

**50 Greg Childs on Seditious Conspiracy;
Or, Why Words Matter**

Elizabeth Ferry:

From Brandeis University. Welcome to Recall this Book. I'm Elizabeth Ferry and I'm here with my co-host John Plotz. Hello, John.

John Plotz:

Hello.

EF:

And with our guest Greg Childs. Hi, Greg.

Greg Childs:

Hi.

EF:

Greg is from the Brandeis history department and he's here to talk with us about why and how words matter in the conversations around the attack on the capital of January 6th and other public mobilizations of the far right. Greg is the author of a book, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press, called the *Seditious Spaces: Race, Freedom, and the 1798 Conspiracy in Bahía, Brazil* that focuses on an anti-racist artisans' movement and Bahía with particular emphasis on the organization and promotion of the movement in the city's public and private spaces, he's an expert in thinking about concepts of revolutions, sedition, insurrection, and so on in the context of the Americas as a whole. So Greg, do you want to start us off by talking a little bit about your work and what it makes you think about the events of the last couple of weeks or beyond?

GC:

I can certainly do that. So, as you mentioned, my work very much centers on the concept of sedition and its uses... its ability to sort of cover a range of so-called crimes that at the time of my research the time period I'm focusing on that was

often... it was often used to smother any attempts to express claims of independence. I'm looking at people of African descent who feel, you know, that their life choices their possibilities for advancement in career and sort of life in general are being halted by, a prohibitive regime. And so, as they organize and start to speak publicly, they're charged with sedition, and then they're later charged with conspiracy. Once it becomes where clear that they were organizing to have a rebellion to sedition seems to be able to sort of have a life and attach itself to a number of, kind of expressions of political conflict.

And I think what helped me see that more clearly in this event that we just lived through is that there was a claim to be taking the nation back from those who would cause a broken society to emerge. And it's interesting because the claim certainly sticks. According to how we understand sedition, historically, the problem comes into play where in the United States sedition very clearly and definitively became codified in law as any attempt to threatened with harm, with violence. The physical contact element became much more pervasive in the U S context.

Whereas in most of the societies that I've looked at, whether it's Brazil, even in Cuba, where I've done research, even in revolutionary France, the idea of sedition is much more tied to speech. Physical contact and violence can be there, but it need not be there. It's the very idea of a public threat, period, bar none.

EF:

We've seen in the last, you know, really rapidly kind of changing vocabulary over the last week and a half where, you know, some of the kinds of signposts along the way have been "protestors," "patriots," "rioters," insurrection and I think insurgents is kind of wrapped up in that at least in the US context...

JP:

I think Biden used insurrection in his speech.

EF:

Yeah and kind of landing a little bit, at least within a universe of discourse that is condemning the attacks on insurrection, but you have some qualms about that, right, Greg?

GC:

It's primarily that concepts have historical life. And I think what is starting to be forgotten is how much insurrection was typically associated with in colonial errors and, and war, and in areas that are still under sort of Imperial rule or Imperial design insurrection is normally levied at people who were trying to transform a society, not people who are trying to maintain a social order. It's understood as people who operate without the strong support of the organs and institutions of the government, not those who, even if they're losing a presidency, have all the other institutions of disciplinary action of legal power at their disposal. It's something that I think is we need to think more about what people have at their disposal in terms of state power access to the most important organs of the state.

I mean, have police officers sliding aside and letting people walk through, you know, police officers and other instances putting their necks on black men. So it's, you have the organs of the state clearly in your, in your control, and you're clearly aligned with you. No matter if you're losing this presidency at local levels, people will still go back to worlds and States and cities where the regime is very Trump-like.

EF:

And maybe, yeah, maybe even if, you know, these kind of institutions of power might think that these are, you know, overly gross or gauche expressions of, we could call it White supremacy. They might be, you know, sort of more generally aligned with them. Is that part of your, would you agree with that statement? Maybe, you know, maybe the sort of people, these institutions that you're saying in power might say, okay, well, that's a little over the top. We don't necessarily want to assassinate Congress people, but they're not necessarily unaligned with the general aims of that.

GC:

I think they could say that. And I think this is actually part of the troublesome aspect here too, is that we also have to figure out what the meaning of a peaceful assembly actually means, right? They could certainly, could certainly say "a fringe element is exactly what you're describing, but it's not the majority of us, we were yelling, but it was peaceful. This is Washington DC. You can go to right in front of the white house on a daily basis and see protest, see people like they can, they can marshal a language, a language, and a scene of, you know, protest

loudly and at the halls of government are not unique in the United States of America. So why are you cracking down on us now?" So I think they could certainly make the argument. And I think that's where one of the other troubles comes in is when we talk about this is not just about, you know, how do we classify sedition? It is also how we classify, what, what it means to the right to assembly. What does that mean,

JP:

Actually, like sort of pursuing that in terms of etymology. As we were talking about insurrection and, and sedition, I just typed American insurrection into, you know, I asked the internet and what I got was the Wikipedia page, which is called list of rebellions in the United States. So I'm sure these are familiar to you guys, but Greg, since you're the historian, like Bacon's rebellion 1676, which was, you know, white colonists rebelling against the British authority, and then Shay's rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion, which again were completely unlawful actions against the government, but again, white settler colonialists. So those are called rebellions. And any thoughts about that? The word, I mean, cause I haven't heard this called a rebellion, but...

GC:

I mean, that term seems to entail a response to the breaking in activity. Otherwise it might be understood as just a riot. It might be understood as a slaughter or a massacre. It's the retaliation or the push back that I think... I think that's in a number of cases, not just in the United States. I think rebellion more than we actually understand it hinges on defensive response, not just kind of offensive attack or insults that for it, because, you know, the people who are rebelling in 1798 *Bahía*, they see themselves as reacting to a government that has already put them on the defense. And so their actions is offensive. Which, you know, now we're getting deeper into the hole, where do we start with the concept of offense in every, in any situation, where's the original concept of offense in this case? Offense can't be the same for any other, [or] in any case. What I mean by that is, the level of offense, starts with people feeling that they're starving and that they're, you know, government is doing nothing about it. Or in this case, the level of offense started for a whole group of people with an election that they think is fraudulent and a transfer of power that they think is going to bring... That's what they call their offense, where I try to think about where would, where would they think of themselves logically to win an argument?

JP:

Is there an argument that this is a legitimization crisis? Like, is that what we're talking about here? That it, because the word rebellion based on what you're saying, Greg, implies the authority is no longer legitimate and its control of violence or force or whatever. And so you get a legitimization crisis. If there seems to be somehow like a sanctioned response to that. Is that, I mean, are we at that point right now? Is that what people are fighting over when they're fighting over what to call this?

GC:

I think this is where I'm actually sort of like pleased and perhaps a little hopeful. It seems like people are thinking about the future in history and what we're going to think about ourselves in this moment. Which I think is a little... I don't think that's always the case in things like this. If we think back to our lives, let's think back. I don't think, most of us who were alive -- of course it is now -- I don't think most of us who were alive at the time were thinking about how do we... what do we call Rodney King's beatdown, like over and over. How do we take this to the news? How do we, like, it's not you know, this is not what you're calling it. This out-of-control Black man, there is police brutality at its highest form, right? People got outraged, we got, you know, we got ready for whatever kind of conflict could come, but a sustained sort of media, like just shove it down their throats. Like, this is how you have to think about this.

EF:

Yeah, critical. It's interesting because the genre of the side-by-side photo, right? Where you see, you know, okay, well, this was the response when the Black Lives Matter people were protesting. And this is the response. I think that really kind of, it's sort of the visual expression of what you're describing this kind of self-consciousness.

GC:

Yeah. Think we're doing that now. I think people are doing that. And I think the politics of naming are taking place because I think it's very critical how this gets described, how this gets marked, how this gets to in whatever case we may think of it archived, where they were talking about like at the state level, at a local level, with that we need to think about very carefully what words we're using, because they really do matter.

JP:

I think it seems significant that we don't even have, we haven't agreed for the purposes of this podcast on what we're calling the Capitol Hill incident, right? We're still...I mean like a year from now, what are, what's the Wikipedia article going to be called?

GC:

Yeah. I mean, I never fully thought it out and just, that's what it always seemed to me from the moment that I heard insurrection. I thought, I don't know how this is an insurrection for people in power, this seems like they're trying to prove...that they see a revolution already happening and that for them this is the counter.

JP:

Counterrevolution. Huh, wow.

GC:

Counterinsurgency, that's even a better way of putting it, counterinsurgency...They have control of the state, right. Have control of the state. They have control, they have control. Maybe not control. Maybe that's too harsh of language for some people, but they have an accord, say, that with a number of organs from the Supreme court all the way down to the police.

There's already an accord. And that speaks volumes about when you think about what's happening to your country, if you're on that side of the ball game. I can see how you would see yourself losing everything that's been worked for the last four to five years in terms of in this country, one where you don't have to hide, where you don't have to be in the shadows with your racism, where you get to be fully and completely who you are, even if people have cameras on you and you can tell them yes, I believe in white supremacy. I've definitely seen those videos around. Yeah. And so you get this society where they're, they're really feeling this and I'm like, all right, we've turned a corner. This is our country again. And we're never giving it up.

And they won [they say]. There's no way they won. There's no way they won. It becomes this narrative of corruption was already baked into it. And why do we even play this game? You know, sedition doesn't have to have anything to do

with you know, actually attacking the organs of government. It could very well be you know, just putting yourself in a position where a movement or an environment is happening around you and you just happen to be working in it. In fact, there's this major seditious conspiracy and Portugal in 1758, an attempt on the life of the king, it doesn't work, but it's an absolute attack on royalty. And that is what makes this a case of treasonous sedition. Yeah, this is why I said a case of treasonous sedition. And once that sort of once that category of, of crime has been placed on this entire, you know, area made up, so to speak, of three or four families estates, all those people working in it are also engaged in seditious conspiracy.

EF:

Let me ask you, both of you -- so we just came off a conversation with David Cunningham about asymmetrical policing and about the sort of both coded and not-so-coded racializing of different, you know, descriptions of protest or social action or social movements. And that's clearly a dimension here and from your work I know that it's a dimension of what was happening in *Bahía* as well. How does, you know, questions about race get sort of smuggled in or just carried in, in these conversations?

GC:

Well, I would say in the era I'm working in, you know, and I think it's...you see and continue to see arguments about this in the US context with John Brown, but it's totally, it's different because of the landscape of Latin America and the way people will think about, you know, what does wealth do for you as a light-skinned person? You become a white, you're not passing, you're just understood as white in their everyday social order. I think what, what happens in the exact opposite way, too. Too much closeness to blackness will get you labeled as someone who's part of a black rebellion.

And so, you know, one of the strongest cases of this in my research is a guy who is a teacher of Latin grammar and, you know, surprise, surprise, teachers didn't make a lot of money back then either. So he's not making a lot of money. He gets involved in this conspiracy because he happens to know and have conversations on the regular with a couple of the organizers. He gets involved in it and gets arrested, and he is sentenced to 50 lashes in public. Now at the last minute that's commuted and he is sent to non-Portuguese-speaking parts of Africa. So totally put in no man's land. But in both of those cases, the judgment

is that this was a crime carried out by a caste of mulattoes. So he's become part of that caste. He sent as a white man to act in a place that, where there are no Portuguese. So, you know, the idea is that he can't lean on anything, just sort of like a prop himself up and move through this order.

So in that world, I think you get classified as Black. Whereas I think, you know, here that happens, it's not a, it's not a unique phenomenon in Brazil that white people get involved and rebellions that are primarily about ending slavery. So that's not a unique thing. I think, you know, when it, when it happens in the United States, it just becomes a question of do we classify this as, you know, a race traitor, if you're on one side of this historical, what do you classify this as someone who was just a man ahead of his time and somebody who was good and someone who was bad, or think of him as, you know, a white, one of the few white men who, you know, was actually fighting for, you know, black liberation

EF:

Or a visionary, that's another one. Yeah.

GC:

You look at it in those, those, those registers. But I, you know, if we take this to the current situations, right, from Charlottesville to, you know, the Capitol, there isn't a narrative afterwards with these white people, all of a sudden being Black.

And I think that's very interesting that, you know, you can participate, you can participate in such actions and not really lose the prerogatives of whiteness, even if you're so-called publicly shamed. That's what I would say. I think that's the way race gets put into the equation here on one side. It's, you know, "they couldn't have pulled this off without help. So who was it? Who are the white traitors who are the ones who are organizing and helping them, who don't even know, you know, their own best interests?" Right? You know, "who are the White folks who were signing off on these," you know, "these child rapists," you know, as I've heard references made to certain, to some of the candidates this year, particularly most recently Raphael Warnock, which did not work you know, but angle that's taken, that's the angle that's taken quite, quite frankly. It's often taken. So I think that's a race war.

A race war is always around the corner. It's always, you know, Black violence, but it's always organized theoretic or supposedly by Whites who just don't

know their interests well, who have the money to fund these things. So, you know, it's that when I read it, that's how race comes into the equation. And in this moment, it is a question of these people protesting outside--they will always have their whiteness. They will never lose it. As we've talked about Ayanna Presley's panic buttons are ripped out, you know, it's become in that moment. so important for some people to make sure that of all the people who can't get out, if we get close enough to her, we got her, right. It's like this outspoken black woman is a target of...I mean, can you imagine reaching under and, and feeling there-- You, you have no panic buttons, right? It's terror compounded by what's already out at the door, you know, banging, and you, I imagine that's a horror that none of us would want it to be exposed to.

JP:

So, so wait, Elizabeth, I know you were asking about 19th century stuff, but can I follow up on this question, Greg? Cause you know, you and I, when we were talking before you were mentioning Hannah, Arendt's "On Revolution." And I was thinking about that a lot too. And I was going to ask you how you think about this distinction that she makes between in her mind, the kind of valorized political revolution versus the dangers of a social revolution. So I admire Arendt a lot as listeners to the podcast will know, but what she praises in the American revolution seems like a capacity to make a distinction, that I hear you saying, is actually a bad faith distinction doesn't really exist because the distinction is between abstract theoretical claims for conceptual categories, like equality, universal human rights, things that are known as goods for all, versus what Arendt says is kind of like the contamination and the emotional complications of social role privilege. And she just kind of wants to bracket those. But I hear you saying that there's something shaky about that logic, is that, am I reading you right?

GC:

I mean, if we're going to cut to the chase here again, I really, I think her problem in terms of the social and the political is that she refuses to see that any of these lofty concepts are all concepts about controlling the bare rights of life. That if the social is just about people working and toiling, and they're never right, they never rise to the level of thought. It's more a question of: this is the result of a conflict over who gets to distribute and control rights. And at that level, she's

bracketed something in the interest of making you forget the hinge that holds it together. And the hinge that holds that bracket together is, none of this is possible without a conflict over who controls access to rights, who controls access to using them and distributing them.

And when we start to talk about making laws and creating police, it's about controlling a social, making a social order work, so that the distribution of goods, integration of wealth, all of that operates smoothly. So, you know, and you can take this all the way, I think, even to J.G.A. Pocock and his arguments in his book, *The Machiavellian Moment*, where the United States is the last virtuous revolution. It's the last one in which virtue rather than the concrete rule, you know, the operations of organization and logic, it's the last one in which there is a political grammar or things that correlate to each other where equality, liberty, and civic rights, like these things have a logic that, you know, you might call linguistically strong in terms of how he makes his argument, but it remains that within that field of thought, virtue kind of speaks to logic not in the abstract, but in a system of words and languages and concepts that supposedly cohere and make a unity. And I think the social revolution seems messy, and that's why it needs to be bracketed off. But for me, it really hinges on the fact that this is a conflict over who controls access and distribution of rights.

And in that regard, counterinsurgents at the Capitol believe that the forthcoming future will deprive them of the access to rights and goods. And all of a sudden those who were on the side of we are the world of debate, lofty ideas, those who run our country, the organizers and rulers of our country are of our background, you know, they're gonna work for us. And I think now more than ever, I think because of the way, you know, the right feels about race, I don't think people really understand how stubborn that commitment to the only thing I have, that's better than you, is my whiteness, I'm going to hold on.

EF:

Right. Right. it's the whiteness as property kind of...yeah.

GC:

"We had it." I don't think we think enough about like how these people are feeling right now. "We had it, we had it in our hands. We thought we were going to not going to get another four years." I think some of these people thought this was going to be a new Jacksonian era where it creates a system and begins to appoint the new head of state that he, if you get Trump's sign off, you know,

you're gonna, you're going to be able to walk into the white house. I think they thought this was the inauguration of a new Jacksonian era.

EF:

I wonder, Greg, tell me what you think. Or John, whether that kind of investment in whiteness or the sort of, you know, the “wages of whiteness” always has that feeling of, we almost had it and now we're losing it. If that's kind of like a constitutive dimension of it, because that's what we see in the civil war, that's what we see during reconstruction. That's what we see in, you know all of the kind of moments of violence against Black people, lynching, and, you know, all kinds of things. That's kind of, like, in the weave of it.

GC:

I think we can always make in this, in this scenario links to... and, and I would just say the long shadow of the civil war kind of is we're feeling it more right now. But yeah, I would say it's always there. I just think it's different now, because they thought eight years, they thought they thought eight years before Trump was a nightmare. You wouldn't survive. And they came out with Trump. It's almost like after eight years with Obama, when everyone really thought it was going to just stay on the democratic ticket and Hillary Clinton would win. People actually thought...some people actually really thought that we were turning a corner on some things. And once Trump got elected and thinking about how people felt and how people looked the day after, the next few days after, it was this shell shock. I won't even say, I can't say a shell shock. It's “we knew they were going to steal it. We were meaning to do it. They've been corrupted since they put that Black president in the office.” Right? There's a narrative here.

EF:

Okay. So maybe this is a good moment to shift to our Recallable Books section. So I'm gonna ask you first, Greg, as our guest, what would you like to bring to the table?

GC:

So yeah, I also have some thoughts on this. I want to pivot back to me talking about, thinking about Ayanna Pressley. You know, we're here in Boston, so it hits real close to home. We're thinking about her in that Capitol building, and

basically attempting to occupy space that she had earned and worked. So to occupy in the Senate. And then to see, you know, these stories about the buttons being ripped out, I just, you know, it made me think about how black women in this, in particular, and it's very stark. And I think on point in terms of being able to sort of like, be spot on the money in this case, how black women tried to work through these different geographies of power and mapped them differently and sort of say, I belong in this space and I'm going to use it in a way that's different from yours and repeatedly have to come up across, you know, whether it be the plantation master, the overseer, the police, the teacher, the men, whatever it may be, kind of trying to think about putting you back in place, pushing you out of space.

And so I was thinking about that a lot, and it kind of brought up for me, Stephanie M Camp's book, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, which is really the book that lays out this idea of rival geographies and how black women, you know, move through them and how they are affected by them. So that book was very key for my thinking and talking about counterinsurgency at the Capitol.

EF:

All right. Thanks. John?

JP:

Yeah. So I'm going to go back to I think the first ever scholarly book review I wrote in 1996 was this book by Charles Tilly called *Popular Contention*.

EF:

When you were only five. Right?

JP:

Right, right. But I think I was bald then too. It was called *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758 to 1834*. And I admit that sounds like a snooze of a title, but this is before the days of digital humanities, but Tilly and I think a team of researchers did something really amazing, which is they looked at the verb/ subject/ object combinations that different newspapers use to describe different kinds of uprising and discontent. And he's able to chart this genealogy of what he calls "the rise of new collective repertoires of action." He actually has

a whole analogy to jazz, to introducing a new musical motif and playing it out. And it was just such an eye-opener to me, because it was actually, you mentioned Pocock before Greg. But it's the similar logic of like etymology as concept, you know, that the way that people use different verbs is not just going to tell you as a historian retrospectively what they were thinking.

It's telling them what to think, you know, how to position one kind of violent action versus another violent action. And it's not a simple story. It's not like, Oh, well, the Tories described collective violence with these verbs and the Whigs described it with these other verbs, but it's more like a, it's kind of the ebb and flow of how different events take on, you know, different nuances and different meanings, depending on the sorts of verbs you use to describe the action. And it was just an eye-opener for me, that book. And I still, I went back to it this afternoon and I'm like, no, this is still amazing.

EF:

Great. All right. Well, what I'm going to bring is as usual, not the thing that I thought I was going to bring in at the beginning of this conversation, but instead George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, which was written about 20 years ago. And that really kind of thinks through the various mechanisms by which whiteness becomes this category that sort of like other forms of capital--reaps benefits, material, ideological, institutional benefits. And I have not read the 20th anniversary re-issue of hear that it has a new introduction that speaks specifically about questions of white fears of loss and the rise of the alt right. So clearly relevant to our conversation.

So, all right. So what remains is for us to thank Greg very much for joining us today. Thank you, Greg.

GC:

Thank you for having me. It was a good talk. A lot of, lot of wonderful things came up. I'm glad that I could participate in it.

EF:

Well, let's all keep talking and listening, as you say.

GC:

Definitely.

EF:

Recall This Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It's affiliated with Public Books and is recorded and edited in the Media Lab of Brandeis Library usually, and also in our, in our bedrooms and living rooms by Plotz, Ferry and a cadre of colleagues here in the Boston area. And beyond our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy "Fly Away," Sound Editing is by Claire Ogden and production assistance including website design and social media is done by Nai Kim. Mark Dellelo oversees and advises on technological matters. And we appreciate the support of University Librarian Matthew Sheehy, and Dean Dorothy Hodgson, and of the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis.

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And you may be interested in checking out past episodes, including conversations with Hayal Akarsu on community policing in Turkey and with David Cunningham on asymmetrical policing and its history in the United States. So thank you all for joining us and goodbye until next time.