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.

Michael Fortner is an assistant professor of political science at The Graduate Center, CUNY. He is also a senior fellow at the Niskanen Center in Washington, DC. He received a BA in political science and African-American studies from Emory University and a PhD in government and social policy from Harvard University. His work studies the intersection of American public policy and political philosophy, particularly in the areas of race, ethnicity, and class. He is the author of Black Silent Majority, the Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment, Harvard University Press 2015. A New York Times Book Review Editors Choice and winner of the New York Academy of Histories Herbert H. Layman Prize for Distinguished Scholarship in New York History. He has also been published in the New York Times, Newsweek and Dissent Magazine, and his research has been covered in major media outlets, such as the Atlantic, the New Yorker, New York Magazine, the Daily Beast, Time, WNYC and National Public Radio.

Tanya Domi:
Welcome to the Thought Project, Michael Fortner.

Michael Fortner:
Thank you. It's great to be here.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. We've been chasing each other for about six months. I am so glad to have you here.

Michael Fortner:
Glad to be here.

Tanya Domi:
And so to set up this conversation, Michael, I want to take us back to the summer of 2014 when Michael Brown was murdered by police in Ferguson, Missouri. The black youth of America were galvanized by his murder. That would continue over years through the summer of 2020, as the country witnessed the murder of principally black men by police officers with impunity that culminated in the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer who put his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds, that broke through nearly 400 years of White Americans ignoring the plight of Black people in America at the hands of police. So in that context, I want to ask you, because you are an accomplished scholar in an emerging field.

Tanya Domi:
I think Michael Fortner, you're actually meeting your moment. You are the author of the book, Black Silent Majority, the Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment. Many people are not likely to know about the once considered moderate to liberal governor of New York Nelson Rockefeller, who did an about face on the issue of drugs and crime in 1972. At that moment, the politics on drugs and crime
were beginning to shift in the United States and it aligned with at the time President Richard Nixon's declaration of a war on drugs in 1973. Rockefeller at that point was near the end of his four term governorship and was considered the leader of the liberal wing of the Republican party. Can you explain to us how he came to the decision to absolutely do an about face. It was like an 180 degree approach towards drugs and crimes. And what happened to Nelson Rockefeller?

Michael Fortner:
Sure. Let me start by again, thanking you for having me. It's such a pleasure to be here finally, after chasing each other. And unfortunately news events kept making this meeting, this talk necessary, but we never found the time. So I want to say that I'm really grateful that we're able to sort of sit down together and have this conversation. I also want to comment on the moment and say that, although I'm trying to have a voice at the moment, I must first talk about all the people who came before me, whose work I build on, respond to.

Tanya Domi:
Sure.

Michael Fortner:
Michelle Alexander in particular. 2010, we get the new Jim Crow and no one is talking about mass incarceration in the popular press. No one is thinking about all the Black souls that are being lost in the American prison system. No one is really thinking about the Black bodies that are being crushed by state violence systematically and regularly until that book. Of course, there are others, Angela Davis-

Tanya Domi:
Angela Davis, I was just going to say Angela Davis. [crosstalk 00:05:22] Years and years, right?

Michael Fortner:
Exactly. Who've been in the trenches, even longer than that. But that book in particular builds on decades of activism, builds on decades of scholarship, to talk about the ways in which the criminal justice is shaped by White supremacy. The ways in which inequality pervades every step of the criminal justice process. And so, this moment that we're in, this moment of awakening owes in great part to the activism and scholarship of brilliant scholars, Black women activists like Michelle Alexander and others.

Tanya Domi:
Hear, hear, I might add.

Michael Fortner:
Thank you. I came to this conversation in part inspired by the work of the people I mentioned, and also inspired by personal events. As I mentioned in the book, I'm from New York, which is why I love being at the City University of New York. Born in Brownsville during a very difficult time when there was a lot of crime and faced both faces of criminal justice in the United States in that I had a brother who was murdered on the streets of Brownsville. I have family members who have spent many years in prison, and it's sort of that duality, that shaped my own understanding of criminal justice and that duality, I wanted to sort of bring to this new scholarship and activism around criminal justice reform.
Michael Fortner:
That brought me to this moment of thinking about the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Why the Rockefeller Drug Laws? As you said, part of the analysis in the new Jim Crow and other places is that the war on drugs is a critical aspect of the prison buildup post the civil rights era. And I wanted to go to the source where in many ways, scholars have argued that it started with Nelson Rockefeller. And I wanted to understand not just why he signed the draconian laws, but also its important to mention what the laws did, and why they were so unique. They instituted these mandatory minimum sentences that basically said if you got caught possessing a small amount of marijuana, of any drugs, you could go to prison for years and years. There's really no discretion in the courts that if you got caught, you lost a huge chunk of your life.

Tanya Domi:
And judges didn't have discretion, right?

Michael Fortner:
That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Tanya Domi:
And that's a big thing. That was taken away, taken away. Yes.

Michael Fortner:
That's right. And so, to the extent that the criminal justice system at that point could have been compassionate, could have been creative, the laws no longer allowed for that, and only allowed for extreme punishment. And I wanted to understand why? What happened? Particularly Nelson Rockefeller is a curious man, he's a curious politician in that he was also known as this liberal Republican. I mean, people today have no idea what this thing is. It's like a dinosaur-

Tanya Domi:
Right, right. Exactly.

Michael Fortner:
... given the moment. But there was a period in the last century where there was this sort of unique political beast called a liberal Republican. And what that meant for Rockefeller was that he was a fiscal conservative, middle-class bourgeoisie of values, but also willing to be creative when it came to social programs, willing to sort of care about the downtrodden.

Tanya Domi:
Human needs.

Michael Fortner:
Exactly right.

Tanya Domi:
Right, right.
Michael Fortner:
Exactly right. And more than that, what really set him apart in 1964, is that when Goldwater was going to win the nomination, he rose up to sort of beat back the reactionary forces in the party, the John Birch Society. In many ways to try to beat back the kind of Trump voters and supporters that we had today.

Tanya Domi:
Exactly.

Michael Fortner:
He saw that as a bridge too far for his Republican party, and he didn't want them to be part of the big tent of the Republican party at the time, and he took a stand against them. So I was sort of curious, given this guy's liberal [inaudible 00:09:34], what the hell happened?

Tanya Domi:
Exactly. So Joseph Persico, who was his speech writer when he was vice president was talking to him and apparently he, this is in 1972 and said, "Well, I've just made a decision. I have one goal and one objective, and that is to stop the pushing of drugs and to protect the innocent victim," unquote. And Persico said they were shocked. And he said, "It doesn't work. What we're doing, isn't working."

Michael Fortner:
Right, no. It's an interesting story about why and when this happened, and it ties directly to his transformation. Because by the early 1970s, it was clear to him that his Republican party had changed, that he had lost the battle of 1964, and that the base was a different beast that he had to contend with. And to do that, he had to appear and seem more conservative, particularly he had to beat back Governor Reagan. One of my favorite parts of writing the book was this cocktail party that Nelson Rockefeller and Governor Reagan, Ronald Reagan, attended at the same time. And Rockefeller had sent one of his friends to Japan to study how they handled the drug problem. And the friend came back with a report that said, "Basically they lock them away forever." The friend who was like, "So what do you want to do?" And Rockefeller sat on the report, didn't say anything.

Michael Fortner:
Of course, many policy experts in New York were saying that made no sense at all. That's completely unworkable. Judges hated the concept. Law enforcement hated the concept. No one wanted to touch this policy proposal. And so, Rockefeller sat on it for a long time. But at this party, this friend is talking to Governor Reagan and tells him about this trip to Japan. And Governor Reagan is sort of intrigued by this draconian policy, and then the friend goes to Rockefeller and says, "Well, Governor Reagan wants this report. Can I send it to him?" And not too long after that, Rockefeller is sort of announcing these draconian laws. And so, I think part of-

Tanya Domi:
And Reagan supersedes Rockefeller nationally and displaces him in that contest to become president.

Michael Fortner:
That's right. And so the argument in the book is that in order to understand Rockefeller's transformation from a liberal Republican to this more conservative politician, embracing these draconian policies, it's
important to understand the transformation of the Republican party at the time. And also Rockefeller's ambition and his competition with Reagan and Nixon. And it's from that, that sort of individual self-interest, that emerges these draconian policies.

Tanya Domi:
That makes a lot of sense. Do you agree, as some experts say, that the Rockefeller Laws, they started in New York State... It used to be, if it started in California, they would lead the country. But in this case, it appears that the Rockefeller Drug Laws led the country and reshaped the modern American prison system. And then what happens is you lose a generation of principally poor, Black men or people who are marginalized, who are poor, who may be White as well, can't get the proper legal representation, and they go into prison and they essentially disappear. We're talking about communities without these people locked away and millions of people. And that, I sort of have this understanding because I was in government by the early 90s.

Tanya Domi:
That seemed to really plow the ground in that in fact, criminal gangs by the early 90s, when Bill Clinton gets elected, they're in all the major cities. And in those major cities like Newark and Chicago and New York, they were having problems with crime and gangs in some contexts. As I said to you, before we started, I actually watched a focus group of Black citizens in Newark, a focus group done by the Democratic National Committee, and they were very fearful, and wanted more police protection. And so, they used these focus groups as a basis to proceed on putting together the 1994 Crime Bill that Joe Biden led, and it became law.

Michael Fortner:
It is quite a tragedy that people who understand the injurious force of state violence would automatically turn to that state for greater public safety.

Tanya Domi:
This is true. This is very true.

Michael Fortner:
And that's what happened in 1994. That's what happened before that in a lot of other ways, but that's the story I try to tell, to complicate the important narrative that we already have about white supremacy and racism in the criminal justice system. But to say that there's this critical, tragic part where people who have clearly suffered from state violence, will turn to the state in order to guarantee their own public safety, in order to save their children, in order to feel safe going to work, in order to feel safe going to church, they will turn to the agents of the state who carry weapons-

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely.

Michael Fortner:
... to secure their own public safety. And that's sort of the dangerous paradox that I write about, and that I think about. The ways in which African-American communities are over policed and under-protected. Right?
Tanya Domi:
[crosstalk 00:15:31] Under-protected and under-funded.

Michael Fortner:
And that's right. That's right.

Tanya Domi:
Isn't there also... Very interesting when you talk about the paradox. There's also this emerging consensus in recent months, as a consequence of what happened to George Floyd, is that we need other people beside the police helping protect us, like social workers and mental health professionals. And that White people also are beginning to realize if you have a family member in crisis due to a mental health issue, you can call the police and people can end up dead too.

Michael Fortner:
Indeed.

Tanya Domi:
Right?

Michael Fortner:
Indeed.

Tanya Domi:
Emotionally disturbed person, EDP, an EDP person. And this is happening a lot because police are not properly trained, nor should they be dealing necessarily with EPDs.

Michael Fortner:
And they don't want to. Many of them don't want to. I mean, we're in this moment of great awakening, this moment of great reflection in part, because one of the consequences of the paradox of policing in Black communities is that the more intense policing paradigm that we have experienced over the past two decades, lived by young people of color. And young people of color after Mike Brown, said, "Enough is enough. We are going to make sure this nation says for the very first time and says it repeatedly, that black lives matter." And that vision, that phrase, it will organize our response to the criminal justice system, criminal injustice system, and organize our response to social problems in these communities. And they've kept mobilizing around this and putting this idea, this vision on the table, that we need not rely on police and policing as the only remedy for everything that ails these urban communities.

Michael Fortner:
Like you said earlier, these communities are sort of under-protected and under-funded. So let's sort of, instead of over-protecting them, perhaps, let's try to get some funding to these communities. And they have been advocating for alternative approaches, and what's been amazing to see over the past six months, is that opinion among Whites, although it's going down again, sort of shifted in the favor of new public safety strategies. Through a variety of surveys, over 50%, over 60% of Whites and Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, all agree, we need to try social workers. We need to try other programs, other interventions.
Tanya Domi:
Besides just calling the police.

Michael Fortner:
Besides having an armed agent of the state show up to deal with a social or a mental health crisis.

Tanya Domi:
So to this point, I just want to say, so our listeners know that you have done this. You've authored a significant policy essay in your capacity as a senior fellow at the Niskanen Center based in Washington DC, and it's entitled, Reconstructing Justice: Race, generational divides, and the fight over defund the police. I see a lot of policy essays in my line of work. I've written a few myself, and I have to really commend you, Michael, because this is-

Michael Fortner:
Too kind.

Tanya Domi:
... like a chapter in a book, if not more. And you wrote it this past fall in October in the run-up to the election. I do hope that you've sent it to somebody in the Biden administration. You need to send this to Vanita Gupta who's over at DOJ, Department of Justice. My friend Vanita Gupta, who's now back in the Department of Justice, left the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. And I want to hear your thoughts because you have just pointed out that these alternative ways to address the problems that confront everybody, whether you're Black or White, but clearly you're much more vulnerable given the White supremacy that is present in all the structures of the country, and in particular, in the police.

Tanya Domi:
So, and let me just say, you've got some key takeaways here on this policy essay and the fate of defund measures in Minneapolis, Atlanta, and New York City document. The ways in which the fight over defund the police is as much a conflict between young and old and left and center as it is between Black and White. So here we are, you got a new Biden administration, and in New York City where we live, we've got a new mayor's race with a primary facing assigned June 22nd. How do you leverage this and bring it into the discourse? I'd like to hear your thoughts.

Michael Fortner:
It's an interesting race to say-

Tanya Domi:
You mean the mayor's race?

Michael Fortner:
The mayor's race.

Tanya Domi:
Oh, the mayor's race is a cast of thousands. Right?
Michael Fortner:
Right, right.

Tanya Domi:
12 people running for mayor. Yes.

Michael Fortner:
Right. So what's interesting, in this regard is that you have, even after the discourse of last summer, you have people who are not comfortable talking about defund the police in the race. You have some who are running from the left, who are still emphasizing defund the police, but a lot of politicians in the race are not sort of making this a critical part of the platform. And what they're doing is that they're emphasizing in many ways, some of the takeaways in my report, and that is sort of most people agree that there needs to be some shifting of resources away from policing capacities to social services and other sort of interventions in these communities.

Michael Fortner:
But there's great opposition, especially among older people of color, to completely defunding the police, or even sort of beginning that process. And we're beginning to see that in some of the polling data coming out around the mayor's race, where people want racial justice, that's the top issue, particularly for people of color, but they're not settled on defund police; particularly older people of color, are not settled on defund the police as sort of a strategy.

Michael Fortner:
So I think there is for many in the mayor's race to capture the middle and parts of the left and perhaps parts of the right, and run on a program about alternative remedies. A program about sort of reconstructing criminal justice system in a way that creates more justice. Right? For everyone. That includes having more resources for experimental programs, having resources around different types of interventions when it comes to responding to those mental health crisis. It also, I think includes, and this shows up in the survey data, more transparency in policing. One of the amazing findings, if you look at attitudes [crosstalk 00:23:19]-

Tanya Domi:
Will you add transparency and accountability?

Michael Fortner:
Absolutely. [crosstalk 00:23:23].

Tanya Domi:
That's a major, major-

Michael Fortner:
Absolutely. People want to know who are the bad actors in police departments, and they want to be able to fire them. Very simple. And that's sort of across racial groups. They want sort of data on what's going on in these departments, and they want a bureaucratic systems that can respond immediately
when there is evidence that someone is a bad actor in a lot of these departments. One of the tragedies from last summer and from the last couple of years is the knowledge that many of the cops involved in these shootings had been written up before, right?

Tanya Domi:
Right, right.

Michael Fortner:
These were sort of bad police officers.

Tanya Domi:
The police officer in Minneapolis who killed George Floyd had been written up over 20 times. And only one time was he found accountable for his conduct. But in that vein, you point out about the problem. I'm familiar with this having talked to other people on our faculty in criminal justice is the role of police unions. And you bring this up. Police unions are one of the ways that are leveraged to prevent that accountability. Is that not correct?

Michael Fortner:
They're not helping in these scenarios. And look, a couple of things, right? I think it is fair to say that unions deserve to protect workers, especially if you have a very difficult job, it's important for you to have a union to protect your back. That's not the question. The issue is, the extent to which the union not only protects good cops, but also protects bad cops. There should be a mechanism for punishing those who deserve to be punished within the police bureaucracy, and there are very few mechanisms to do that. There should be some transparency in policing and in a lot of these hearings, but rarely is that the case.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. [crosstalk 00:25:34] I was just going to say you point out one such organization, African-American Mayors Association had drafted a policy blueprint that focused on greater transparency, revising police related contracts and other elements to that, in terms of federal policy engaging the community.

Michael Fortner:
Yes.

Tanya Domi:
There has to be... I mean, I know that Portland is looking at reforming their police department, but as somebody has said, reform isn't possible. The words, "Reform the police," is just never really happened because of the lack of accountability. Right?

Michael Fortner:
Right.

Tanya Domi:
Is this like a chicken and egg problem?
Michael Fortner:
I hope not. And this is why I think the federal government is so critical, right? Because at the local level, you can see the political incentives to follow the lead of police unions, right? Instead of a powerful local constituency, they can sort of summon all the symbols and the good feelings that police usually receive and sort of mobilize significant power on their behalf. Mobilize it on behalf of sort of bad policing policies. And so we need, I think, some kind of federal intervention in these issues, or federal accountability, because I'm not sure local politicians have enough autonomy from police unions to make the right decision. And so-

Tanya Domi:
That's a fair point. That's a fair point. I think that at this moment we talked about the mayor's race just for a few minutes and we will continue to talk about that. It's going to go on the whole year, but let's talk about Biden. And now he's putting in place a new department of justice. Vanita Gupta is going to return, Garland Merrick is going to be, hopefully, the attorney general.

Michael Fortner:
Hopefully.

Tanya Domi:
I don't know. We'll see how that Senate, it goes. It may take Kamala Harris breaking the tie because the Republicans embarrass themselves.

Michael Fortner:
Indeed.

Tanya Domi:
So let me just say this, as you point out in your report, Jim Clyburn just basically dismissed the idea of defunding the police. Biden himself says, "No, we're not going to defund the police, but we're going to reform the police." Should that initiative come out of the Department of Justice? And should it be perhaps a task force where they bring in police professionals in groups that are advocating for these new ways of approaching safety and communities, and put together a national task force that construct a policy approach to police operations in all the jurisdictions of the United States? Is that a possibility?

Michael Fortner:
I'm slightly skeptical. I mean, we've had during the Obama administration, a commission on policing-

Tanya Domi:
That's right.

Michael Fortner:
And we've had national commissions before.

Tanya Domi:
[crosstalk 00:28:56].
Michael Fortner:
Right, right, right. So, there are commissions who study a lot of this stuff and have a lot of great ideas, some bad ideas, of course. I mean, I think what we need now is leadership. We need to decriminalize marijuana at the national level. We need to have a, I think, Justice Department who is serious. This is the point you made, that the Justice Department itself could do a lot in observing and monitoring and investigating these departments.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely.

Michael Fortner:
And having a more rigorous, a more intense justice department in this area, I think would help a lot. But I think we know a lot of what we need to do, and hopefully the Biden administration will follow the evidence on a lot of these points. I think they're devoted to that kind of strategy. I think they are, as you suggested, they don't want to get wrapped up in the defund discourse. I believe-

Tanya Domi:
Yes, they're definitely avoiding that discourse.

Michael Fortner:
Yeah. I think they believe, or many Democrats believe, right or wrong, they believe that that hurt them in the house.

Tanya Domi:
Down ballot, down ballot. Yes.

Michael Fortner:
So they're going to avoid that kind of conversation. But I do think again, the federal government and its ability to provide resources, its ability to gather data information and prosecute crimes can be a very positive force in a lot of these areas. And providing grants to fund a lot of these experiments, I think would be a sort of a huge benefits to more-

Tanya Domi:
To communities.

Michael Fortner:
... criminal justice. Right. More justice in the criminal justice system, and to sort of gather more evidence and research around these alternative remedies.

Tanya Domi:
Interesting point. So let's just talk for a moment. It's not surprising that there's a generational divide within the Black community. It's not surprising that you would have one in the White community. There's clearly generational lines, and some of that is really exacerbated by lack of economic opportunity. It's been afforded to millennials and gen zoomers after the recession of 2007, and now
you're in a pandemic economy. Do you think, I mean, there's people in the government, like Kamala Harris, who's younger than Clyburn and some of the older members of the Black caucus, congressional Black caucus.

Tanya Domi:
I mean, there's a lot of people in that caucus. Clyburn has tremendous amount of power and influence, and he's used it. And Joe Biden is really probably President of the United States because of Jim Clyburn's replacement in South Carolina, and now they're putting Jamie Harrison in the DNC. And seeing finally, finally, and rightfully, many more people of color in the administration; in important positions, including the inter-governmental coordinator who's a former member of Congress. I can't remember his name at the moment. He went to Morehouse?

Michael Fortner:
Yes, I know who you're talking about.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah, I'm sorry, he's a former member of Congress. So he's got a role to play. It would seem to me that these are important forces, and important voices, and Biden picked them. I think that given the fact, and it's unfortunate that it took 400 years, but Biden uttered the words, White supremacy in his inaugural address.

Michael Fortner:
Right.

Tanya Domi:
Now, I remember Biden. I was in Washington from '91 through the late 90s and this Biden that I'm seeing now, is not the Biden that I used to see in '94.

Michael Fortner:
Right, right.

Tanya Domi:
I mean, he's just a different man. And I would say that, I don't know, but I would think his exposure with Barack Obama and seeing how Barack Obama was treated, with great disrespect repeatedly by members of the Republican caucus, that must have changed him. And to Biden's credit, for political reasons, whatever, he picked Kamala Harris. And for me, because full disclosure, I supported Kamala from the beginning.

Michael Fortner:
Did you really?

Tanya Domi:
Oh, for sure. Absolutely. I was on her foreign policy team. Let me just say this. I said, when it came to pick, if he says he's going to pick a woman, I said, "It's Kamala." I knew it would be Kamala. And to his credit, he picked her. I mean, he could have gone with-

Michael Fortner:
Klobuchar.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah, Klobuchar. And I thought, "Please don't." And Klobuchar, to her credit, for whatever reasons, political or whatever, she said, "It's time to pick a woman of color."

Michael Fortner:
Yeah. But she also knew it wasn't going to be her.

Tanya Domi:
[crosstalk 00:34:06] But you know what I mean? Listen, listen Michael-

Michael Fortner:
Fair enough.

Tanya Domi:
When I worked in Washington, I would go lobby for a vote. I didn't care why they voted-

Michael Fortner:
Fair enough, fair enough.

Tanya Domi:
I needed the vote, just as long as they did it. So I don't care what she had in mind, but she did the right thing, and maybe it was personally to her advantage. I don't know. So anyway, I just want to say that. And what are your thoughts on this nucleus of new people in the government, this new perspective? And I think Biden's getting it. He's talking a lot about social equity. He's talking about racial equity. I've not seen this in our government really since LBJ. When LBJ brought the Housing Act, the Voting Rights Act, and yes, it was as a consequence of the civil rights movement for racial justice. It's been a long time.

Michael Fortner:
It's been a long time.

Tanya Domi:
Long time.

Michael Fortner:
Indeed, indeed.

Tanya Domi:
I was in fifth grade when that happened. I was a young, grade school student in fifth grade, watching the president because believe me, I used to write them letters.

Michael Fortner:
Right.

Tanya Domi:
But anyway.

Michael Fortner:
Well, listen, justice is hard work, right?

Tanya Domi:
Indeed.

Michael Fortner:
Justice takes a long time. I do want to make one point though. I am hopeful about all the beautiful diversity in this Biden administration, racial and ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQ community.

Tanya Domi:
Oh, amazing.

Michael Fortner:
It's brilliant. It's absolutely brilliant. But we should also remember that representation itself frequently is not enough.

Tanya Domi:
Indeed.

Michael Fortner:
That it is frequently not enough. And we need in addition to cultural representation, identity representation, we need to make sure that there is an agenda and this administration is focused on economic justice for everyone. We need to bring along our White brothers and sisters, right? The working class White brothers and sisters, make them part of this multicultural dream we're all living at the moment.

Tanya Domi:
Well, that's Reverend Barber's coalition, the poor people's movement.

Michael Fortner:
That's right.

Tanya Domi:
I’m with you. And this is actually a throwback to MLK, that’s exactly where he was when he was murdered.

Michael Fortner:
That's right. And going back to that.

Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Michael Fortner:
And so, I’m hopeful that diversity in this administration will yield fruit, but I know that it will yield fruit if activists keep pushing them. If-

Tanya Domi:
Keeping the pressure on them.

Michael Fortner:
That's exactly right. And so, yes, we have a radical vision of change. We have a sense of justice in what we need to do to get more justice for people of color, for working class folks, but we can't rely on representation itself, but we need to keep pushing it. We need to keep pushing. We need to keep making sure that those who represent marginalized populations, those who represent people who need a living wage, constantly hears that perspective; constantly understands that perspective. And so, that we build not just in the area of criminal justice, but all throughout, sort of policy arenas-

Tanya Domi:
All aspects of life.

Michael Fortner:
That's right. Sort of a fair policy process, political system for working class people and for people of color in the United States.

Tanya Domi:
Michael Fortner, that is an incredible conversation. I hope we can keep it going because there's so much more to talk about.

Michael Fortner:
Absolutely. Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:
It's great to have you here.

Michael Fortner:
Thank you my sister. I really appreciate it.
Tanya Domi:
And thank you, and we will come back to you. Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor Michael Fortner of 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.