

Tanya Domi:
I was just going to say, those laws are a seminal, there's like a line that drawn that says, "This was before
the Rockefeller Laws, it's after the Rockefeller Laws." And I think the Rockefeller Laws are emblematic of
the larger issue about War on Drugs under Nixon, for example. Right?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Yeah, that's actually right. I think in some ways they kicked off that era of the war on drugs.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
And so, for the Working Families Party, from the party's inception, there was a central focus on, I would
say, class or what we might call economic issues, and also some recognition of intersectionality with a
specific analysis, I think, in the organizations founders, that race and racism are defining features of the
United States of America. And so, it wasn't by accident, actually in the same year, that they organized
under a Republican governor and under a Republican-controlled state Senate, to raise the minimum
wage above the federal for the first time in the state's history. This was in 2004. But in that very same
cycle, they recruited a young attorney to primary the Albany District Attorney, to run in a primary race
against him, and turn that race into a referendum on the Rockefeller Drug Laws.

And I have to say, talking to people who conceived of and executed that race in 2004, they did
did not think they were going to win. I mean, they thought they were going to politicize the Rockefeller Drug
Laws issues through this race, but they absolutely crushed the incumbent in the race. I don't have the
percentages in front of me, but it was a two to one margin. I mean, everyone on both sides were truly
shocked. And so, 2004 was a big year for the WFP. I mean, in many ways, they came on the stage as an
outfit that could produce significant state-level policy changes. And the way that the Rockefeller Drug
Laws were changed, and this is, again, under a Republican administration, and the governor's mansion,
and also a Republican-controlled state Senate, but that race was so high salience that the legislature,
not completely, but made changes to the Rockefeller Drug Laws that year.

So, the race was in the fall, and by December, they were reforming those Drug Laws. And I think
it was, in part, the success of that race and, and incumbent elected officials, seeing that there had just
been a sea change in the consciousness around the War on Drugs and around these racist laws. In some
ways, I think, I call it [primary 00:16:59] for policy in the dissertation, primary for policy. But when you
have a successful primary race like that, that is unexpected to all sides of, the incumbent elected officials
get a little anxious and they think, "Geez, has the consciousness changed this much that I might lose my
next reelection if I don’t pivot on this issue?" And so, there was a threat, in some ways, to the entire
incumbent establishment through that one relatively small race, such that even relatively conservative
figures were willing to make changes to those laws.
Tanya Domi:
I think you've just seen a contemporary version of that through the Bronx, on the Bronx Machine during
the primary. I mean, it was just, I don't know how much the Working Families Party was involved, but it
was the Justice Democrats in the House of Representatives that endorsed Elliot Engel, that's my district,
gone down after 16 terms in the primary to Jamaal Bowman. And so, there seems to be some eruptions,
but I will say this, very quickly, the Working Family Party has really been in a tête-à-tête with the
governor for a number of years. It seems like, I would call that brutal political warfare, although not
necessarily seen, not visibly seen. But it is, when you read the reports, the journalists reporting on
Albany and the back and forth, the Cynthia Nixon race, all that, it was really tête-à-tête. That was
political warfare.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
Was it not?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Oh, my gosh. I mean, you are a sharp analyst of what's going on in New York. And I think on the first
point, just to say that the WFP and Justice Democrats work together is my understanding quite
collaboratively on the Jamaal Bowman race.

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
And as you're saying, that was quite successful and an echo of AOC, and it really does seem like-

Tanya Domi:
Well, Mr. Engel deserved to lose. He was never in the district, and Mr. Bowman defined him as such.
And it was a brilliant campaign, I have to say. Now, very quickly, because we can talk about this politics,
is there anything else you want to say about [crosstalk 00:19:16]?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Well, just to say that I think one, and this comes out in the dissertation, but one way to tell the story of
the Working Families Party is that there is a neat break line when Andrew Cuomo becomes the
Governor. There's the WFP before he was the Governor, and there's the WFP after he was the Governor.
And the terrain, that single election changed the terrain so substantially that I think, in some ways, it is a
different organization as a result of, as you were saying, the brutal, but relatively under the surface,
conflicts that have gone on between the organization [crosstalk 00:19:46].

Tanya Domi:
It's not visible. You have to be a complete politico interested in the inner Nicene warfare that was going
on. Of course, I'm fascinated by it. Cuomo is a boxer. He is a boxer, he's a political boxer. He's always
been that, his father was that. His father was more polished at it, let me just say that. Okay. I want to get in something here about your PSC hat, and I know you're a busy person. You are the labor representative for the PSC at the Graduate Center, and we're facing a truly, truly existential crisis that seems that it will take roost very soon, that there's not enough money, probably, to get through until the end of January for CUNY, according to reporting.

And the Governor's had CUNY on a monthly budget for salary. I don't know about how much on expenditures for other items. The New York Times has laid this case out very well. We all know that without further federal stimulus, cities and states around this country are facing the horrible reality that there's going to be massive public employee layoffs. Where are you with this? What can you tell our audience? We're all PSC members. We adore CUNY. We're committed to CUNY. What's your thoughts on this? Terrible problem.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
I have a lot to say, probably even more on this than on my dissertation.

Tanya Domi:
Wow. Okay.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
But I'll try to keep it brief. I have a lot of feelings about it.

Tanya Domi:
I'm sure you do.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
We've watched thousands of people pushed off the payrolls and adjunct faculty, and class sizes increase as a result, in a moment when we should be doing precisely the opposite. Let me step back and say what I understand to be going on. The legislature on, actually it was early April, passed the state operating budget, which includes the budget for the CUNY senior colleges, as well as the base aid to the community colleges. And that budget is still on the books. That budget is on the books as passed in the spring.

Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
However, there was new language introduced in that budget that had not existed in previous budgets, that has enabled the governor to withhold a portion of the budget, basically keeping it in the Division of the Budget Office, not releasing it to CUNY. And so, these 20% cuts that we've heard about, are essentially 20% cuts to the state allocation to the City University of New York. But they are, I don't know, I don't have a better word for it, but informal or impermanent cuts at this point. The money is being withheld.
They're not permanent yet.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
But the law as passed is still on the books. And so, we're in this just incredible limbo zone that has had very real effects on people's lives. And then on, of course, student's lives who are struggling to adapt to this all online environment as are the people teaching those classes.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
To get to, I mean, I want to differ a little bit with the analysis that has been out there. It's not the only analysis out there, but it's a dominant one, that the only hope is from Washington DC. I mean, I am ready to throw in a lot of time, energy, and money to these two Georgia primary runoffs for US Senate.

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
I mean, the Democrats may still end up in control of the US Senate if Democrats win these two races in Georgia, and that will increase the prospects in a substantial [crosstalk 00:00:23:20].

Tanya Domi:
For federal stimulus.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
For federal stimulus.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
However, New York state has an advantage that I'm sorry to say, states like, say, North Dakota, do not have. We have an incredibly wealthy tax base in this state. We have-

Tanya Domi:
[crosstalk 00:23:36] pay personal income tax.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Right. But we have more than, am I right, more than 100 billionaires. I mean, the wealth and the income in this state are just unbelievable. And with relatively minor tweaks to the tax code, you could easily generate the revenue to cover these shortfalls and frankly, to generate new revenue beyond them. And I have to say, by the way, we learned recently from a report from the Comptroller's Office, that the
deficit was not nearly as bad as it was projected earlier in the year, and maybe $5 billion less than expected.

Tanya Domi:
Okay.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
And part of this is that folks who have higher income jobs are, by and large, still employed and working remotely. And so, that chunk of the tax space is still substantially intact. And a lot of the jobs that have been lost are at the lower end of the income spectrum.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
And so, these initial panics about the state of the budget were somewhat warranted, but not as warranted as we thought. And again, we have the capacity in this state to basically run our own new deal style programs, given the tax base that's here. So, it's not to ignore DC. I mean, I am throwing in on the Senate races in Georgia.

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Idea that we, the only hope for New York is in Washington DC, is just, I would say, empirically not accurate. And there is a big revenue coalition, including the PSC as a part of it, that many other unions and progressive community organizations that are pushing for progressive tax increases to cover and exceed the shortfall that we see in this cycle. And I have to say, I'm optimistic that we're going to do that. I think it is politically not viable in a moment of this level of economic catastrophe, not to increase taxes on the wealthy. I mean, I'm sure-

Tanya Domi:
And speaking of which, did not the Senate majority leader, did she not say that they're going to keep looking at that, that there is a democratic majority in the Assembly and in the Senate, and that they can potentially override Cuomo.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
We [crosstalk 00:25:40].

Tanya Domi:
Is that not true?

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Even the Governor himself said he would look at tax increases. I mean, he has been much more resistant than either of the leaders, Andrea Stewart-Cousins or Carl Heastie.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Even he, a month or two ago, said that they would look at that possibility. And now we are looking at, I mean, we didn't even a week ago think this was going to happen, but a super majority, it looks like. I don't think we're 100% there yet, on the State Senate side, as these absentee ballots flood in a number of races that we thought were not going to go democratic. So, even on Long Island, Jim Gaughran, that race just got called for the incumbent Democrat. Kevin Thomas, people were not expecting those races to go to the Democrats. So, it's looking much more favorable on the Senate side. So, I mean, politically, practically, economically, there's just, in my view, no reason we can't execute enough tax increases to keep the state functioning as it should.

Tanya Domi:
Luke Elliott-Negri, thank you so much for being with us today. It was a really interesting conversation. Good luck on your dissertation. Good luck on your research.

Luke Elliot-Negri:
Thanks so much. I really appreciate you.

Tanya Domi:
Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Luke Elliot-Negri, a PhD candidate in sociology at the Graduate Center CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.