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.

Tanya Domi:
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.

Tanya Domi:

Welcome to The Thought Project Professor Gunja SenGupta.

Gunja SenGupta:
Thank you so much Tanya. I'm delighted to be here.

Tanya Domi:
The failed insurrectionist attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, kicked off a series of unprecedented events in the United States. The second impeachment, historical of former president Donald Trump. Two weeks later, the inauguration of Joseph Biden to become the 46th president of the United States whose political partner, Kamala Harris, the first woman to hold national office, a Black and Asian American woman was inaugurated as vice president following the violent attempt to bring down the US government by a sitting president. Americans, if not the world has experienced a whiplash of extraordinary events that remained in our immediate rear view vision. Such as the moment right to invite our guests today, Gunja is a 19th century American historian professor. So, in this brain where we are at this moment, I would love to have your thoughts about these recent extraordinary events, arguably as the greatest crisis in US history since the secession of South Carolina.

Gunja SenGupta:
Thank you, Tanya. Yeah. I want to begin with the words of that brilliant young poet, Amanda Gorman who we all heard on Inauguration Day, particularly when she said being American is not the pride you inherit, but the past that you step into as a naturalized American, a woman of South Asian descent, acutely conscious of the fact that I would not have been a participant in this democracy of ours in 1860. I'm especially glad to be able to step into that past and to make sense of the present in light of that history with you.
Tanya Domi:
That's wonderful. And I too would add that I would not be a part of that history either as a gay person. This is a relatively new thing and the growing acceptance. So, I share in your aspirations and your thoughts there, it was very moving to listen to Amanda Gorman. It was so moving. So, given that despite the fact that these incredible events took place, it was preceded by the overture to our yearning to include and bring in, and encompass all of our diversity in this country, which took place on January 5th when Raphael Warnock, an African-American man and Jon Ossoff, a Jewish man was elected from a former slave state in Georgia to the US Senate securing the democratic majority. It's quite remarkable. Is it not?

Gunja SenGupta:
Oh, it absolutely is. I really think that that day sort of represented in many ways an important watershed in our path to forging this multiracial democracy, which did not really begin until the civil war ended. It was only with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the US constitution that we could dream of this inclusive vision of democracy. It really is rather ironic that the very day that Warnock and Ossoff were sent to the Senate by Georgia, which overcame its history of voter suppression in order to do so, that very day a mob of pro-Trump rioters essentially tried to overturn the legitimate results of a free and fair election with violence. And as you said, without a doubt, this represented the greatest crisis of our democracy and in my judgment, since the secession of South Carolina in the Civil War era.

Tanya Domi:
So South Carolina, when they seceded the Congress actually expelled at least 10 senators and as you have pointed out, the Republican lawmakers who objected to the certification of the Biden-Harris victory have since then faced backlash from various quarters, including from the business community, which has indicated to the Republican they will not support those who were supportive of the insurrection or perhaps gave aid and comfort to it. And as well, there have been calls for Congress to censure them in some way. Does this present case have these parallels that you just mentioned in terms of the sedition of 1861?

Gunja SenGupta:
I would argue that recent events drive home the truth of William Faulkner's famous points that the past is never dead. It is not even us. The specific circumstances of course surrounding the expulsion of the 10 senators for sedition in 1861, are somewhat different from the case of the 147 lawmakers who refused to certify the Biden-Harris victory. But I would argue that in spirit, the two cases are similar in that they both represent a challenge to democracy and not just a challenge to democracy, but a challenge to multiracial democracy, because think of the sort of symbols that the rioters were spotting just a few hours before these lawmakers refused to certify the results of the election, right? A mixture as historians have recently pointed out, a mixture of Confederate flag, racist, anti-Semitic medieval iconography of toxic masculinity and so forth, right?

Gunja SenGupta:
So, I think it's sort of worth recounting the history of this expulsion and then relating it to current events, to the move to censure even Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz by some democratic senators. It all began, of course as we know, with Lincoln's election in 1860. South Carolina seceded followed from the union, followed by other deep Southern States in January because they perceived the outcome to pose a threat to racial slavery, which formed the foundation of their economic and political power.
Tanya Domi:
It's very clear in less than 24 hours after Warnock and Ossoff are elected, I mean, the reaction to that into the Biden-Harris election, she being a African-American Asian Indian woman. I mean, this must just shock their conscience, that it's unacceptable and their behavior and conduct in the Capitol. And I would add there's another insult to the Capitol itself where a number of these insurrectionists, and it's not been widely reported, actually urinated and defecated all over the Capitol. And of course the staff, the cleaning staff, primarily Black people had to clean it up. This is just more than primitive.

Gunja SenGupta:
Yes. And so, I think that the rejection of the Biden-Harris victory, in a sense validated, legitimated this bad behavior so I do think that there are some parallels. Now at the time, by say January 21st in 1861, when some senators who remained in Washington issued statements of withdrawal, it's quite a debate in Congress on a number of issues, right? Including the question, whether the senators had actually resigned or withdrawn because this language had implications for the legality of secession. People like Judah Benjamin of Louisiana who favored the term withdrawn maintains that the constitution allowed secession, allowed you to walk out of the union if you didn't like the results of an election.

Tanya Domi:
So yeah. That was the argument, right? Withdraw or actually resign, right? That was the tension in the arguments, right?

Gunja SenGupta:
There was and the 36th Congress adjourned without setting the matter to rest. It was when the 37th Congress convened on March fourth, 1861 with the Republican majority that the Senate voted to declare vacant the seats of some senators from the deep South, whose terms have not yet expired, thereby rejecting the legitimacy of secession. But about the same time, Texas was debating secession. The Senator from Texas notified Congress that pending formal confirmation of his state's withdrawal from the union, he was going to discharge his duties as a senator. And this was what triggered fresh debate on the question of expelling senators who remained, 68 senators. But once again, Congress adjourned without deciding the matter and took this up again in July 1861, by which time of course the civil war was raging, the remaining States of what became the Confederacy had seceded from the union. And the question what the Senate had to decide, what to do about 10 slave state senators who had left Washington without formally withdrawing from Congress.

Tanya Domi:
So, at the core of this really is the question of slavery and in the contemporary, it's really about race in America and what kind of future America do we actually intend to pursue in that context. There's been a great deal discussion about the role of race in shaping our current politics, which is probably the most polarized I've ever experienced in my life. That even, I believe it even surpasses the Vietnam era because at that point between civil rights, the traditional civil rights movement for racial justice there was hope. There was hope and it was different moment, but at this time it's so polarized. It seems that the bargain for citizenship throughout our history has been the white man's freedom that was based upon keeping the Black men in slavery or less than the white men. Can you shed some light on the theme of white identity politics in American history?

Gunja SenGupta:
Sure. Like many others, I was struck by president Biden's reference to white supremacy and the need to overcome white supremacy in his inaugural address.

Tanya Domi:
And that was a historical first, I understand. According to people that are paying attention.

Gunja SenGupta:
Yes, president Biden knows his history and is willing to acknowledge the more sorted chapters, right? In our history. Americans have argued about the racial meaning of citizenship and democracy since before the birth of the Republic, right? Scholars, I think it’s worth defining race the way historians use the term. We define race as a trope of difference, which signifies power relations between different groups. And racial slavery of course, shaped white identity as a privilege and a relation of difference from blackness. And this relation of difference, this privilege was institutionalized in war in language and economic arrangements and educative social relations, gender norms and expectations, other cultural norms and so on. Now how-

Tanya Domi:
I mean, we had everything from Plessy V. Ferguson to just the institutionalized, if a slave tried to free himself or herself, they were automatically jailed. People try to ignore this but it was true. It happened.

Gunja SenGupta:
Sure. Now, if we want to historicize white identity formation as a privilege, I think one of the good places to start would be Edmund Morgan's famous book on the paradox of American slavery, American freedom, which she wrote in the 1970s and which she pointed out, that even as planters in North America's first permanent settlement, British North America that is, first permanent settlement, even as planters were quantifying a self reproducing Black labor force, they were granting certain political concessions to white men. Many of them former indentured servants whose economic aspirations for land the colony was having trouble realizing. In other words, Black slavery and white freedom went hand in hand, right? So, racial slavery had the potential to drive a wedge among workers along the color line while establishing the idea of an aristocracy based on color rather than on wealth.

Tanya Domi:
Right. So, a white man would seek land obviously because that elevated his economic potential and allowed him to vote as well in the Republic. Is that right?

Gunja SenGupta:
Yeah. And many white indentured servants crossed the Atlantic hoping for land once they had completed the terms of their indenture. And so when that for a variety of reasons became less possible because of falling death rates, shrinking supplies of lands and so on, limits that were placed on Westward expansion, many of these servants, former servants became volatile according to Morgan. They posed a threat to the established order. So, the transition from white indentured servitude to Black slavery carried certain political as well as economic advantages for the established elite, right?
But the paradox of Black slavery and white freedom, basically many historians have suggested led to the creation of a white Republic. The whiteness scholar, Matthew Frye Jacobson points out that in large parts of the country, Americans embrace the notion of Republican citizenship, white American status, which linked to the capacity for self-government with economic self-sufficiency, which supposedly assured immunity from the political will of others. And Republican citizenship is very racialized. It excluded enslaved African Americans, it infused American nationality with the idea of race. And so historians have described the system of representative government that emerged before the Civil War as Herrenvolk democracy, meaning democracy for the dominant race in most States of the union outside of the [crosstalk 00:18:37]

Tanya Domi:
And this actually denied Blacks the ability of those who were enslaved to even have any opportunity to create wealth, to be free. And so its legacy is with us today. This is a fact that people do not want to recognize that Black wealth is significantly less compared to other groups in America, including immigrants that have been successful in the American experience of being included.

Gunja SenGupta:
Absolutely. You know, slaves were fashioned a democratic rationale for chapel bondage known as pro sleepy republicanism. You referred to this, the idea that the status and freedoms of white people depended on the survival of Black slavery. In fact, in my first book on [inaudible 00:19:32] Kansas, I quoted defenders slavery in Missouri during the Kansas Wars, who said slavery is not a political evil, it's not a moral evil, it's not an economic evil because "it makes color and not money the Mark that [crosstalk 00:19:48]"

Tanya Domi:
Yeah. It was literally based that it was based on race.

Gunja SenGupta:
Yeah. [crosstalk 00:19:53] Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
It's just stunning. It really is stunning when you look at it in retrospect. We can talk about this. I mean, it's just fundamental to these issues. It's a thread in our history, its a painful, painful thread and I think that the activism of Black Lives Matter, which started in 2014 when Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson and the efforts to galvanize the public and in a multiracial inter-generational fashion on the streets of America in this past year in 2020 and 2019, I think it's really pushed this and it's been part of maybe this escalation into the crisis, because people are saying once and for all, this has to stop. You cannot shoot Black men in their back and get away with it. This impunity must end. So, this is part of our evolution and if it's a thread of pain, I think I tell people overseas in my work abroad, I said "this was America's original sin."

Tanya Domi:
And I have learned again and again from it, given this crisis and given what has happened in recent years and actually the incredible I think, miracle that people came through the electoral process. We actually had a free election. It included a Black and Asian woman to take our place on the national stage and that
a former slave state delivered the victory, not only for Biden but also delivered the democratic Senate. What are the lessons that we can draw from this history that illuminates this crisis now upon us? Beyond what we were just talking about in terms of white identity construction.

Gunja SenGupta:
Right. I think what it suggests is that it takes struggle, it takes organization, it takes coalition building across lines of race, gender, generation in order to arrive at this moment of hope. So, by now the well-worn cliche organize, organize, organize. I think lies at the root of [crosstalk 00:22:24]

Tanya Domi:
Well, In a way it's an irony but I think we can actually thank Donald Trump because the reaction to him was immediate. When the Women's March took place in January 2017, the day after the inauguration, it was the largest manifestation in US history and it went global. The reaction was global. It was so... It was an incredible experience to actually participate in, but to see the reaction and women said " firstly, no. This will not stand." And in that period despite the suppression carried out by this former president, great resistance in the country.

Gunja SenGupta:
Absolutely. And that's the thing, right? A multiracial democracy would not have been possible without the action of enslaved rebels and the ruined communities going all the way back to colonial times really, to interracial abolitionists, suffragists, civil rights activists, true equality activists, down to the freedom fighters of our own time. We're marching under the banner of Black Lives Matter. It would not have been possible without Stacy Abrams, who didn't give up hope-

Tanya Domi:
No. Certainly not.

Gunja SenGupta:
Of overcoming the burden of history in her native Georgia.

Tanya Domi:
It is a remarkable thing. And I would say, speaking of which it's going on right now, is that the Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer of New York announced that the article of impeachment passed by the house, the second impeachment of Donald Trump will arrive to the Senate on Monday. You actually have pointed to the impeachment of president Andrew Johnson in 1868 as a parallel to Trump's second impeachment. Please tell us why.

Gunja SenGupta:
So, obviously the impeachment of Trump for a second time is unprecedented but I would argue that in terms of the larger principles involved, there are some similarities with the impeachment of Andrew Johnson in 1868, because both actions actually occurred in context of struggle over the meaning of freedom and the future of a multi-racial democracy, quite frankly, on the face of it. Formerly of course, what triggered Johnson's impeachment was his alleged violation of the tenure of office act as we all know, which required senate approval of the dismissal of cabinet appointees, but the real reason for the showdown between Johnson and so-called radical Republicans, the progressive lawmakers in Congress
at the time was his very limited vision of reconstruction and the role of the federal government in
protecting the rights of the freed people.

Gunja SenGupta:
In fact, so limited and cramped was his vision of reconstruction that had led to what many feared was a
return of the old South, reconstructed Southern constitutions were refusing to grant voting rights to any
African-Americans. State legislatures were passing black codes, right? Which established slavery under a
different name. Local police were joining in violent mob action in places like Memphis and new Orleans.
And when progressive lawmakers tried to secure some basic rights for the freed people, Johnson Vetoed
was setting the stage for the confrontation that led to impeachment. I would argue that Trump and his
supporters by their actions have sought to disenfranchise voters of color by seeking to disqualify
perfectly legitimate vote counts by coming up with false charges of fraud against majority, minority
cities. And he-

Tanya Domi:
Yes, absolutely. He targeted cities. He derided Chicago, he also tried to attack New York and he attacked
primarily Democratic strongholds but made insults towards cities that were really dominated, had
significant African American population like Los Angeles or any place else. It's very, very diverse and it's
much more than just Black and brown. It's Asian. It's just so multicultural, multiracial that this is where
their antipathy lies.

Gunja SenGupta:
Right. And so for me actually, this impeachment, some others too, I think carried some symbolic
meaning. I think it signified our willingness to firm the importance of an inclusive vision of democracy.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. Without a doubt, there's no question. And I would say there is a really hard anti-semitic edge to it
which is actually quite frightening to see. Wearing sweatshirts that said camp Auschwitz and six is not
enough. It's very chilling. I would say to you, so given that Mr. Trump is the first president of the United
States to have been impeached twice. How do you think historians are going to view this extraordinary
action by the United States congress?

Gunja SenGupta:
I think that they're probably going to charge it rather positively. I think they're going to view it as a
statement that we have come too far to turn the clock back on history. I think they're also going to see
this as a symbol of just how contested the path to a multiracial democracy has been. Just how long, just
how tortured.

Tanya Domi:
How persistent.

Gunja SenGupta:
Yes. And the importance of vigilance in sustaining whatever progress we've made and the importance of
struggling. Keeping the struggle going basically.
Tanya Domi:
It seems with Mr. Biden becoming the 46th president and righted on his first day when he revoked the Muslim ban. But to people who believe in that multiracial, multicultural, multi-religious democracy to their great relief. How would you imagine the people who settled New York would have to say about this country at this moment? Do you think they could even imagine it?

Gunja SenGupta:
Well, in my second book From Slavery to Poverty, I talked about how New Yorkers argued about race and citizenship. There was no consensus on this point. The language of poverty and poor relief became a site for negotiating identities of race, identities of gender, identities of citizenship. Yes. In the Civil War era, New York was actually a pretty pro-slavery town.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Gunja SenGupta:
Before emancipation and latest state for emancipation in 1827. Nevertheless, it was also a place where abolitionism thrived. It was a place where women’s rights thrived. So, the public sphere here was always contentious and I would argue that successive waves of immigrants, particularly in the 20th century from Eastern Europe [crosstalk 00:32:16]

Tanya Domi:
Eastern Europe. That’s where my grandmother came during the period.

Gunja SenGupta:
They introduced discourses and struggles of labor rights, of political rights, women’s rights and this was continued forward by African Americans who were migrating to the city from the South. So, this is always been a case, I think, where people have debated and have sort of worked through their differences in some ways.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. Well, we sit here not knowing what the future will reveal to us. We are in a nascent state of democracy right now. It’s very tenuous. There’s an attempt being made by the minority leader in the Senate to sort of engage in a power sharing that would sort of remove democratic control of naming chairs. And I think that battle is going to continue. And I think there’s going to be a concerted effort to debate these and push these and it’s duly noted too. And it’s been kind of overlooked that Chuck Schumer is the first Jewish Senator to become majority leader so that’s another first. It’s going to be on his shoulders, working with the speaker of the house, Nancy Pelosi and with the president of the United States. And we will come back to you, Professor SenGupta for more history and more insights.

Gunja SenGupta:
Thank you. This free-wheeling discussion has been fun.
Thanks for tuning into the thought project and thanks to our guest Professor Gunja SenGupta of Brooklyn College and the graduate center CUNY.

Tanya Domi:
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.