

Recall This Book 64
Brahmin Left #4
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Roundup (AU, EF, JP)

Transcript

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall this Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. Welcome to the special fourth part of our three-part series on the Brahmin left. So, you've heard of a Three Dog Night, this is more like a three-host podcast, so a downer. Hello Adaner, Elizabeth hello. I like the double hello. In this episode we gather our energy and we focus it with a laser-like precision—who's going to make a laser sound?

Elizabeth Ferry: (makes laser sounds)

John Plotz:

I think that was pretty good—On the common problem of class realignment or dealignment that unites our conversations with the American historian Matt “New Gilded Age” Karp; Jan Werner “Populism” Müller; and Arlie “Strangers in their Own Land” Hochschild. So basically, did the three episodes, conversations we had, taken together support Piketty's thesis about the shifting voting patterns that mean college educated voters are now the bulwark of liberal or progressive parties? Or did they make the case either for seeing that evidence in another way, or, you know, rejecting the Piketty hypothesis altogether? Perhaps more to the point, what commonalities do we see in the explanatory scheme that all three provided, and what differences? So that's the general brief for today, and we thought we might begin....and I should say it's very awesome of you Elizabeth to come in (since you weren't involved in the actual conversations) to come in with your umpire's eye and way and I know you have your own sort of take on how to think about the Brahmin left. And I definitely

want to unpack that as well. So, we just thought we might begin the discussion by quickly discussing what the core claims of our three guests were and then potentially seeing how our conversation goes. We might then zero in on a phrase or two that really struck us, and then finally a free-for-all where the three hosts like dogs in the night get a chance to either show their teeth, or perhaps simply to cuddle up together. Going in order, maybe we can start off with Matt Karp. Adaner do you want to get us going on the essence of Matt's argument?

Adaner Usmani: Sure, yeah, thanks John and thanks Elizabeth. I'm very excited to talk about this and reflect on the arguments. I thought that Matt gave us more or less the, what you could call, the standard story that you hear in the Piketty as well, if its obviously in Matt's case, specifically in the context of the United States, but more or less the same story that Piketty tells in *Capital and Ideology*, which is which is basically that there was a certain era in all of these industrial countries (in all these advanced capitalist countries) where industrialization created a working class and that working class, by virtue of the rise of industry and the rise of these big industrial cities (the rise of these big working-class communities) was sort of sutured to social democracy and Social Democratic parties by means of the unions into which they were organized. So, there was this kind of glorious age, and we can debate what glorious means exactly, but there was this glorious age where class politics was a key defining feature of the industrial democracies. Let's date it from maybe like the late 19th, early 20th century to the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and in that age, precisely because the working class was represented politically in unions and in Social Democratic parties, there was a profound class cleavage in politics where the egalitarian left represented the working class disproportionately and the inegalitarian right represented the rich disproportionately and sort of class politics was the dominant story in advanced country politics. And what Matt argues, I think, in following Piketty, is that what

happened is, in effect for a whole host of reasons that might be interesting to unpack and debate, capitalism hemorrhaged jobs for unskilled men. Those jobs went overseas, unions collapsed, communities that were, whose vibrancy was in some way a function of those jobs and those unions, also collapsed. All of that started to break the bond, or at least put a lot of strain on the bond between the working class and, in the United States, the Democrats (but in Europe in general, the Social Democratic parties). And those parties slowly, as the working class ceased to be organized into unions and ceased to be politically its own force, those Democrats and those Social Democrats started to find that it was kind of rational to seek their electoral fortunes elsewhere in the highly educated, and so they turned away from the working class to the highly educated.

John Plotz:

Interesting. OK, so should I just pick up with Müller at this point? OK, so I'm going to call him Jan so I don't have to try to pronounce an umlaut, but so Jan has an interesting approach which I think is consistent with, for those who know his work, you know he wrote this book that we think is great called *What is populism?* But then he's also working on a kind of more proceduralist or formal account of democracies right now. And so, I would say that mainly what he had to say was a formalist account of various anti-pluralistic impulses that can come to define a polity. And so without going into too much of the predictable weeds around exclusionary identity politics, I think you could say that he sort of batted away any attempt we made to make him focus squarely on content and instead wanted to say like, we just have to be aware of parties that don't behave according to the old party rules, they are now behaving according to new rules that turn out to be very appealing to certain voting blocs. That, for example, don't concede when they've lost. Like, they just claim a kind of true legitimacy, even if they're real legitimacy (meaning their formal sort of rule following legitimacy) has been eroded, and so, you know, I think Adaner, it would be interesting to reprise the

kind of point you tried to make of looking for where the left wing/right wing equivalency comes in there in terms of parties that have given up on the old order of business. But I do think probably in the end where Müller came down was: this isn't so much about, I mean he didn't say this explicitly, but it's not really so much about a Brahmin left as it is about a new kind of right, which I don't want to call a rump right, but a right that defines itself as: "*We are those who genuinely ought to constitute the essence of the nation*". Now one of the most interesting disagreements there, sort of looking ahead to Hochschild, is he doesn't really want to focus on the notion of a kind of a left behind, like a drama of particular people who are excluded. He's actually much more interested in the notion that people have an identity that is strong enough that it causes them to sort of buck political norm-following altogether. With Müller, I guess I wonder a little bit how he runs the historical argument and I don't think we kind of pursued that with him, but whether he could or would sort of admit that as part of the formalist account of what's going wrong now, he would also have a historical explanation for it. Or maybe, you know, that's maybe just not his bailiwick. I don't know. But yeah, so that's what I got.

Adaner Usmani: I have a idea about what he would say, I think—

John Plotz: Oh yeah, OK.

Adaner Usmani: —and I think what he sort of, I think maybe we didn't push him enough on this, or ask him enough about this, but he did mention at some point he thinks that representative institutions are pivotal to healthy politics, so where representative institutions start to erode the kind of claim making John that you're describing becomes something that's a viable political strategy. And then also the media. I think he didn't. We didn't talk too much about this, but you know the rise of nontraditional forms of media and the collapse of a certain kind of traditional media establishment, I think, is also responsible for why, certainly

in the United States, why these kinds of claims that politicians make can become so compelling to people. Because I think that is really the question. It's not simply why do we have these political figures that make these outlandish claims about not having lost or whatever? But why is it that such a significant proportion of the population believes them and is energized by them? That seems to me to be the \$1,000,000 question.

John Plotz: Totally. So, actually that totally makes sense to me Adaner. I just want – there's one other point I had wanted to make about Müller and I forgot and you sort of prompted me, which is that I do think we have a default historical argument—I kind of want to say it's from Hannah Arendt, but I'm sure you guys can correct me as to where it's from—which is that basically democracy is or representative democracies are kind of robust because they have a self-correcting set of repertoires that allow them to fine-tune to you know, to move with the popular will, but to do so through a set of checks and balances. It's all like schoolhouse rock, you know like *today, we're still just a bill..* So, like that those things are robust. But one of Müller's key points, I thought, and this is one of the things that made me think about the historicization of the repertoires, is that actually populists are borrowing repertoires from one another now in really interesting ways. Like he made the point that Erdoğan, Chavez, Putin and Trump ideologically they can be really different from one another. But in terms of how they proceed, like perhaps with a hollowed-out media, perhaps with weakened party structures, how they proceed looks remarkably similar. So Ferry, do you want to yeah....

Elizabeth Ferry: So yeah, Hochschild's argument in a lot of ways was similar to Karp's argument that Adaner just spooled out, kind of based in a structural account at its core in terms of capital flight from the United States and the erosion of the political power of the working classes and the institutions upon which they might have claims, right? And she mentions both

unions and certain aspects of the federal government, right? So we could see changes in the, you know, National Labor Relations Board, or other kinds of organizations as being the kind of, where this sort of ground is eroding. And she also located a kind of Clintonian democracy as a kind of a choice within that. That helped to kind of remove the kinds of things that might put a brake on unfettered capitalism, red and tooth and claw. And she argues, I mean, she's also sort of, you know, finding the answer in the question of the growth of the populist right, or at least, that's the way she kind of approached the question from her own work. You know, that this gives Trump a good story. She talked a lot about legitimacy and the ways in which legitimacy functions, right? Trump, is lightning in a jar and it's not only this sort of stylistic repertoire that he doesn't speak much to me but totally speaks to some people. But that he's seen as the one who would bring blue-collar manufacturing jobs back to the United States. It's, you know, not really clear how much evidence there is for that.

And so the question in the conversation then turned on how progressives or how the left could come up with their own compelling story, right? So that the problem was kind of located in the Democratic Party is speaking to this, you know, more wealthier, more suburban base. But they haven't come up with a compelling story that can counter the compelling story that speaks to the working class, or I would say at least to the white working class, right? Which is one thing that we could talk more about and she had some answers for that. One had to do with kind of you could call it sort of creative industrial policy and creative managerial policy, right? So she has this story about Ro Khanna, you know, outsourcing different kinds of health centers and other kinds of tech support to Kentucky ... *Silicon Holler* was the phrase that came up, and also what I mean, this phrase didn't come out, but these kind of, you know, a just transition sort of sets of policies and initiatives so you know trying to move towards, for instance, a post fossil fuel economy in ways that took account of economic

justice. That sort of took account of well, what's going to happen to coworkers, for instance, right, you could see that as an outgrowth of the you know, resolving the same this same problem.

John Plotz: I think Adaner you did a great job, really registering and responding to Arlie's, you know, to her big story, deep story sorry, and that is obviously the essence of what Arlie has to tell, which is the like, you know, as a sociologist. She seems to be really good at Concretizing what the kind of collective cultural gestalt is. The place I pushed back, but maybe I was wrong to push back, was more about what role parties have to play in this, like whether the political actors are simply responding to and implementing the will of the people or actually, you know, ginning it up. I mean, you know you think about Mitch McConnell's Kentucky? I mean, it's not like, that's not a place that's naturally filled with white working class anger. That's a place that Mitch McConnell has done a lot of work to make people angry, so.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, right, yeah? And Adaner already mentioned this in terms of, you know, there's this sort of idea and it's not completely fake, but of who Trump appeals to that kind of ties in with that story. But in fact, he appeals to tons of people who were who do not fall into this story who did not, have not done particularly badly in the, you know, past 30 years and actually a lot of them have done really, really well. So you know it's one you know, trench and it's, but it's also one that kind of repeats the story that Trump is telling as well, right? I mean, it's sort of a, you know, that's the way Trump would put it too, right? Like I speak to the people who are left behind and you know I'm gonna make America great again you know. So even when common commenters are saying. He speaks to these people who feel left behind they may not have the same definition of America or great or any of these other things, but they are kind of adopting the same narrative?

Adaner Usmani: I think this is something that that Jan was arguing as well in his reply to us, to be cautious of talking about these people as the “left behind”. One of the points that he made that, I think is very important, is that a lot of the people who we think about as the left behind are actually not really responding by flocking to Trump, but just by disengaging entirely from politics. There's just a large proportion of these people who don't participate at all, and if you think about the profile of the people who are in Arlie's book, they're not quite, you know, there's a range. Obviously, there are some people who are just, you know, destitute and miserable as a consequence of what's happened in Louisiana. But there are some figures. John, you might remember better than me, who are sort of, I think there's one lady in particular who's a pretty well-off white-collar worker at an oil and gas company there. There's a range here in the kind of class position.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, there's the dentist with a boat...

John Plotz: Can we just can we go back to the original phrase Brahmin left and think it through in terms of let's take educational attainment as the marker here. We are all, we have, this whole discussion I think, it's pretty true of all three of the people we talked to have been focusing on the converse, I think. That is, on the angry right let's say. Do we want to say anything positive about? I mean not positive in the sense of complementary, but like positive in the sense of descriptive of the category of people who have chosen in their educational attainment to go over to the left parties. I mean, is that something that's just, goes without saying? It strikes me that like with Jan Werner Müller, there's an account where he's talking about essentially a moving target, 'cause he's not just talking about realignment between parties. He's also talking about this emergence of this new kind of, you know, virtually un-partied voting right block. But whether you think about that complication or not, can we just think about the education?

Elizabeth Ferry: OK, but yes, it's in this question of the Brahmin left and the only part in the conversations that in our conversations where the sort of difference between the liberal or the sort of the Democratic Party and the left was teased out was in at the moment when we said, *well, we're really not talking about the Brahmin liberals*. We're not talking about the Liberals we are talking about the left. And then, at least in my reading of that conversation, it was sort of like... I'd like to hear more content of that exactly because who says that the Democratic Party is the left or has been the left for like a really long time? And you know, sure, we can say that at least speaking in the US, which is the case that I know better, this has been an ongoing thing. And even within the left you know there are left parts of the party, but the left parts of the party are the ones that are, you know, yes, they may or may not have different constituencies, but they are in fact arguing for things like raising the minimum wage, improving infrastructure, bringing jobs back, higher taxes for corporations. I mean, they're those policies of the left wing of the Democratic Party, are in fact not particularly in the interest of a more and higher and higher income and class brackets. So it's not that I necessarily disagree with the insights, I just feel like the term *Brahmin left* – It's very easy to then sort of say, OK well, it's all of these, you know, it's the Democrats and the left part of the, you know, and the left – what I would call the actual left. And also we're not just talking about, you know the demographics of party membership, we're also talking about policy and I think there's a lot of granularity in there. That's we could tease out.

Adaner Usmani: Yeah, but I think this is precisely where the concept becomes really provocative in some ways because if (I really like the way you put it Elizabeth) is that there are these two things going on to which we could apply the moniker “Brahmin,” one is the sort of demographic composition of the people who are voting or who are active and one is the content of the policies and in some ways the whole puzzle paradox provocation here is that if we were to

look at the demographic composition, if the Piketty story is right and some people say that it's not exactly right, but if we in the United States, if we think about Piketty's story as you move leftward on the political spectrum, the Brahmin demographic composition becomes more and more apparent. And that contrasts really profoundly in some ways, as you're saying, with the policy content as you move towards the left on the political spectrum, and I'm not sure anyone totally has totally wrestled with that, as you're saying Elizabeth, in our interviews.

But if it's correct, I don't know exactly what it implies. Does it imply that we can depend on the Brahmin left to kind of vote and advocate against its interests in some ways? I mean Matt's provocation in the piece which we talked about briefly with him, John, was that it is true that you'll get some sort of *pro forma* left-wing language. But when push comes to shove and you vote in, I think it was Illinois for minimum wage, these people don't come along, they won't vote for it. Right, right? Ultimately, it's a little much to expect people to vote against their fundamental interests, and I'm not sure. I mean this is, in fact we didn't, I don't know, ever address this, John, with any of the interviewees, but there was that one response to Piketty which we linked to on the website whenever we introduced these interviews which tries to show precisely what Elizabeth is describing, which is that a lot of the people in Europe who are voting for left wing parties are actually, not a lot of the highly educated people who are voting for left wing parties, are actually not voting for the Social Democrats. They're voting for the Greens and other kind of parties that are on the left and they're also self-described defenders of redistribution and the welfare state, and so there is this kind of disjuncture that is just difficult to think through.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah.

Adaner Usmani: Demographics and policy.

Elizabeth Ferry: I mean, I don't think we can like just let's sit back and just everything will, you know, be for the best of all possible worlds and just think that the term the Brahmin left needs to, you know, has more in it than some of the parts of the conversation necessarily should. And then I guess I'll just say one more thing. Which is about the question of, particularities of race in the US and how this plays out, like 'cause the story that you're telling Adaner about, you know, this kind of period before that, in the before, when there is a class alignment with the political parties (and the unions have a kind of central place in that) I mean, the only the big part of the working class that couldn't join a lot of unions and wasn't particularly represented was the black working class, right? So, how does that play into that story and I think even now, you know, that's also true. If you look at sort of the next chapter, which we've been describing, you know, it's not the working-class black people for the most part like sure there are some examples in those examples, there's a lot you know made of them and, and they're featured prominently on social media, but for the most part, it's not the black working class or the, you know, those black voters (who are, you know, also have been really screwed over the past 30 years) they're not going to Trump, right? And many of them are not voting either. I mean, they may be prevented from voting, but I don't think the answer is necessarily that they're just sitting back and throwing their hands up in the air either.

Adaner Usmani: Yeah, I think it's a really important point. I wonder what you would make of this response to your observation, which is that what the kind of, the Matt Karp/Piketty story is trying to say is that yes, this is primarily about in Europe, the kind of nativist working class the white working class in in the United States, the white working class, but what has happened basically is that in the United States, at least after the New deal there was a period in which the working class is black and white were both voting for the Democrats. And what happened was, as the structural changes we were

describing unfolded, there was an opportunity—I don't know how big that opportunity was—to continue to speak to the material interests of the white working class. And the Democrats failed to do that. And as a result, the Republicans came along and didn't speak necessarily that successfully, as you were saying, to the material interests of the working class, it's not like they brought all these jobs back, but they spoke to the racism of a white working class – the racism and the nativism –

Elizabeth Ferry: Yes.

Adaner Usmani: – That's never going to be appealing, obviously, to the black working class, but it does mean that you sort of suture the class, or not suture exactly the opposite, split the class, right? And because the white working class is something like 60% of the working class in the United States, that's a problem.

John Plotz: I want to connect that to our question about Matt Karp's example of the place in Illinois, where people voted to protect their property tax exemptions or whatever the hell it was that he saw people voting, which is to say--- we see people voting against their material interests all the time. I feel like that's the essence both of Arlie's work and also what Müller was saying about exclusionary identity politics. Because people don't just vote on their material interest, they also vote on other kinds of cultural value interests, things that are upheld. Some, you know, people might be willing to vote for a Pro-life candidate even if you knew that person was instantiating policies that were going to be disadvantageous for you, but it would be worth it because your value was protected. So, I guess the question I have about that is: Isn't there a story to be told about that and the left, like a long term story about that and the left? Like, there are people on the left who vote against their material interests, and I guess the final wrinkle I would add to that is that if you're educationally attained and you're at a higher income level, potentially, your material interests

would matter less to you. Because you know, OK, fine, my taxes go up.

Adaner Usmani: Yeah, yeah, but yeah, I think in some ways that's sort of the modernization story of all of these changes, which is a rival narrative that we discussed briefly with Matt, which is that if in fact as people get richer, they care less about material facts. They care more about cultural facts and what starts to happen is that cultural issues start to dominate politics as countries get richer. I think Matt had a effective response to that which is to say that there are still substantially a lot of people in the United States who, you know, their like what was that, a crazy stat that we heard recently that 40 to 50% of Americans couldn't wouldn't be able to find \$400 if they needed to repair their car or something like that. We're still quite far away from that, but it might, John, as you're saying, explain what we're seeing amongst the Brahmin left specifically, right? I think that was your point. But I guess the response to that would be to say that kind of a strategy that depends on basically the self-flagellation of the Brahmin left for redistribution, which is maybe what the left has been doing for the last 5-10 years, may moderate inequality slightly, but it's not likely to take us back to the egalitarian or take us towards like a properly egalitarian income.

Elizabeth Ferry: No, definitely not.

John Plotz: Yeah, can I just move towards a conclusion here you guys by asking – I said I was going to ask as a framework whether there were, you know, moments that genuinely so startled or surprised you (and I think we've mentioned a couple of them) but does anybody want to jump in on anything else that struck you?

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, I think this is just to kind of have a circling around, I think your point about the key issue of legitimacy and whether, what it would be like to have that threaded through all three of the conversations? Because I think that

the issue, I mean, if it's true that there is actually, there are political participants who are advocating policies that we at least believe might reduce inequality, right, then yet are not, you know, the people who are sort of most strongly aligned with them are not the people who are most benefited by it, then the issue really becomes about something about legitimacy, right, and about sort of being able to speak to that position. See right and you know, I think maybe this conversation is underplaying a little bit how much Bernie was able to reach some of that. I mean, if you if you look at his numbers there are, you know, numbers of people who are, you know, not college educated and they are, there is an income difference, some of the income difference is corrected out by age but not all of it. But, you know, so the question really becomes how does that story get told, right? Or how can an effective story be told?

Adaner Usmani: Yeah, absolutely. I think that was, in some ways, the moment of optimism in both of our conversations with Arlie and Matt. I think maybe I'll just sound the note of pessimism that I imagine Jan would introduce, which is that in some ways, I think Jan would say the following, which is that in some ways it's not sufficient to have an appealing story, which I think is the kind of story that Arlie was saying Bernie was able to tell. That's maybe 80% of the battle, but it's also important to be implanted in the institutions of the life of the people whom you're trying to convince, and that was what Jan was lamenting about the collapse of certain mediating institutions like parties and unions and in the media. And so I worry, that attempts to craft a compelling story try to do an end run around this more foundational problem about the lack or the death of that representative institution.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, it's a fair point.

John Plotz: So, the whirring of my computer makes me afraid for the status of our recording and it makes me think that we should draw to an end. So maybe I'll just say that Recall this

Book is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanities Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English department, Elizabeth and Adaner and I are eager to hear your comments, criticism and thought on today's discussion and on the notion of Brahmin Left generally, so please write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts and if you enjoyed today's show, you might check out earlier Brahmin left conversations with, as you know, Matt Karp, Jan Werner Müller and Arlie Hochschild, and also our conversation with Thomas Piketty, the one that started it all off back on January 6th about proprietarian ideologies. So, Elizabeth, Adaner, thank you. It's been a pleasure and Adaner, we loved having you as a host. Don't stop hosting, stay in the mix.

Adaner Usmani: It was great. I really enjoyed it as well.

John Plotz: We're just going to end by saying from all of us here at Recall this Book, thanks for listening.