

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. Today's guest is Manu Bhagavan, professor of history and human rights at Hunter College and the Graduate Center City University of New York. Professor Bhagavan is a specialist on modern India focusing on the 20th century, late colonial and post colonial periods, with particular interest in human rights, nationalism and questions of sovereignty. He is the author of the critically acclaimed 'The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World' published by Harper Collins in 2012. Welcome Manu.

Manu Bhagavan: Thank you Tanya. It's nice to be here.

Tanya Domi: In the past two years and the focus of our conversation today, you have written two essays on nationalism and xenophobia sweeping the globe. Published in quartz.com in March 2016, this essay went viral on the internet and just this month, you were published by the 2018 Raisina Files on debating, disruption in the world order. Your essay there is entitled 'Illiberalism Intolerance and the Threat to International Society'. Congratulations Manu.

Manu Bhagavan: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: Do you think this dangerous state of the world actually yields to historical parallels to the interwar period between World War One and World War Two?

Manu Bhagavan: Well, right. So the essay that I've just published in the Raisina Files looks at our current moment, the challenge to minorities, the increasing ... the rise in violence against minorities that we see today and also looks back at what occurred in the interwar period. I'm not sure that I would say that we look back to the interwar period to see if there are distinct parallels or connections to what is happening right now. But we ... I do think it is useful to see if there are lessons that can be learned about mistakes that were made. That is where I think it is useful to take a look at the past. And in fact, unfortunately what I do see happening is a replication of those kinds of mistakes. That is, we are not being attentive enough to the plight of minorities in the world today, and time is running out to prevent a catastrophe.

Tanya Domi: That's very good points. When I look back at your essay published in Quartz, it went viral. It was a very, very hot essay and you were already tracking the rise of xenophobia by authoritarian leaders around the world. Can you give our listeners an overview of the planet's state of escalating nationalism in this moment?

Manu Bhagavan: Well in that essay, what I sought to do was to show that I thought that there were a set of overarching factors, which were driving the rise of authoritarian

populism. That was the globalization of the economy, the globalization of conflict and the globalization of crises. And in a nutshell, that simply meant that we had interconnected our economies in such a way as to empower particularly global corporations and disempower people and governments ... responsive governments in a variety of ways. The globalization of conflict is the long war on terror and the expansive use of state militaries, and the expanding a non state actors sort of battling it out, threatening people's livelihoods on the grounds no matter where they were. And then the globalization of crises, things like public health concerns like Ebola and climate change.

Manu Bhagavan: So all of these things were driving indicators. They've been on the map for a while. We can ... That is to say it isn't something that's happened in the last year or two years or even five. I think we can track back elements of these drivers to the nineties and even before. That has sort of coalesced into a perfect storm where our institutions, domestic and international are too weak and have failed us. And that has ... is what has created the space that has allowed strong men, usually men, sometimes women, to rise up around the world and to threaten us all with xenophobia and notions of a certain kind of jingoistic nationalism, which are really just in my view, facades to build themselves small dictatorial fiefdoms.

Tanya Domi: Yes. I mean it seems apparent from Prime Minister Modi in India to Duterte in the Philippines and we're talking about Viktor Orban in Hungary and of course Vladimir Putin. But it is really a global phenomenon and these states and leaders are bumping into each other and there's a lot of rhetoric flying around. I'm sure that this week in Davos, there's going to be lots of comments. Trump has gone to Davos. He's the populist espousing, "How my people have been oppressed." And now he's in Davos rubbing shoulders with some of the richest people in the world. That's quite a juxtaposition, isn't it?

Manu Bhagavan: Oh, absolutely. It also ... Davos is a forum where the old elite guard sort of made policy, rubbed shoulders and patted themselves on the back essentially. In many ways it was disconnected from many ground realities and some of the mistakes that they made there have fed our moment. Trump ran by criticizing the Davos crowd. So his going there, I think reveals first of all, the enormous amount of hypocrisy that has long been a trademark of his campaign and his outlook. But I also ... I had a followup essay to the Quartz piece that ran in India in a magazine called Seminar and I titled it 'The Age of Authoritarianism and the End of the World As We Know It'. And there I looked particularly at the rise of Trump and in India the rise of Mr. Modi. And what I argued there was that these rising autocracies all have this sort of similar phrases, they use a similar set of phrases. Make America great again, let's revive our great past, let's put our national interests forward. The problem with this kind of revivalism is that ... Oh, and all of these sort of share a certain ... All of these autocrats share a love of this kind of language and they've all been supporting one another for that reason. So some people dubbed it for example, the league of nationalists.

Manu Bhagavan: The problem with this is that that kind of rhetoric bumps up against itself when two of these people are in the same room. So I argued then that it isn't going to be a world of national interests where then everybody gets along and it's a fair practice. What will end up happening is we go back to old world practices, where you have a lot of conflict because we don't have mechanisms to resolve this. And in fact, at the time when that piece came out, I cited Mr. Modi's inaugural address at the Raisina Dialogue from last year. The Raisina Dialogue is the ... India's flagship global affairs event in which he argued for multilateralism and for a ... a need for a certain kind of global order. So I cited it then and I said, "Well India is not actually against globalization. So I predict that this will lead to some conflict between India and Trump's America." And in fact, just this week at Davos, this is Mr. Modi's first appearance at Davos. His speech was almost exactly that. He took on ... He, without naming Trump, all of the commentary has said it was directed at Mr. Trump. Modi said that we have to have ... we have to defend globalization, we have to defeat the forces of protectionism in isolation, and that we must ... He believes and India advocates a multilateral global order that supports multiculturalism. So-

Tanya Domi: It's interesting because ultimately all countries have their own national interests. And so just as you've pointed out the similarity of their rhetoric, when it gets right down to it, India's got its own national interest. The same can be said about this really strange relationship between Trump and Putin, where he fawns over Putin, refuses to criticize him in any capacity and yet there is a number of problems now in the U.S., Russian relationship. So that is a pretty rocky situation right now. They've been kicking out diplomats and there's been a back and forth on kicking out diplomats. There's been a rise in kind of hostile type rhetoric, from Tillerson, the secretary of state towards Russia. and of course there's sanctions that are not going to be removed anytime soon because Congress has tied up the administration's hands on this. But just as you say, there is a lot of conflict right now that in the post World War Two period, they put together a framework of how the countries would get along and that would be through the UN. Is the UN irrelevant?

Manu Bhagavan: The UN is certainly not as relevant as we need it to be. There was a period when Kofi Annan was considered a global star and the institution was reforming itself and there was some kind of hope on the horizon for what it might turn out to be. I think there was some hope for when Mr. Gutierrez took over as a UN Secretary General, but my understanding is that the past year has been a disappointment, largely he hasn't done much. The UN is treading water. And my understanding of that too is that that is because he feels that he needs to work with everyone and he fears the consequences to the institution if he were to butt heads with any number of these leaders with whom he disagrees or with whom he wants to fight ... I mean at a diplomatic level. So the UN is not where it needs to be. The UN moreover often appears in conflict situations and has not done enough to address the fact that some of its members or the forces that it sponsored then participate in aggressive or terrible actions of their own again,

and creating new forms of victims. So there's a report out that suggests that kind of thing is widespread at the UN.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, like the situation in Central Africa Republic. Just really terrible abuse of children-

Manu Bhagavan: Yes.

Tanya Domi: By peacekeepers.

Manu Bhagavan: Exactly. Exactly. So the UN is an organization in my view that needs further reform. It must continue on the path of transparency. It must also reconnect with people on the ground. But I think it is a huge mistake to think that the UN is irrelevant or inconsequential, that we don't need it or that it is a waste. In fact, the UN ... many of its operations we know are enormously successful, have positive impact and operate on shoestring budgets. So in fact, it's very productive and efficient as these things go. Could it be better? Absolutely. Do we need it? Absolutely.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. I think ... I mean I think in this moment where we're talking about the rise of illiberalism being practiced, especially among the larger countries, that the institutions seem to not be able to meet the moment. And we're seeing that not just at the UN, which has had a downward spiral because the lack of funding to it. But also you're seeing this at the international legal levels, the human rights engagement. I mean you're talking about the human rights commissioner has in the last six months said that we can't rule out genocide against the Yazidis, and in the Rohingya situation, the same thing applies. And the idea that India and Bangladesh might deport refugees back to Myanmar is an appalling thought.

Manu Bhagavan: Right. So that's something again is in this essay. We're looking at some very serious human rights, humanitarian catastrophes imminent or ongoing, and what we are left with right now is an inability to act in an effective way. I think what the UN high commissioner with respect to the Rohingya for example, was trying to do is to trigger the genocide convention or the responsibility to protect something, where states would feel the need to go in and protect this population which is at risk or is in fact being violated. But he's finding it very hard to get his message across and as I understand it so hard in fact, that he has decided not to continue on in his post because he does not want to have his integrity questioned. He doesn't want to kowtow to requests from a big states and particularly, I believe it's from the United States to alter his message.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. It's a very interesting situation. You're starting to see people not only maybe self sensor, like that we talk about journalists. But in Gutierrez's case and the high commissioner for human rights, they actually are hanging back and choosing to lead. It's regrettable because indeed the high Commissioner's chief advisor is Peggy Hicks, an American human rights lawyer and a former colleague of mine in Bosnia. It'll be interesting to watch that situation transpire after he

transitions out. Back to your Raisina essay. I mean you situate the essay ... You begin in Charlottesville, in describing the Unite the Right rally that took place there last summer in August, led by neo-Nazis and Klux Klan leaders, resulting in the death of one woman and injuries to many people when the rally turned violent. This is really a frightening display-

Manu Bhagavan: Absolutely.

Tanya Domi: Of xenophobia and if not, fascist overtures in America. And these events not only took place in Charlottesville, but some of them took place on the campus of University of Virginia. A shocking set of events and Trump weighed in and criticized both sides, but actually assaulting more or less the antifascist presence of Antifa, which is an organization that fight fascism. I've been told by people that were on the ground that it actually ... the violence and the amount of armaments as actually changed their idea of peaceful confrontation and engaging in civil disobedience. They're actually re-looking that whole construct at this time.

Manu Bhagavan: Charlottesville I think was a wake up call for a lot of people. The visceral threat that is now posed by the rise of white nationalism, I think is now apparent to all. You said that there were fascist elements in the marches. Of that, there is no doubt. The ... What I point out here is that the attire that a lot of the marchers wore is, is drawn almost as if they were following instructions from Nazi propaganda, from ... I mean actual Nazi propaganda, from the thirties. So the dress code, the tone, the phrases that were used, the shouting, the threats, fascism was on display. I think there's little doubt about that.

Tanya Domi: You also draw a connection to other places, with Viktor Orban in Hungary. In fact, just recently in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serb statelet staged a military parade which was in violation of the Dayton peace accords. And then on the streets of Banja Luka, these figures showed up in camouflage fatigues, wearing black berets and allegedly ... And it's been reported from local reporting, that they were trained by Russian military that has a training base in Serbia. So this is also creating your own militia, taking to the streets, organizing your own private armies. The rhetoric that accompanies that is absolutely potentially explosive.

Manu Bhagavan: Right. So I think ... I think we're not paying enough attention to these kinds of details. Where does it all lead? I don't think we're looking at that carefully enough. We don't have enough of an understanding of where this could go. I think we ... In my essay, I'm talking about where I fear it could lead based on past mistakes. The big thing here is that I think strong men have a sense of what they're doing. They think that they can rile up the existing order, use the chaos if I can quote the character, Little Finger from Game of Thrones, as a ladder and that they will rise to the top and be the big bad of their local area and important figures in their own right. The lesson of history broadly is that chaos once unleashed, can lead to all kinds of unintended consequences.

Manu Bhagavan: In fact, order it tries to be ... once one tries to have order, can have all kinds of unintended consequences. The world is a complicated place and there are many things that are going on at the same time. When you have things like militias and organized violence in states like Hungary or anywhere, these can be targeted at specific vulnerable populations at a given moment. But at some point, each of these national states who are so self professed, interested in their own interests, their own case, their own, their own needs, will find themselves in an oppositional relationship with another state. And then they're going to be conflicts between those kinds of forces and these strong men who think that they are secure. We'll find that they aren't, I fear.

Tanya Domi: That's a very sobering assessment. I think it's pretty accurate. I would also say looking back on history, when you look back at the World War Two period. It seems that even though Hitler rose to power and even though Hitler killed more than 6 million people, which is a horrible thing, there were some great leaders in that moment that rose to that occasion. And right now I don't see those similar men or leaders that could actually rise to this moment. I don't see them yet.

Manu Bhagavan: I think the old cliché goes that ... goes something along the lines of the people are made by the challenges that they face. And so I think perhaps we haven't ... we don't know who those people are going to be, the great leaders of our time. But I think that they are out there and they are working and we will only know who they are as they begin to achieve some success. I might also add that perhaps the leaders that we're looking for are us, that is to say everyday people and maybe this time we won't have one person or two people or three people who are ahead of a state. We will in fact have a full movement driven kind of politics, which is more disorganized and more desegregated, but nonetheless equally effective. That may be overly optimistic. I hope it isn't Pollyanna-ish. But I do think that it is a viable possibility as to what might happen.

Tanya Domi: Well I think the seeds are planted actually, the Women's March. You see what happened, it was not just in the United States. It was all over the world, and so I think we have to hurry. The moment is calling us.

Manu Bhagavan: Absolutely.

Tanya Domi: Thank you so much for being with us today, Manu.

Manu Bhagavan: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Professor Manu Bhagavan. The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City with production engineering and technical assistance by Sara Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.

