

## **Recall This Book 51**

**(Recall This Buck 3)**

### **Thomas Piketty on Inequality and Ideology**

**(Adaner, JP)**

**February, 2021**

#### **John Plotz:**

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall this Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of issues, problems, and events. Welcome to our third episode of Recall this Buck, a short series, which is designed to explore the curious history of money and the wealth that underlies it. If you haven't yet heard our episodes with Chris Desan and Peter Brown, you may want to check them out.

So our key question today is simple. "What is the nature and origin of the glaring and the growing inequality that everywhere defines wealth distribution in the 21st century, both between societies and within them?" And perhaps more importantly, as Phillip Larkin puts it, "why aren't they screaming?" He's talking about death, not inequality, but I think the point remains the same. That is, what sorts of stories do societies and individuals within those societies tell themselves so as to tolerate such inequality and the poverty and misery it produces. And even to see that inequality as part of the natural order of things.

I think nobody has been more persuasive in recent years in framing, and also in beginning to answer those questions than our guests today, the French economist, Thomas Piketty, or *Toma Pickety* as I will try to call him when he appears. I'm John Plotz and my co-host today is Adaner Usmani, a sociologist currently working on the origins of mass incarceration. You heard him discussing that terrific project back in episode 44. So hello, Adaner.

#### **Adaner Usmani:**

Hello, thanks for having me.

**JP:**

It's great to co-host with you. We will shortly be joined by Professor Piketty who teaches economics at three universities, I discovered, two in Paris and one in London. He's most famous for his 2013 bestseller *Capital in the 21st Century*, which analyzed a rising inequality in the modern world by proposing fascinating new ways to understand data on income, wealth accumulation, and the changing value of labor.

In 2020, he followed that thousand page tome with another doorstop of a book *Capital and Ideology*. I'm holding it in my small hand right now, which looks at the belief systems that underlie that data and tries to shed light on the question I mentioned above, "where does inequality come from and why does societies naturalize and put up with it?" So "why aren't we all screaming?"

Okay. Adaner, we've got a few minutes here. I want to do this kind of color-commentary style, like announced series before the big match as the, as the players approach the pitch. What are your expectations for today's conversation? What are you looking forward to hearing from Piketty and where would you like to press him the most?

**AU:**

Well, I loved your introduction and I think in your introduction I see a little bit of the difference that you and I have. And I think in some ways, Thomas is probably on your side, since you summarize the argument, I think very much the way that he puts it, which is that these changes or the lack of change and inequality is, has a lot to do with the way in which people see the world. And I think my provocation today in today's interview will be that it has less to do with the way in which people see the world and more to do with the incapacity of people to remake the world the way they would like it to be.

**JP:**

So you're saying that *realizing* the situation or *envisioning* the ideological, you know, presuppositions of a society is irrelevant to actually changing it.

**AU:**

I think that would be the strong version of the argument. That version of the argument might apply to something like, let's say, hypothetically American

slavery or something like that. Our explanation for the reproduction of American slavery over time might be that slaves accepted slavery, but it might also just be that slaves didn't accept the rule of their slave owners, but were forced to accept it by the fact that they had no means to challenge the rule of slave owners.

The other way, the slightly weaker argument, --which I think is still compatible with my general approach--is to say that people might come to accept the rule of slave owners, but in the end, that's simply a consequence of the fact that they have no ability to challenge slave owners.

So it's a rationalization of their domination. It's a rationalization of their powerlessness, in which case it does no independent explanatory work. It's just the kind of mediating cause between their powerlessness and the stability of the world.

**JP:**

But can I just ask you how you have thought about the, the set of race and slavery questions that I proposed asking him?

**AU:**

Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, how would you put, how did you put it exactly?

**JP:**

I mean, I just kind of wanted to know where the line of causality was. Cause I feel like, you know, do you understand slavery as producing racial ideologies or race thinking, as you know, legitimizing and opening up the door to slavery?

**AU:**

Well, the way that you just put it there, I think both of those things could be... race could definitely legitimize racial ideology. I think certainly has the function of legitimizing slavery. I think the question I might ask is *in whose eyes and for whom?* That's one of the bigger questions I have about ideology in his book. He seems to want to argue that ideology is about convincing the ruled. Not simply the audience of ideology is the rule, but for slavery, that seems particularly weird in some ways, right? Are we, is it, is it the case that

racial ideology really convinced slaves to be reconciled to slavery? I'm not so sure. I'm not sure how you would answer that.

**JP:**

I guess the other set of questions I have, but they're harder to ask. It has to do with like the long tail of slavery. So in other words, think about wealth distribution in the United States and its profoundly racial nature. Like how do we link that to the legacy of slavery? Like, do we see it as coming out of the proprietary ideologies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or is it something that's more ongoing in the present day?

**AU:**

Yeah. It's a great question. But I mean, to the extent that...so do you mean something more than simply...? Is it the consequence...Is it the simple consequence of the fact that after slavery, because of slavery, white people had such a disproportionate share of America's wealth and then you sort of just run the American experiment forward and that's what continues? Is that kind of the question or is there a specifically an ideological element that makes it difficult to challenge?

**JP:**

Yeah, the question is how much the ideological or cultural elements are kind of ongoing and sustained on a daily basis in ways that are decoupled from the slavery in the past, versus just as you said, it just trundles forward because black people were on the underside of the wealth gap.

**AU:**

Right. I think it's a good question to ask Piketty because also because, you know, cross-nationally, this becomes, it becomes...I mean, if it's the case that we see it very difficult, see that it's difficult to challenge slavery, to challenge wealth inequality everywhere. It would seem that America-specific explanations might need supplementing because it can't simply be things that are specific to America that make it difficult to challenge wealth inequality because everywhere is having trouble challenging wealth inequality.

**JP:**

Right. Yeah. I mean, so that's, I really valued the chapters on Haiti and the way that the debt was calculated, the ongoing debt of slavery you know, the so-called compensation for slave owners like that, that was still being paid off from Haiti...is just an amazing question. Okay. So I'm going to admit him and we're going to just go.

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**Thomas Piketty:**

Hello.

**JP:**

So, I'm John Plotz, I'm the one who emailed with you. And colleague, my colleague will ask the first question.

**AU:**

It's a real pleasure to have you: thanks very much for being here. We're just going to jump right in if that's okay. So one of the things that I really admired about *Capital and Ideology* was the way in which you tackle both analytical and normative questions. So you gave us an account of the evolution of inequality over time in place, but you also tell us very forthrightly about what we should do about it, about what governments should do about it. I wonder if you could speak, just to start a little bit more about the relationship between kind of the descriptive and the prescriptive in your book.

**TP:**

You know, this is a book about the history of inequality regimes. And as you know, one of the main conclusions is that this history is primarily determined by political forces, ideological forces, because all human societies and all, you know, actors at the bottom of society, or the top of society, you know, are trained to give meaning to equity and inequality and to make sense of the world. And so it's not, you know, I did not invent normative perspective and inequality. You know, people have a normative perspective and inequality and to me it would be strange if, as a scholar, you know, I would sort of put myself outside of society.

And just so you know, of course I'm trying to have some distance because I'm very fortunate to have a job where I can spend days and weeks and months just reading books and working with data. I can look at historical periods, which are now very far away from us. So it's possible to put a distance, but, you know, I think at some point we have to, you know, we're so fortunate to do these jobs. We have to try to return a little bit, you know, for what we have received.

**JP:**

I love the book in general, but one of the things I love most is your account of the slave societies and their intimate integration into the proprietary ideology. And I wanted to kind of ask you...it's almost a, it may be an impossible chicken and egg question, but it's about slavery as a vital ingredient of modern proprietary ideology. That is, do you see slavery as a necessary, is it a necessary component that makes those ideologies fall into place, or rather does the existence of those ideologies enable slavery to arise in the extreme forms that you see in the slave societies?

**TP:**

It all happened together, so it's difficult to disentangle. But I think, you know, you can imagine an industrialization process and the development process without slavery, you know, I think it was not necessary. It was, you can imagine you know, a world with a different balance of power, both material and ideological, with different state power in Europe, in Africa, in Asia, in America, you know, would have led to a form of international economic development with a more balanced distribution of, you know, power across societies. So that you know, you don't have a forced labor going from Africa...It would have been a pretty different world, but you know, technically you could have an Industrial Revolution with a very different distribution of the gains from industrialization.

So the slaves, instead of being slaves, could have been free workers getting higher wages and you know, moving to America because they wanted to have higher wages, which would have implied that the capitalists and slave owners would have had a much lower living standards and much lower, capacities to, to accumulate capital for themselves, then what they had. But this does not imply that capital accumulation could not have taken place. Capital accumulation could have taken place in a more collective manner and in a less unequal manner. You know, we know from the 20th century that the

reduction of inequality is not, is not bad for growth and for capital accumulation, because even those people at the top accumulate less, you know, you can have more direct accumulation by the middle-class.

And we also know that more corrective forms of accumulation starting with human capital education are very important in the long run. And you certainly don't want this to happen only within a very small group. In principle, you can imagine a different 18th century, 19th century, where things would have happened completely differently. Now this would have required the balance of power between States. So, here of course it's more than ideology. You know, I stressed in my book, balance of power between States and sort of relative power of relative state capacities develop a different rhythm in a different part of the world are absolutely critical for everything that that happened. But at the same time, you know, this balance of power itself comes with the rise of different ideologies, which allow different process of state centralization and state construction to assert themselves and legitimize themselves.

When they come into conflict, those trajectories that will be chosen out of these times of crises are very, you know, indeterminate...do not just depend on the pure balance of ideology. So anyway, we can imagine a completely different World that was...this requires quite a lot of imagination. And in those specific trajectories that were taken, then of course, slavery played an absolutely central role. The vast majority of the cotton used in textile manufacturing in the 19th century Britain or European or North American plants, you know, came from slave plantations from the US South. So, yeah, technically, you know, this was truly central to the process.

**JP:**

So I guess I have one final related question about that, that slavery question, which is, you know, as an American, you can't, we can't help thinking about the racial legacy here. I know it's different in other countries, but you know, everywhere around the world, one of the legacies that slavery has left is racialized thinking.

And I just wonder again, probably a hard-to-answer question about causation, but how race and racialized ideology fits into your sense of both of the legacy of slavery and, how much we understand current racial configurations as coming out of that slavery configuration of the early modern period--and how much you would account for it by other, you know, by other mechanisms or other means?

**TP:**

You know, I think both in the US, but, and more recently in Europe, you know, we have been...we've tried to forget, and we've tried to neglect how important this legacy was. But I think we have to confront this legacy and you know, in the book I try to show that there's a discussion about recuperation, which we need to work together with a discussion with sort of a more universal perspective on economic justice for the future, but we need to articulate the two logics. So in terms of reparation, I think, again, it's not only in the US, but it's striking that US Congress voted in 1988 a law to transfer, you know, 20,000 Japanese-Americans that were still alive in 1988 that were interned during World War Two.

Somehow, the African-Americans were subject to segregation to the 1960's. So not just confined in jail for one or two years, but sometimes for 20 years, 30 years, or their entire lives. They could not walk on the same street, go to the same school...This was a serious prejudice. And it would have made sense in 1964 or in 1988 or today, you know, to have a similar kind of symbolic reparation and not only symbolic in some material dimension. And would have made even more sense, of course, in 1865. And, you know, a promise actually was made at the end of the Civil War that they could receive one mule and forty acres of land.

Of course his promise was never applied. France received, you know...the French state received from Haiti, huge payment for almost one century and half, you know, between 1825 and 1950 in order to compensate, you know, the slave owners in France, in metropolitan France, which had lost their property because of the independence of Haiti. And when people in France today say, *Oh, you know, this is a long time ago, it's too late*. Well, okay, it's too late, except that, you know, there were expropriations that took place during World War Two, or sometimes even during World War one, which we are still compensating today, probably rightfully so.

But then if you refuse to have a discussion about Haiti or racial segregation in the US then you are in troubles, because then you give people the feeling that the notion of justice that you're trying to build is not really fair. It's not treating, you know, different prejudice and different discriminations the same way. And I think a big part of the difficulties we have, just to live together today, you know, if you think of the issue of Antisemitism, the issue of the attitude to Islam, the issues of racial conflict in the US--a big part of these conflicts have to do with our difficulties to come



with the notion of justice in terms of reparation for past prejudices during World War Two or during the slavery or during colonialism.

And you know, some people in my country, in France, still believe that this is a US problem, and that in France, this is not an issue. But, you know, segregation, it's not only as a payment from Haiti You know, segregation in the colonial Empire or in Algeria until the 1960s was in many ways comparable to that in the US. And this is something which people have a hard time confronting. At the same time, we need to look at the future. And so when I propose a minimum inheritance for all, 120,000 euros at the age of 25, this is really, for all, you know, whether your ancestors were slaves or slaveowners , everybody would receive 120,000 at the age of 25

So I think we need to do both. We need to have some specific reparation sometimes symbolic (pedagogical museum) sometime material for some specific injustice of the past. And at the same time, you know, look at the future of universal redistribution mechanism, which will in practice benefit a lot to the, you know, people will come from the minority groups, which are, which are still very much concentrated in the lower socioeconomic groups in societies, minority society, or, you know, postcolonial migrants in European societies.

But, we need to have both the reparation and the universal perspective on economic justice and that's difficult part because very often people want to hear only about one or only about the other and finding the right balance between the two is very complicated.

## **AU:**

So one of the really striking things about the book is that the way in which you tell the story of the rise and fall, or fall and rise, and hopefully the fall again of inequality is centrally about the way in which people see the world about ideology, about ideological change. So when people see it differently, the world will change. And when people see it, when people simply swallow ruling ideology, the world is not likely to change very much at all.

There are two ways in which someone could criticize this argument, which I was hoping we could explore. The one criticism is that this argument overstates the extent to which people in fact, accept ruling ideologies. So I guess the question that I would ask is what evidence do we have that people, in fact, accept ruling ideologies and they've accepted ruling ideologies over the

course of history? It could just be that they don't have the means to rebel against their superiors. Under normal circumstances, it would be kind of foolish for slaves to try and overthrow slave owners, peasants, to challenge landlords, workers to challenge capitalists. So what evidence do we have that people at the bottom of social, political, economic hierarchies that actually accept ruling ideologies versus simply being unable to change the world that they inhabit?

**TP:**

Yeah. You know, I think it depends on which situation. Well, in the case of the case of slavery, you know, I'm not saying that slaves ever accepted the ideology that they should be slaves. There's something different, which is mobilization capacities or risk you take in case of a revolt. Although, you know, in the long run, I find some of the rise of the literacy in family life and then the literacy of US slaves also, you know, mobilization capacity.

Generally speaking, slavery is really the extreme example where, you know, you don't need to have a very sophisticated counter-ideology to be against the ideology of slavery when you are a slave. But in most inequality ideology, including the pre-ternary societies that I study before the French Revolution and before the 19th century, all the proprietary ideology of the 19th century and early 20th century, it's not so easy to find an alternative.

I mean, there are alternatives which have been developed socialist, communist...brands of socialists and communists ideologies were developed in the 19th century in order to serve as an alternative to the proprietary ideology. But, you know, as we now know some of these ideologies, sort of other platforms that sort of work, and so most of the segments of these ideologies, you know, in effect, it didn't work so well. So this illustrates very clearly that, you know, finding your content ideologies is usually not so simple. And you know, that's really what I want to stress in the book is that I think there's always a tendency in the Left you know, to say we sort of know what we should do. And the only problem is that, you know, we have sort of a group of very powerful people who don't want this to happen. So all what matters is the balance of power.

I'm not saying the balance of power is not important. I'm not saying that you don't have people who are trying to protect what they have, that's obvious. But you know, the problems that we are trying to solve are not simple. And you know, we know from stories that the pure balance of power...in 1917 in Russia, it was a balance of power allowed, you know, the

rise of completely different kind of state, you know, proletarian state instead of a proprietarian state. But, you know, in the end, this balance of power led to the development of a set of institutions and rules, you know, which did not lead to the emancipation of the working class that they were supposed to lead.

I think things could have happened differently. You know, it seems that if there were a different group of people, a different... it was not written in advance that it would happen like this. And all the socialist movements, you know when the social Democrats take power in Sweden back in 1932, you know, that developed a different kind of institution ideology, you know, starting from a different starting point of course.

But still, you know, I show in the book that Sweden, it was not a nice egalitarian place begin with. It was an incredibly inegalitarian place, different from Russia, of course, but it was not written from the beginning that things would need to go in such different directions. Political and ideological mobilization was critical in both cases and will be critical in the future bifurcations.

**JP:**

Finally, I wanted to ask as Americans, we feel like we have to ask a question for you about how you view the last four years of President Trump, you know, in terms of where the developments are, like, whether we see an advent of some kind of new ideology, like a new turn in the Neo-prorietarian or is it just shifting deck chairs? You know, could this be as big as Thatcher and Reagan? Yeah.

**TP:**

Yeah, I'm not sure. You have to see from a European perspective, we've already seen a little bit something like Trump, when we had Berlusconi in Italy we had something that comes close. No, it's not the same, but it comes, it comes relatively close, you know, in...except of course Italy is not the superior power of the world. And so it was much less important and we talked much less about that, and in the US you didn't talk at all.

In France, you know, where we are much closer to Italy, you know, it was quite impressive when Berlusconi came to power and there was already 30 years ago. And Italy is interesting because it's sort of, you know, it's very close to us when we are in France. And at the same time, you know, that sets the level of, sort of complete decomposition of the political system of the post-

war political system is, in a way, much more advanced...advanced, you know, I'm not sure when we'll all go into this direction but unfortunately that's not hopelessly impossible.

And so anyway, what they mean is that, you know, several institutions in the US of course have lots of problems. I mean, the good news is that the good news for the US is that European federal institutions have even more problems.

**JP:**

It's not good news!

**TP:**

Look in the end. Trump was, of course, awful and a terrible president. But to me, you know, as compared to, George W. Bush who went to war in Iraq and caused, you know, half-a-million dead Iraq after 2003 and 2004 the Iraq War. You know, in a way Trump was less damaging at least from...I understand that you, for you in the US you view Trump as not damaging, but facing from...if we take a world perspective, I mean, it could have been worse. If he had used the US military to do things, you know, it could have been worse. So in the rest of the world, the fact that you didn't choose the US military to do terrible things, you know, after Vietnam, after Iraq. The question is "when is the next time that America will use its military to do very bad things?" And at least Trump was not the answer to this question.

**JP:**

Can I ask the question in a slightly different way though? One thing Adaner and I agree on in loving about your book is the critique of the Brahmin left parties. So I guess I wondered whether you see Trump one way to read Trump would be as a vindication of your analysis of the hollowing out of the left side of the American political spectrum.

**TP:**

Oh, yes, of course you're perfectly right. I think, Trump, a little bit like Berlusconi is testimony to this sort of conflict between elite, between intellectual elite and the business elite that I described. So to me, that's exactly the embodiment of this. I think what makes Trump possible, and what makes

it possible for Trump, to claim in a sort of quasi-plausible manner that he's against the elite, in spite of the fact that he's a billionaire, in spite of the fact that, you know, like Berlusconi...what makes it possible is because, indeed there is another elite, which is not the business elite, which is a PhD elite, which is, the intellectual elite, which indeed votes massively for the other side. Now, this was not true, you know, in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, where all the elite will vote for the Republican party or for the right wing parties, or, you know, a conservative party in Europe.

So at that time, it could have been completely ridiculous for a billionaire to claim, to be against the elite, because his entire political coalition was an elitist political coalition. So it would have made no sense. So I think what makes Trump possible today is this conflict between the elite and the fact that the democratic party in the US, you know, has become a party of elite. And I think, you know, partly because the Democratic party is not doing a lot to, you know, to reduce to reduce inequality and in the end is serving the interests of the educated elite, the children of the educated elite, you know, with more attention or at least as much attention as serving interests of the poor. And, you know, when I read *The New York Times* I don't see a lot sort of self-questioning about that.

I see people who are very upset against Trump, again of course, you know, I can understand this, especially, you know, these recent weeks. But, you know, I think it's important to...if the Democratic party wants to be able one day to regain confidence of socially disadvantaged voters from all origins...you know, which was more or less the case in the 50s, 60s whether black or white or whatever their ethnic origins. If the democratic party wants to regain confidence from these voters, you know, they will have to sort of be a bit less self-confident in the, you know, in the idea that they have done everything right and don't have to change anything. And it will take a very, very long time.

And from this perspective, this election of 2020 is very much...I have tried to put 2020 in the continuation of my graph for the US in the 2016 election. And it's very much in the continuation of this rise of the Brahmin left and the Merchant right.

**JP:**

Yes. Okay.

**AU:**

Yeah. Thank you so much.

**JP:**

Hope to see you in Boston for real.

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**AU:**

So what did you think?

**JP:**

I thought he was great. I mean, I thought it was very typical of interviewing, you know, celebrity intellectuals, which is that he has a lot of stuffs to say. He said a lot of it before, but as he talked, even not necessarily with our own inter locations, he developed, you know, unexpected angles. So there were many things he said that I was pleased to hear. Yeah. What did you think?

**AU:**

Yeah, I thought something similar, which is that I think it's always a difficult form of engagement because he comes, expecting to give a sort of responses that he's given before. And I think he was expecting questions, like, you know, "summarize the book's argument," da da da...

**P:**

My brother calls it, my brother who interviewed famous people for a long time, calls it "control F5", you know, like you can just have the answer and drop it in there and then, yeah.

**AU:**

Yeah, yeah. But I thought, yeah, I thought he went sort of furthest from that in the discussion, in response to your question about slavery and proprietarian ideology. That that was really interesting to hear.

**JP:**

Actually I was going to say, I thought the thing that he said about slavery that was the best was the way he continued to think it through, in response to your question about change. Like whether ideology was pervasive even at the bottom, because he said, okay, he took your point immediately about slavery and mechanisms of control, but then the subtle thing that he added, which I think is totally right, but I've never heard anyone put it in this context is that like, there is actually rising literacy and rising economic opportunity, at least in the border state versus slaves in the 40s and 50s. Like, that's actually part of the story. I mean, Frederick Douglas is the metonymy for that, but this is not the only person who manages to go North. And he was able to kind of, you know, be part of whatever Michael Warner calls, the evangelical public sphere, you know, and that's significant.

**AU:**

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That was interesting. And then if we had had more time, I think I would have asked him to make that distinction that he was making between a certain form of dominance, which is sort of like slavery, I suppose, and these other forms of dominance, because he seemed to want to draw that distinction quite sharply. But I would wager that it's sort of more a continuum, you know, life in ternary societies is also full of domination.

**JP:**

Totally. And also the point about, you know, I actually was, I had forgotten that colonialist is an entire separate ideological structure in his argument, you know, there's like proprietarian and slavery, slave and colonialist. And I think colonial context would be a great way of thinking about that, right? Because they are on have exploited property relations is something other than being, you know, being owned by another human being for labor. But you're in this position of just like distanced oppression, I think that's right.

Yeah. I mean, I wonder if you might extend the argument the same way. I mean, if you think maybe Gandhi here would be the metonymy for this, that like that, when people in colonialist situations of asymmetrical power relation also get access to the weapons...

**AU:**

Absolutely. That, that exact same argument I think, could be made about the Indian nationalist movement. Yeah. Gandhi, Nehru all of these people, I think were, in some ways, products of certain concessions that the British had begun to make. And then also there was a rise of an Indian labor movement after India started to industrialize under the British in the 1910s and the 20s.

**JP:**

Even in South Africa. I mean, one of the things when Gandhi goes to South Africa, you know, what puts him in a position of power is Indian labor.

Yeah, so I thought he was...I mean, I agree with you that the discussion about slavery was really interesting. But can you just help me parse it as a social scientist? Because I feel like his answer to the question of *could it have happened without slavery?* It was something like, well, theoretically, anything is possible. It could have, but it never did. Is that what he was saying?

**AU:**

The way that I understood the argument that he wanted to make is that I thought he was directly answering your question. "Is there a necessary connection between proprietarian ideology and slavery?"—which is, he was replying to say that there is this historical connection, but there in fact is no necessary connection because you could have imagined exactly the same tenants of property, proprietarian ideology in non-slave context and in a world without slavery. But I think the evidence for that would be countries that didn't have a slave past.

**JP:**

Okay. So that's what I was waiting for. Like I almost wanted to push him, but I was hoping he would just bring up, is there such a case? I mean, it's like...

**AU:**

I mean, I suppose various European countries, you could try the Scandinavian countries.

**JP:**



I was just thinking that they did have serf relations didn't they?

**AU:**

Absolutely. Yeah. But that would be different, I think then versus colonies or slave societies. I think that that would be...well, I mean, one reply could be that these ideas migrate transnationally and so...simple as discrete national histories with discrete consequences. But I think that is what he had in mind without saying it. Do you find that compelling? No?

**JP:**

I mean, I don't know. I mean, I guess, okay. Well, here's where I definitely think he punted, I think he punted on the question of race and like the derivation of the current day forms of racism. I completely agree with everything he said about reparations and actually thought that it wasn't just that it was eloquent, but the directness with which he linked the legacy of slavery to the need for reparations based on existing structural inequalities is exactly like...you know, it was very well put and it relates to what you were saying, which is (before he came on the line) which is we could understand slavery as the, as part of the mechanism that started things going and they just trundled along under the same mechanism. So that makes perfect sense. But what he didn't talk about was the kind of cascading consequences of race thinking, you know?

**AU:**

Yeah. No, not at all. I mean, I think when you ask that question, he sort of jumped straight to his control F5 policy answer, which is we need both. And I think that's what he's been thinking about a lot. That's, there's a lot of that in the book. Yeah. But yeah, you're right. That, I mean, in his defense, it's not an easy question.

**JP:**

Oh, of course not. Anything he said he would get attacked from, you know, 99 out of 100 sides because everybody has their own side of them. So do you think that's strategic on his point to just not tackle race except in the abstract?

**AU:**

Yeah. It's a very, it's a very compelling answer. And if you want to build sort of goodwill about your policy agenda in intellectual spheres. I think to say, we need both this and this people have been arguing about this and this, but we need both. And, and I think that in some ways there's a compelling approach, the debate.

**JP:**

Yeah. I liked that point. Well, it certainly I had forgotten that his amount is 120,000 euros. So it's sort of hard to argue with that because you're telling everyone, you know, I have the check in my hand for 120,000 Euro.

**AU:**

I think it's more than that. Isn't it, isn't it like, it's not a check exactly as much as like a wealth fund that would accrue over time..... I mean, look, I think if I had wanted to be provocative at that moment, I think the way that I would have tried to do that is to say, you know, in principle, both of these things are really important to demand, but in fact, one of the difficulties that I think he does allude to in his discussion of identity politics is: If you agree that politically agitating for reparations will turn off precisely those elements of the nativist working class that have been attracted by the right, then you have a strategic decision to make that is less comfortable than the kind of argument that he made, which is that perhaps then reparations becomes an obstacle to the kind of universalist.

He was sort of saying, we can have both and it's really easy. And that's a really nice answer for an academic, but I think a political strategist would reply to say, no reparations poll terribly with the white working class. And so they'll run away from our coalition if we foreground reparations.

**JP:**

Interesting. Yeah. So speaking of coalitions, let's talk about the Brahmin left a little bit. What did you, as like, I guess presumptive members and it certainly like beneficiaries of its policy.

**AU:**

Yes, self-flagellating members.

**JP:**

Exactly. Right. It's like, that's the defining feature of being a member of the Brahmin left as far as I could tell. If you ain't self-flagellating you don't belong. So yeah. What do you think? Did his analysis ring true?

**AU:**

Yeah, I mean, I find those graphs in the book, some of the most compelling and veritable material that he presents, because I mean, the question that we didn't exactly get to that...

**JP:**

Adaner, tell our listeners about one of those graphs. Like, what is it particularly compelling?

**AU:**

So the graph that he alluded to at the very end, which he said that he had added 2020 to, shows that the correlation between being college educated and voting for the left has flipped over the last 67 years of American history. So controlling for all the other confounders that you can observe call it, the educated people used to vote more for the right in like the 40s and the 50s. I can't remember how far it goes. And now they vote much more for the left.

And so there's this evolution then of what he calls the Brahmin left. And he said, 2020 sort of continued this trend. And now college educated people are *even more* likely to vote for the Left.

I find that explanation that he offers...So I find that description profoundly fascinating and important. But I find the explanation really wanting in the book, the explanation that he offers is something like, I mean-- and it's partly because this is a polemic or not a polemic, but like an intervention into a political debate--He argues in the book, similarly to what he said in the interview, that these politicians of the left have abandoned the working class and turned to these college educated voters. And so in other words, it's a choice that political parties have made that they need not have made. But I think the fact that this is something that is happening in every single advanced capitalist country, which is what he shows in the book,

suggests that we need a deeper explanation than simply a choice that these sorts of conniving politicians have...something deeper happening.

**JP:**

I think that's very fair.

*Recall This book* is sponsored by the Mandel Humanities center. Music comes from Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, sound editing by Claire Ogden, website design and social media from Nai Kim, we always want to hear from you with your comments, criticism or suggestions for future episodes. If you enjoyed today's show, which coincidentally was recorded on the morning of January 6th, 2021, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcast, as well as those earlier *Recall this Buck* episodes with Chris Johnson and Peter Brown and our conversation with Adaner about mass incarceration. You may be interested in two discussions in the January 6th insurrection one with David Cunningham, the other with Brandeis history professor Greg Childs. From all of us here at *Recall This Buck*, thanks for listening.