



Library podcast

Sasha Polakow-Suransky with Cyrus Habib

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[00:00:37] Hi everybody. Good evening. Thanks so much for being here tonight. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at The Seattle Public Library. And welcome to this evening's program with Sasha Polakow-Suransky. I wanted to make a quick programming note unfortunately. Lieutenant Governor Habib was called away on urgent business and won't be able to join us tonight. That said we have a representative from his office who will be saying a few words a little bit later in the program. I wanted to thank our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Thank you as well to our program partner Elliott Bay Book Company for being here tonight. Finally we are grateful to The Seattle Public Library Foundation private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight. We say thank you very much for your support. Now I am delighted to just tell you a little bit about Sasha Polakow-Suransky. He's the author of a former book that was published in 2010 called the unspoken alliance Israel's secret relationship with apartheid South Africa. And he is an open society foundations fellow. Sasha was an op ed op ed editor at The New York Times and a senior editor at Foreign Affairs and he holds a doctorate in modern history from Oxford University where he was a Rhodes scholar. His writing has appeared in The Guardian foreign policy Newsweek New Republic and The Boston Globe. He's here tonight to discuss Go Back To Where You Came From the backlash against immigration and the fate of Western democracy which is an exploration of how one's marginal views on immigration have flourished to reshape the political landscape. But before we hear from Sasha I'd like to welcome Tina Neville from Lieutenant Governor Habib's office who will say a few words

[00:02:34] Thank you very much as it was said before unfortunately the lieutenant governor could not be here tonight. However what he did do was have some remarks directly from him for his dear friend Sasha. So good evening everyone I'm sorry I'm not able to be there with you but I couldn't pass up this opportunities here to share a few words about my dear friend Sasha Polakow-Suransky a brilliant mind and an incredible writer and about why I think this is the most important book you'll actually read this year as many of you know I serve as lieutenant governor of Washington State as an Iranian

American who was elected to this position on the same day Donald Trump was elected president as the child of immigrant parents and now as a public official working to serve a divided constituency in an ever more divisive political environment the question of how we got here and where we are going are two that I have consumed my attention over the past year running for statewide election in 2016 gave me a front row seat to the rhetoric of hate and fear that exploited voter anxiety in many parts of our country even here in Washington State. Evidence of the growing intolerance for immigrants and particularly those of Middle Eastern descent reared its ugly head in my own race for lieutenant governor. Even now the very real economic and social frustrations to which anti-immigrant hate has been tied are themes I hear reiterated in conversations I have across Washington state as I traveled to communities who have seen industry shut down and companies close leaving persistent unemployment and widespread despair and disillusionment in their wake many of us have just recently in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump begun to cast about for explanations of what brought populist anti-immigrant political waves to the mainstream stream and perhaps more importantly what they mean for the future of liberal democracies.

[00:04:44] Sasha. As a historian and critical investigative thinker recognized a trend years ago and set out to explore it. What Sasha's finding makes clear is that Europe provides certain clues and warning signs. If we care to pay attention to the European experience Americans can learn how to navigate these challenges from the successes and all too often the failures of an ever more diversifying Europe. Sasha has carefully charted the global course of what brought us to this precarious and uncertain point and poses questions that we as a nation alone and in concert with our global partners must work together to answer. And his book could not be more timely ultimately Sasha's latest book is one about the need for accountability. The need for politicians to be held accountable for the effect their rants and rhetoric can have in turning us against one another by delving into how the cycle of politics and populism can go from virtuous to vicious. Sasha also suggests a method for reverse engineering this process which could lead to a restoration of tolerance and inclusiveness fostered by civic leadership in a time of fake do's and finger pointing. It is critical that we as agents of democratic society learn from the history of others reject partisan bickering as a governing strategy and look critically at our own choices and attitudes Sasha. That's a clear eyed paradigm through which to begin that conversation. I appreciate his taking his time to visit Seattle and I wish you all a wonderful evening. Cyrus Habeeb lieutenant governor with that please join me in welcoming Sasha Polycorn Syrian ski.

[00:06:40] Thank you. And thanks very much for having me here at the library.

[00:06:47] I began researching this book in mid 2015. Before the mass refugee crisis throughout Europe began I already sense that there was some sort of movement brewing. There were politicians like Marine Le Pen in France here builders and Holland the Danish People's Party in Denmark and a new party coming up in Germany and they had all been saying these things for years. They had been talking about Muslims as a threat to their societies. They'd been talking about the need to close borders and keep immigrants out. But to really become popular and to have an impact electorally they needed a catalyst. And what happened in late 2015 gave them an incredible political gift. I would argue and I want to just read to briefly from a section of the book that involves my first week of

reporting on this project. In the summer of 2015 just to set the scene for what was happening in Europe then and what followed in the middle of the afternoon on August 25th 2015 as most of Germany was enjoying the end of the summer holidays a small government agency posted the message on Twitter that would shape the fate of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and many millions of Germans. We are at present largely no longer enforcing Dublin procedures for Syrian citizens read the seemingly unspectacular bureaucratic tweet posted by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

[00:08:26] But it meant something very different for the hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants streaming through Turkey and seeking a way into Europe. A few days after the German announcement a steady flow of Syrians Afghans Iraqis and others began to arrive on the Greek island of Kos as tanned Dutch tourists dodged refugee children wandering through the bike lanes. A middle aged Syrian man showed me a screenshot of his itinerary on a tattered Samsung smartphone a squiggly lines snaked through a poorly drawn map of Greece Macedonia Serbia and Hungary. With the prices of each point to point journey listed in dollars the shortest and most treacherous from Turkey to costs cost fifteen hundred hydro foil fare for those blessed with visas and the right passports with sixteen dollars if they made it across alive the weary refugees many of them from Syria would then trudge two miles past backpacker bars and package deal hotels passing occasional British revelers on the way home from a long night of drinking. They would arrive at the still shuttered Coast police station before dawn and then they'd wait. It was there that I met Mohamed a 16 year old from the Syrian city of Latakia who had made the journey from Turkey on a small inflatable boat with 21 others after the German announcement.

[00:09:41] He'd been living in a tent on cousin's trash strewn beach for a week his companions 20 year old Hotham and 22 year old Mahmoud came from the Syrian cities of diaries or in Hama where some of the earliest protests against the Assad regime began in 2011. One bears a scar where he was shot through the knee. The other fled to Jordan where he was beaten by police before escaping to Turkey. Greek coastguard boats rescued their vessel halfway to costs and brought them ashore. The next day the three men took an overnight ferry to Athens with hundreds of other Syrians. As word spread that Germany was opening its doors odes to German Chancellor Angela Merkel appeared on Facebook in Arabic praising her as a loving mother and a lion. By the end of the week Mohammad had written to say that he'd reached the Austrian German border. I don't know anyone in Hamburg he told me in a text message. But Germany had announced it would accept 500 thousand refugees so he crossed and took a train north so that was the first week of my reporting for this book. And as I said the mass influx of refugees from Syria and other countries in September and October of 2015 and the terrorist attacks that shook Paris a month after that in November was in many ways the greatest political gift imaginable for populist anti-immigrant politicians like Marine Le Pen.

[00:11:01] And here at builders they exploited this by conflating desperate refugees who are fleeing ISIS with terrorists attacking European cities in the name of ISIS. And despite the fact that there was virtually no overlap whatsoever between those two groups that image and that conflation stuck in the public mind in Europe. And it was used politically over the following year one of the major themes in this book is how politicians have exploited crisis and stoked the fears of immigrants and refugees to

fan the flames of hatred and resentment. It's very clear to me that many European voters who've supported these parties have reasonable concerns about immigration. They're worried about their social benefits. They're worried about how their neighborhoods are changing. But what's happened is that those fears and grievances have been hijacked by nativist politicians who are opportunistically exploiting the fears of their constituents to push an agenda that would keep immigrants out and deprive Muslim European citizens and Muslim newcomers of certain rights and rather than blaming the failures of previous governments or current governments or companies that have moved jobs overseas they've blamed immigrants and refugees and they've scapegoated an entire group for the crimes of a few of its members and the Left in Europe also bears some responsibility.

[00:12:37] And I think it's important to acknowledge that for a long time social democratic parties in Europe and other left wing parties pretended that there were no concerns with immigration that there were no problems that integration was going just fine and that people who complained were simply racists and that of course wasn't true. But what's happened since then is as they started to see that they were hemorrhaging votes to far right parties they caved in to the agendas of those far right parties adopting many of their political ideas and many planks of their platforms out of fear of losing more votes to them and what I've observed in talking to voters who've made that journey from Communist Party's Socialist Party social democratic parties to far right parties is that the voters are going for the original and not the copies. So when a social democratic party or a labor party adopts the agenda of a far right party and starts to get tougher on immigration the voters don't go back they stay with the far right party and that step has been taken. And so now what you see is the center adopting the policies of the far right and it's essentially created a new normal in European politics where the entire debate has moved to the right.

[00:13:56] As a result of those political concessions there's also something more sinister at work in this debate. And it's something that Steve Bannon in this country and Marine Le Pen in France have spoken about quite openly and their inspiration is literary rather than political on some level.

[00:14:18] Both Bannon and Le Pen like to cite a 1970 three novel by a French writer named all of us by called Camp of the saints and camp of the Saints is a book that paints a sort of dystopian picture of a mass refugee arrival on France's shores and the refugees are coming from India and the heroes in the book shoot down the refugees coming ashore. They try to shoot at the boats as they're in the water and as the refugee crisis peaked in late 2015 Marine Le Pen was tweeting to her millions of followers. Read lass by camp of the saints. Bannon referred to it repeatedly in bright barred interviews and I think especially as we're in a library tonight it's worth considering the way that literature can also seep into politics. And this is a novel that has become a favorite of the far right in the United States and in Europe. The new German far right party the FDA its former leader Frank Petri at one point in late 2015 even referred to the novel and talked about shooting refugees to keep them from crossing the German border. So those ideas were moving from a 40 year old novel into mainstream political discourse so this idea of civilizational war that comes from that novel and that we see in the rhetoric of these politicians has become a major theme. The idea that Muslims are coming and colonizing and taking over Europe by out breeding the Europeans by conquering territory. The rhetoric that's used is very similar to what one heard in the 1930s and in the 19th century about Jews

and I think what's happened is that the rhetoric has been recycled with a new target and Muslims have replaced Jews in the rhetoric of the far right especially in France.

[00:16:22] And you hear these kinds of themes that one heard during the Dreyfus Affair that one heard during the Vichy regime except Jews have been replaced by Muslims. 9/11 also changed the debate here and in Europe. There was certainly hatred of Muslim immigrants in all of these countries before but it wasn't a mainstream or popular idea. If you recall in the mid 1990s there were a lot of Bosnian refugees who left Bosnia during the genocide and moved north into countries like Germany and Holland and Denmark and there were citizens in those countries who were upset and complained about class size in their schools and sharing social benefits and crowding in their neighborhoods. But the rhetoric wasn't about Islam conquering Europe or colonizing Europe or Muslims outbreeding the natives. That changed after 9/11 when politicians began to conflate terrorists with all Muslims. And as I mentioned earlier blame an entire group and sort of tribute collective responsibility because of the crimes of a few of that group's members and the recycling of these old anti-Semitic ideas and using them to target Muslim Europeans today. Has become very popular and it's been popularized by some leading philosophers in France. There's a book that's very well-known in France these days called the great replacement written by a man named Linda come. And usually one wouldn't expect far right anti-immigrant activists you meet sitting around on park benches to cite obscure works by elderly philosophers but that's what I encountered in Calais in northern France when I was reporting for this book.

[00:18:19] I had spent quite a bit of time in the large refugee camp in Calais. That's now been bulldozed but it was known as the jungle and there were between three and six thousand refugees and migrants in that camp at any given time and far right white nationalist groups from all over Europe were converging on Calais and protesting the presence of these refugees and migrants and actually trying to scare them away. And I decided to go and interview some of the leaders of one of those groups that was called retake Calais. And as they were telling me how they were trying to kick the refugees out to follow them back to their camps to intimidate them. They mentioned this book The Great replacement and started citing it. And what's interesting and terrifying to me is that we saw very similar rhetoric and phrases being used in Charlottesville a few months ago if you recall the chants of the white nationalist groups in Charlottesville. One of them was the Jews will not replace us. And another was they will not replace us and that resumed again a few weeks ago when they returned to Charlottesville with their tiki torches chanting again they will not replace us. It's a direct parallel to what this French philosopher is talking about in his book. And these ideas are cross pollinating and spreading from Europe to the U.S. We saw it again just a few days ago when Richard Spencer spoke at the University of Florida and some of his supporters fired into a crowd.

[00:19:57] So these ideas are not innocuous. They're dangerous and they're spreading in both directions across the Atlantic. And I think that in trying to counter this movement and these ideas we need to remember that just because people are saying things and writing things doesn't mean that it's not dangerous because they catch on and they can lead directly to violence and they are no longer a fringe idea one of the other themes in this book is how far right parties have rebranded themselves. And I want to talk about that a little bit because it's quite surprising to a lot of Americans to hear

how politicians on the far right are selling themselves to constituencies across the board 10 20 years ago most gay voters most feminist voters most Jewish voters never would have considered voting for someone like Marine Le Pen or hair builders. That has changed what they have done is they've tried to appeal directly to groups of people who never would have considered voting for a far right party and they've done it by depicting Islam as the threat to all of these groups. So the argument is if you're a gay couple and you're shouted at or attacked in the street it's because Islam doesn't accept homosexuals. If a woman is taunted or attacked because of what she's wearing it's because of Islam and because there have been some attacks on synagogues often involving European citizens of Muslim descent.

[00:21:47] They blame Islam and these things are problems. They have happened. But again what we've seen is this attributing of collective blame to the entire group because of the crimes of a few of them. And what politicians like Le Pen have done is that they have presented themselves as the defenders of these groups. And I just want to read to you briefly a few passages to show in their own words how these politicians are attempting to attract these voters. The other group that has been a key to the strategy is old leftists which I mentioned earlier. They are going after former Communist Party voters former Social Democratic voters former Socialist Party voters. And the argument that they use to draw voters from the old left to the New Right is that they will be more socialist than the socialists when it comes to economic policy that they will protect the welfare state. But for us not them it's a nativist defense of the nanny state that exists in a lot of European countries. So it's not the old neo liberal right wing critique of the welfare state saying no government spending. They're saying more more money for health care more money for elder care more money for higher education. But for us and not for anyone who comes to this country as an immigrant or a refugee. And it's resonating with a lot of voters who used to vote for the left so let me just read you a few passages involving Marine Le Pen own words when I spoke with her because she is deliberately targeting these groups and is quite proud of herself for her success. The first is a passage from an old post-industrial French town in the Northeast called I OCE.

[00:23:43] The mayor is a 38 year old gay vegetarian who used to be a left wing activist with a group called workers struggle. Things have changed. Now the young mayor Fabian Engelman fears the great replacement and views halal meat as a harbinger of Islamization. Despite his own diet Engelman sees the absence of pork as truly worrying a conquest of France through its dishes. He said whether or not there is an ethnic or culinary great replacement happening in France it's unquestionably happening in politics in France's post-industrial north and east. Working class people who the left once saw as its base now vote for Le Pen with Marine Le Pen having discarded the image of fascists and skinheads ex leftists are now at the center of her party's modernization campaign. During the 2016 campaign she tacked to the left believing that there were more votes to be won from the Old Left than from Catholic conservatives. When I spoke to her she tried to avoid the phrase welfare state that's a socialist concept. She told me she appeals using a different rhetoric talking about a large nurturing state that fights for the little guy and not the rich. I defend fraternity she told me. The idea that a developed country should be able to provide the poorest with the minimum needed to live with dignity as a human being. The French state no longer does that. She said we're in a world today in which you either defend the interests of the people or the interests of the banks. If I

hadn't told you that Marine Le Pen was saying this you might have thought it was Bernie Sanders but Marine Le Pen won 45 percent in the Calais region.

[00:25:20] She told me it was socialist communist for 80 years. I won and she took over 52 percent there in the 2017 election. So this kind of rhetoric is working with these voters. The same thing goes for gay voters. And I'll read you another quote from one of her speeches. I hear more and more firsthand accounts of how in certain neighborhoods it's not good to be a woman or a homosexual or a Jew or even French or white. Le Pen said this was in 2010 one of her aides explained that it was a direct pitch to gay voters telling them that if they were being victimized immigrants and Muslims were the cause of their pain. Who best protects the weakest. Marine Le Pen. Her advisers best Johnston who said a gay who is attacked for being gay is going to seek a strong law and order platform and her inner circle has filled with more and more gay advisers during the campaign. Several of the top advisers were openly gay and she's also making this pitch to French Jews. When I asked her directly about it she said to me for a lot of French Jews the F in the fullness you now appears to be the only movement that can defend them from this new anti-Semitism nourished in the suburbs in a very natural way. They have turned towards us because we are capable I think of protecting them from that so. Le Pen is going for these voters and it's happening in other countries too.

[00:26:48] The most interesting and also most disturbing character that I met in the course of my research is a Dutch supporter of the far right TV party builders his party and he's the son of Holocaust survivors. And I decided to spend quite a bit of time with them because I found it both chilling and fascinating that he was a proud and vocal supporter of a far right party that also had some support from the darkest corners of the Dutch political scene. And I talked to him and I'd like to read to you in his own words how he's explains his support for this party because I think it gives a window into the thinking of these voters who are switching he said it's an outdated reflex for Jews to always say the problem is the extreme right. We have new enemies and we need new ideas. We shouldn't discriminate between the socialist anti Semite and the right wing anti Semite. Jews are always screwed in Europe. We should go for the short term. It's a historic anomaly that we're not in danger. We should be active and vote for parties that are good for us. Now we went on to say at this time in history Jews can't be heroes. I don't think in politics Jews have the luxury of choosing their allies but he did admit if I were a Muslim in Europe at this moment I'd be very uneasy. He told me if Europeans regain their manhood it could be bad. It's the history of Europe to treat foreigners terribly. We Jews know that nevertheless. He campaigned for builders and is one of the most prominent supporters of that party so what that character shows is that even people who acknowledge the danger and acknowledge where this could lead are still willing to support these parties and my argument. At the end of this book is that the longer term danger in liberal democracies is dismantling from within that democratic systems. If they fall prey to populist ideas and xenophobic ideas can start to erode and dismantle their own institutions because the leaders of these populist parties in Europe are not liberal Democrats.

[00:29:12] They're illiberal Democrats in the sense that they're simply majority Aryans. They have a very crude understanding of democracy. They want to have a referendum on every issue and they

view politics as a zero sum game in which a party that gets 50 percent of the vote plus one can do what it likes.

[00:29:29] It's a conception of democracy that's closer to what you see in Erdoğan's Turkey than what you would expect in a country like France or Hall under the United States. They're not interested in independent judiciaries checks and balances or constitutional protections for minorities for them. Whatever the people and that means 50 percent of the people at any given time once is the democratic will. It's a very crude understanding of democracy that would roll back a lot of the great achievements of constitutional democracies in Western Europe and the United States where we have seen similar rhetoric from our own president and the argument that I make is that terrorist attacks can shake democracies and they can be traumatic but they don't destroy advanced democratic states. But the allergic reaction to those terrorist attacks can if we start to dismantle the protections and the checks and balances and the constitutional order that is the pride of many of these countries and that backlash is a real danger because it can undo democratic traditions and institutions in the name of the people and whatever the current whims of the people are. And it's particularly dangerous because these nativist parties tend to present themselves as defenders of the homeland and authentic spokespeople for the natives but they don't really care about constitutional democracies or protections of minority rights. All they care about is what the masses want at a given moment and at a time of anger and backlash that can be very dangerous.

[00:31:23] If those politicians gain power and influence. I'll stop there and I would be happy to take any of your questions. Thanks very much

[00:31:40] Ok. I'll summarize the question is can the electoral college system in this country be changed. It has clearly been in conflict with the will of the majority of voters in some cases. I'm not an expert on election law. I have read about this because the question interests me. I've heard of certain solutions that have been proposed. Some of them involve a critical mass of states deciding internally at a state level that they will give their electoral votes to the popular vote winner nationally. That's the most promising solution that I've read about in the last year or two but I think that there's also a danger in blaming all of this. And Trump's victory on our antiquated electoral system because the fact is that it was a close election and you're right that the Electoral College system is what gave him a victory despite losing the popular vote but he won 60 million votes. And I think that that requires some introspection on the left because it should not have been close. And so the real question to me is what was the appeal and how did Trump attract voters who used to be committed Democrats.

[00:33:12] I'm from Michigan. Michigan went by 10 percent to Obama when he was running against Romney the son of the former governor of that state. So how did Trump win in Michigan. He clearly converted some Obama voters and I don't have all the answers to that question but I think that the kind of strategy that I was talking about that Marine Le Pen has employed this very conscious strategy to go over to go for the old left and appeal to them on economic policy and combining it with cultural grievances has been very effective. And I think that Trump's strategy was similar in many ways even though the electoral landscape is different in this country. If you if we want to understand how Michigan Wisconsin and Pennsylvania went for Trump I think looking at France and Holland and

Germany provide some answers. I hope that sort of answers your question. It's a very good question. I'll summarize again. How have intellectuals in Europe enabled all right politicians and how have those ideas that begin with intellectuals but how have they been adopted and used by some politicians is that an accurate reflection.

[00:34:34] I think it's one of the most important things that's going on and one of the most shocking for me. I spent quite a bit of time interviewing prominent Jewish intellectuals in France some of whom have adopted ideas that are very similar to Marine Le Pen's. One of them is a guy named Eric ZIMMER Well he wrote a book called The French suicide that among other things blamed Muslims and Muslim immigrants for many of the problems of France he sold half a million copies. He also despite being an observant Jew has been a public apologist for the Vichy regime in some of his speeches including speeches and synagogues basically excusing the Vichy regime and saying that it wasn't so bad because it wasn't extermination.

[00:35:30] So you know you are you have milder forms of this. There's a prominent famous French philosopher named Alan Finkel Kraut who's written quite a lot about this and he doesn't go as far as this other guy but he does sound a lot like Marine Le Pen when he talks about nostalgia for an older pure French culture.

[00:35:54] And to me it's it's worrying when you have a prominent intellectual both of these guys are the sons of foreigners one the son of Holocaust survivors the other of of of immigrants from Algeria Jewish immigrants from Algeria when it was still a French colony and yet they're going in for these same ideas and propagating them and as you know France is a country that values its public intellectuals much more than most places where someone like this can sell hundreds of thousands of copies of a fairly dense philosophical text. And so these ideas matter and when prominent people disseminate these ideas and they would in most cases never admit that they or they would even deny that they agree with Marine Le Pen they'll say I didn't vote for. But on paper the ideas are very similar and one of the the chilling things about it is you know on some of these really right wing Web sites you'll see commenters writing things denouncing Jews and all sorts of blatantly anti-Semitic rhetoric and then someone will attack one of these guys who I've just mentioned and someone will say no no no he's useful for us and they've legitimated some very dangerous ideas.

[00:37:13] And I think that that is allowing them to spread Yeah. So the question is is how does religious conflict play out in European countries when different groups are depicting the other as heretical or is that an accurate reflection. I think I think it's important. There have been trying to think how to phrase this. I would argue that the conflict has been exacerbated by politicians and by terrorist groups in the sense that you have a sort of amping up of the rhetoric on both sides.

[00:37:55] And so what you see is the far right and Islamist extremists are feeding off of each other. If you look at some of the recruiting tactics of extremist Islamic parties like his tough career in Europe one of the recruiting tactics they use in Denmark and the UK is to say you're not accepted here. You will never be seen as Danish or British. This society is inherently racist and you need to claim your Islamic identity. That is all you have. And on the other side you see this sort of ostracizing of Muslims

and the civilizational rhetoric that says they can never be fully part of us. They can never integrate. They're fundamentally irreconcilable which is something that you not only hear from politicians but also some very prominent writers in all of these countries have made these arguments that Islam is somehow different. It's not like the Catholics in the United States it's not like the Jews. It's different. But of course if you look at writing about Catholic and Jewish immigrants in this country in the 19th century a lot of the very same ideas were used to to present Catholics as somehow completely other on a similar bill and a threat. The Ku Klux Klan and in its early days was vehemently anti Catholic and and went after and violently attacked Catholic churches and priests.

[00:39:23] So we've seen this before with other religious groups and I think it's a revival of that. At the same time it's worsening because that aggression and and lack of acceptance is being weaponized by these extremist groups and used to recruit people. And so you see Brits going and fighting in Syria for ISIS Danes going and fighting in Syria for ISIS. And one of the most interesting people I met in the course of my research is the former head of Denmark's intelligence service. And we talked about this and he said it's not helping. You can't blame everything on the nasty combative rhetoric about immigrants. But as someone who was covertly monitoring potential extremists he said there's no doubt that this is contributing to it. And it's being used as a recruiting tool. And so what I think is happening is that the far right and the Islamist extremists are feeding off of each other. And it's this downward spiral that's polarizing these groups even further which is not to say that there's no problem at the beginning but it's spinning out of control because of the way it's being stoked by both sides.

[00:40:38] Well where do we go from here. I guess the summary of that question. It's it's difficult.

[00:40:44] I would go back to what I was saying earlier that the first step is not to ostracize Trump voters or Le Pen voters or builders voters.

[00:40:57] I think that that's happening unfortunately. Even in my own circle of friends and family people often say oh you know screw them. They're all a bunch of racists.

[00:41:09] They'll never change and I think if you just dismiss this very large number of people it makes the situation worse because that is precisely the the message they're getting from Fox News and from the president. And it sort of sends people deeper into their own political tribes when when you polarize that way I think it's one thing to attack the policies and ideas of the president and the people around him. It's another to attack those who voted for him because if you're going to win back those voters in a place like Michigan or Wisconsin some of them voted for Obama once upon a time something made them vote for Trump. I think that part of it is the way that savvy politicians manipulate our emotions as voters either bringing out our better angels or bringing out political demons.

[00:42:08] But it happens and people aren't static and unchangeable.

[00:42:15] And so I think part of it is is trying to understand what made them vote the way they did and how you might win them back very good question.

[00:42:28] How does my research.

[00:42:32] Are there any lessons from my research in Europe and the US for countries in the non western world I studied one country in that category. South Africa which is where my family is from. As you may or may not know South Africa has one of the largest populations of asylum seekers in the world. Since 1994 when it became a democracy it became a destination for refugees from across the African continent. Rwanda Congo when Zimbabwe's economy imploded it was right next door three to four million Zimbabweans went to South Africa and after Germany South Africa last year had the largest backlog of unprocessed asylum claims in the world. There's also been massive waves of xenophobic violence in South Africa involving black South Africans attacking and killing Somalis Congolese.

[00:43:35] It's an ugly situation and it hasn't been actively exacerbated by politicians.

[00:43:44] But at the lower levels at the city level and at the ward level even in major cities in South Africa you can hear some very nasty and ugly rhetoric from local politicians who find it easy to blame immigrants. And South Africa is interesting because it's a country where the majority was disenfranchised and discriminated against systematically by the state for 50 years. And in 1994 it becomes a democracy.

[00:44:18] And many South Africans like South Africans rightfully felt that they had come into their inheritance and they finally had received the rights and benefits that they'd been deprived of for so long. Yet at the same time you start to see people coming from other countries and sharing in that. And so it's kind of a classic model of xenophobia arising from from economic competition. But it's turned very violent. And I think that for me it was a lesson that this is not just a question of racist white Europeans hating Muslims and keeping them out.

[00:44:57] It can happen elsewhere too and the dynamics are very similar in South Africa. And the rhetoric is very similar. I'm focusing on that because that's the one place that I've studied in depth. But you do see something similar happening happening now with the Rohingya. There's a mass exodus there is what appears to be ethnic cleansing going on and many countries in the region are not letting these refugees in.

[00:45:29] And if that crisis gets worse it's going to become quite an ugly situation because right now many of them are going to Bangladesh that won't be sustainable in the long term and I also worry what will happen when there's a major climate crisis in that part of the world or in Egypt if there's a drought or Pakistan or if a country like Bangladesh goes half under water. These are countries with huge populations. People are going to be forced to flee. Some of them are going to go to places like Europe and Australia. And what we've seen with the Syrian refugee crisis I think could happen on a much worse scale with a much uglier political backlash.

[00:46:13] I hope that sort of answers your question. OK.

[00:46:17] This is a very difficult question for me to repeat but of the two main themes are is there something fundamentally incompatible or missing from from Western liberal democracies when it comes to dealing with with mass immigration as that and the other are any politicians actually dealing with it in a productive way. I'll answer the second part first because I think it's easier I would say the best examples in Europe are Merkel and the new French president Michael Merkel is a very low key politician she's not exciting or dramatic or flashy but she always wins and she just won again despite people having written her obituary politically after the refugee crisis. She lost a bit of the vote share this new party got 13 percent which is very worrying and dramatic but she's still Chancellor and I think what Merkel has done very effectively is shrug off the alarmism of the far right and say we'll manage. That was her slogan well we'll handle this. And even people I met some of the dissidents within Merkel's party it was not a popular policy within the CDU Merkel's party to let in a million refugees.

[00:47:46] There was massive dissent within the party. But she's the leader she declared that would be the policy. And they went along with it. I interviewed some of these people and they said we were debating it. We were opposed to it. We think it's a bad idea. But she's our leader and we're conservatives we we follow our leaders we. We went along with it and now we'll do our best to integrate all of these people. And maybe in 10 or 20 years it will be an economic boon for the country. So it's interesting too that the centre right in Germany even the people who opposed it didn't fall for this sort of irreconcilable civilizational clash rhetoric that you know we can never integrate these people it'll be impossible they'll never be Germans the country's going to hell because you know the best selling novel that I didn't mention earlier in Germany which is called Germany abolishes itself was a sort of social darwinist attack on Muslim immigration declaring that that Muslims were especially Turkish immigrants.

[00:48:44] We're already dumbing down Germany and that you know 20 years from now everyone would be speaking Arabic and Turkish instead of German and there would be no churches left and this was a bestselling book in Germany. This came out in 2010. So the ideas are there. Like it's in it's in the air. And so Merkel sort of shrugged it off and just said we'll manage and and the people in our party. Her major opposition was from within her own party which was politically convenient because her opponents in this last election most of them supported her on refugee policy. Apart from the far right party of day the Greens the Social Democrats they'd all supported her on the refugee policy. The other example is Michael. And he did this in a more dramatic way because he's a flashier politician in the final presidential debate in France which was really vicious. I mean it was much nastier than anything that we've ever seen in this country and the moderator just sort of cowered and disappeared and they were yelling at each other across a table three days before the election and at the certain point he said to Marine Le Pen sitting across the table you are the high priestess of fear sitting in front of me. And you know it was one of those moments in the same way that you know people talk about the Kennedy Nixon debate and these sort of moments in political history that changed things and he probably would have won anyway but he stopped her in her tracks and it was quoted everywhere the next day and he doubled down on it in his acceptance speech on election night saying We will not

succumb to this fear. It was a very direct attack on the fear mongering of Le Pen and the far right. And I think it was effective because it was honest and it called it out and it called it what it was.

[00:50:28] Now the harder part of your question I think I think numbers matter.

[00:50:34] You know a lot of people on the left will say oh we should have open borders and just let everyone in and it'll be great. I think that the strain can be too great sometimes and Germany's a good example of this. Merkel said We'll manage and they are managing there've been crises in the past two years there've been attacks that have involved refugees in some cases not all of them but there have been a few. You can't get a country the size of Germany can't admit one million people every year year after year. It's not sustainable. I think even a wealthy successful economy like that is it's just it won't work. And I think that policymakers and intellectuals and people on the left to consider themselves pro refugee and pro immigration need to acknowledge that the numbers do actually matter and if you really want effective integration that welcomes these people into societies so that these Islamic extremist groups that we were talking about earlier aren't able to recruit and say you're not welcomed in the society you're always going to be treated as a second class citizen. Effective integration is difficult when there are so many people at any given time because it happens in the schools that happens in the workplace and and there there's a point at which the system will buckle under that. So I think that I think that these countries are going to have to deal with that and have that debate honestly and say yes you know we're going to abide by our international legal obligations and desperate refugees come to us. We will assess their claims and admit them. But we also can't take in every single person and that's difficult.

[00:52:20] But one of the first ways to do that is to distinguish between refugees who have a claim under the Refugee Convention and people who are economic migrants and you know I interviewed a lot of refugees and among them I found some people who readily admitted Yeah I I couldn't find a job in Pakistan. And so I heard about Merkel and we decided to make our way towards Europe. And I'm sure that some of those people were fleeing a lousy situation. But I think that at some point politically there will have to be tough choices and say OK the Syrian refugee or the Afghan refugee who whose house was blown up has a claim and maybe the person seeking a better life does not.

[00:53:04] And that distinction needs to be made and it hasn't always been made and the other issue that I think is crucial here is that you know all of these people coming in 2015 risked their lives to cross over in very flimsy vessels in many cases. And a lot of them died and there are people still dying in the Mediterranean trying to come from Libya to Italy.

[00:53:34] And smugglers are exploiting these people. You know there's a really nasty trade. I mentioned the prices sixteen dollars for me. Fifteen hundred for these Syrian teenagers that I met.

[00:53:48] Same journey. I went on a nice hydro foil got my passport stamped.

[00:53:53] You know they almost died and so there's no reason for people to be making that journey because if if European governments actually want to resolve the crisis and be proactive about it they could do what many governments did during the the mid 1970s to address the.

[00:54:16] The Vietnamese boat people who were streaming out of South Vietnam a lot of countries setup consular offices in Hong Kong and other in Thailand and places in the region and process the claims of of South Vietnamese who were fleeing and it largely worked. And I've heard the suggestion from some of the more interesting and creative thinkers on these these policy issues saying the German government could have set up consular offices in three or four cities in southern Turkey because all of these Syrian refugees were passing through those cities and allow them to come and present their claims there in Bodrum rather than at the German Austrian border. And then you have a managed less chaotic version of it and you can reject people if they don't have a claim and you can put them on the next Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt if they do have one and they don't risk dying and it's orderly. And so I think that that's sort of one one step that could be taken. But obviously you can't do that for a million people. So I'll stop there. That was long winded. So what conclusions have I drawn about immigration in this country. I'll be honest that 80 percent of this book is about Europe. I did not anticipate Trump's victory and it was not initially a focus of my research. But it happened and that's part of the book now. And so I still believe in the idea of a comprehensive immigration reform settlement the outline of which was quite popular and shared across the aisle during the Bush administration and the Obama administration and the Republican Party has taken a turn towards a much more nationalistic nativist platform on immigration.

[00:56:10] I believe that there needs to be some path to legal status for people who are already here and who came illegally. I think that dreamers should have a right to stay and shouldn't be kicked out. But I do think there will have to be some sort of compromise if those things happen that secure the borders I don't think a wall is going to help at all logistically or on a policy level but if there's regularization of the many people who are already here and if people like the Dreamers are permitted to stay there will have to be a tradeoff. And in the sense of making sure that another wave of people aren't able to come in because politically this sort of compromise isn't going to hold especially after the president has riled up his supporters so much over this issue.

[00:57:10] So I do think that they'll have to be some difficult decisions what bothers me now is that that bipartisan effort an agenda that was really gaining traction for a long time has completely disappeared and now we're talking about walls. Let me just see if there's. Oh do we have to stop OK. Is there anyone who has not asked yet. I'll come. Yes. OK yeah. That's a very good question and it's very much on the agenda now because of the Austrian election. The question is basically can if centrist parties adopt a tougher line on immigration. Will it sort of halt the rise of far right parties. That so. I mean this is basically the argument that that was made in Austria in the election a couple of weeks ago. You have a center right. A young center right candidate who won the election but he adopted a lot of the ideas of the far right and the far right party did very well and there's likely to now be a coalition that involves both of them. So the question really is if the ideas win does it matter who actually wins the election. And I I would argue I don't know what's going to happen in Austria. But I do think that what I've seen talking to voters who supported these far right parties is they don't go back to

the centrist party after they make the leap to the Danish People's Party or to the film as you know in France they think they leave the Communist Party and they go to the far right.

[00:58:46] And that's where they are. And part of it is because the voters who've gone in that direction like the original and not the copy and so they think that the Social Democrats are just copying the rhetoric in order to try to win them back and they think it's a cynical ploy. I think it is possible that there might be some success but the track record isn't good. What what I see in the data in most European countries is that once they cross once the voters cross over they don't necessarily go back. And that has to do with this shift in the political spectrum where the ideas of the far right become the new center. And so it shifts the whole window of what's mainstream rhetoric and what you're seeing in a lot of these places is the far right approach to immigration has now become the mainstream approach to immigration.

[00:59:40] And when that happens I think it's going to be very hard for centrist parties to win those voters back. OK.

[00:59:47] I would argue that that this is not something that is exclusive to Islam. If you have ever walked through an orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem on a Saturday morning wearing shorts or if you've ever driven through an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood on Yom Kippur War I mean ambulances in Israel will get rocks thrown at them.

[01:00:16] You know there are other religions that don't have a particularly liberal conception of the state the same the same sort of rhetoric was used as I mentioned earlier about Catholics. I mean in the nineteen twenties this was even prevalent among women suffragists. You know they would argue that there was something inherently medieval about Catholics. There was also an argument that they were beholden to to Rome and not to the values and ideals of the country. So like this this sort of idea has has has been there before. I think that you you've identified some real problems there are Muslim citizens of Europe and refugees coming in who do not have a particularly liberal vision of the state. There are also native Dutch people and native German people who are members of neo-Nazi parties who don't have a particularly liberal vision of the state. So I don't think that it's exclusively a problem associated with religion but it is something that needs to be addressed and what I would say is that you know a liberal state generally permits freedom of speech up until a point.

[01:01:28] And so you know if there are staunch anti-abortion groups that protest outside of clinics it's generally permitted if they start shooting abortion doctors that's not allowed. And the laws of a liberal democracy would crack down on them I think the same should go for Islamist fundamentalists if they decide that you know they want to protest something that that is their right.

[01:02:00] And in the same way that we see the KKK marching through Jewish neighborhoods sometimes and the ACLU defending them. That is something that happens in liberal democracies but you draw a line at some point when it involves inciting violence.

[01:02:13] And I think that liberal democracies are equipped for that and they need to stand by that and punish anyone who transgressors regardless of what their religious motivation is or their ideological motivation.

[01:02:26] It's a hard question.

[01:02:27] I think that a lot of this is quite new in in that the contemporary political moment I felt as a writer that I was chasing a moving target and it was quite a difficult thing to report on. There are there are other people out there who are trying to write about this and following similar issues. I would have to sit and think a little bit more I think and I hope that there will be some other books coming out of Yeah you know I'm sorry I'm going to disappoint on the last question just because I would have to just sit and think about it for for a bit. I think that sort of for this political moment that there've been a lot of books sort of denouncing Le Pen and saying why she's dangerous in France and likewise in places like Germany. But I think it's so fresh that this current wave that that genre hasn't quite emerged yet and I hope that this can be part of it but there will be there'll be more. Thanks for having on

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