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David Roediger Interview

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Bucknell: Occupied
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Jennifer Thomson, interviewer (JT)
Mohammed Elnaiem, interviewer (ME)
David Roediger, interviewee (DR)

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Transcription

JT: Hello and welcome to Bucknell: Occupied here on 90.5 WVBU Lewisburg. Tonight is an exciting show. I've got two people in the studio with me. First of all is our guest Professor David Roediger who's a professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas, he is here on campus today to deliver the final lecture in the Capitalism in Crisis series." He's gonna be talking on why saving the middle class won't work based on His forthcoming book, The Unhappy History of the Middle Class also with me in the studio is a favorite guest here Mohammed Elnaiem a graduating senior in history, who will be co-interviewing Dave with me, so welcome to campus, Dave, and thanks for being here, Mohammed, it's great to have the opportunity to talk with both of you today. So we thought we could talk about your most recently published books Seizing Freedom. I know, Mohammed, had the chance to read it with many other students, and then we could transition into talking about your new project on the middle class, so maybe if I can ask for those in the audience who haven't had a chance to read Seizing Freedom, if you can give us a sense of what you were after in that book.

DR: Great. First of all, I'm delighted to be here. I learned at lunch that people held in prison around in the area sometimes listen to this show, and that's terrific. Seizing Freedom grew out of in a funny way out of Arab Spring and the series of revolutions in the Arab world that started actually not in the spring, it started in February in Tunisia. I was teaching a US History class at the time in modern US history survey, and I was trying to illustrate how when slaves started to move toward freedom, other groups were inspired because they did impossible things. And then uh white women, for example said what would that mean for me to think about things that had been impossible now being possible? So this was in February, and I told the students look at Tunisia. It won't end there, because you overthrow a impossible to remove 30 year dictator. Somebody else is gonna say, "Oh why we got a dictator. We're gonna think about doing the same thing." So I had actually given those lectures for years and years and years in US history about how the struggles of slaves to free themselves during the Civil War, inspired a new labor movement, a new women's movement and a Irish nationalist, movement in the United States all start to liberation movements coming out of the motion of slaves. But I never thought about writing it. And then the students actually became very interested in this point and some of them... I then had the following fall in a smaller class and by then, by the end of that semester, you had seen Egypt and you seen Bahrain and you had seen the demonstrations in the squares in London and in Spain, were beginning to develop and you were getting the beginnings of Occupy. And so, the students who remembered at that point, I thought I was some kind of soothsayer or something, and it really was about how history moves when it moves and how one group's struggles, inspires other group's struggles especially if what's achieved, seemed like it couldn't possibly be achieved. And the

immediate uncompensated emancipation of four million people just seemed completely impossible in 1859.

JT: Right

DR: And then, slaves made it happen by 1863 or 1865. so that's the kind of plot of the book, is that slaves move to take advantage of this new military and political situation, move literally toward the Union Army, and create the conditions for their own freedom. But in doing that, they then also create the conditions for other people to...

JT: Mm-Hm.

DR: ...think about what emancipation would mean for them.

JT: So, I mean, as I understand it, one of one of the central arguments of the book is based on a claim made by W.E.B. DuBois, that in fact, emancipation was a general strike on the part of slaves. So how is it that you understand this argument and how does it play out in the book?

DR: Yeah, Dubois pointed out that probably a half a million, maybe 800,000 people moved in some way away from plantations... of four million slaves at this time, but then he says the people who stayed on the plantation also refused to be disciplined in the ways that they had been disciplined before, and often the management of the plantation, some of the management was off the plantation fighting so they took advantage of the space to be un-governable, even if they stayed and... And so he says we should consider that not just a movement of some slaves but a general strike of the bulk of the slave population which withdrew their useful labor from the slave holding class terrified the slaveholding class because they thought that they knew what slaves were about, but also in a lot of cases, gave that labor to the Union Army by the end of the war by being soldiers and sailors. But even before that, by digging entrenchments and by doing useful work for the Union side.

ME: And so this concept is general strike it's a concept that I think W.E.B DuBois adopted from labor history. And usually in the context of labor history, general strike, usually means, a withdrawal, stopping the machines from moving. But here we're talking about a general strike as a form of movement and I wanted to know sort of that kind of distinction and why it can still be called a general strike outside of the lexicon of labor history.

DR: I mean, I think that the larger view of general strikes by Labor historians is sometimes a little bit too formal itself that if we actually looked at some of the big general strikes in US history, not nearly everybody participated but enough people to say, shut down the railroads and shut down a lot of production. Not everyone was convinced some people were encouraged to respect picket lines. So I think that all general strikes are something other than unanimous and lots of general strikes, I think probably most in history are not formally called so sometimes people balk at DuBois' characterization because they say "wait, there wasn't it [murmur] it didn't have a formal decision-making structure that enslaved people could decide to call a strike. They didn't have an organization that was above the ground." So I think that people do make that formal, objection and say, Well, couldn't be a general strike then. And I think I it is useful to insist that this is the form that the

general strike, took in this case, but also in a lot of cases. The Tunisian general strike is also not a disruption of factory production. It's a disruption of transport first. And then, things that spin out of it.

JT: I'm particularly interested in... So you talk as you were explaining the book you talked about the way in which the self-emancipation of slaves really inspired other groups to begin fighting for their own emancipation, right? Which I think one interesting aspect of that, I think for both Mohammed and I is the parallels then to the 1960s. But one thing that I wanted to think about before we get into that idea is... Maybe the relationship between revolution and reform in this sense. So certainly, you make the argument that self-emancipation was revolutionary and it was a complete interruption, of temporality et cetera, and in a way which women and Native Americans as well, were able to build upon.

[SOUND]

JT: But then at the same time, some of the struggles that you talk about, right? To get the right to vote for example...

DR: Right.

JT: or... an eight hour work day or more about. Well, they're just more reformist solutions.

DR: Yeah... yeah.

[CROSSTALK]

JT: They're more about integration into the existing order. So how do you see the relationship between those two elements?

DR: Well, I think that that's right, but we also have to realize how visionary and impossible women's suffrage seemed in the 1840s and 1850s and really up until the Civil War in 1848 when what some feminist historians think of is the first big feminist gathering in Rochester occurred. It was touch and go. Whether the three hundred people mostly women who were assembled there could be made to vote in favor of applying for women's suffrage, and some of the leadership said no that will expose the movement to ridicule and it's too visionary. Some people say crazy a demand to be countenanced. And according to one of the stories that circulates and now it's being challenged, Frederick Douglass the great escaped slave leader also in Rochester is kind of drawn to the convention to convince people that they need to ask for what they need, instead of what seems possible and diplomatic and practical and reform-minded. So, in, in that sense, and right up until the early 1860s, only in the very few areas did that demand gain any traction at all. So I think the most impossible thing, the book argues that the most impossible thing in US politics, at the time was immediate emancipation without compensation to owners of four million slaves without any planning. But probably the second most impossible thing was women's suffrage it still hadn't really, in any case, become a practical political demand and people envisioned it as needing to be ratified by men. So, if you envisioned referenda, women weren't gonna participate in those referenda, so it was really an uphill battle for it to be heard. Similarly, the eight hour working day people--about

half--worked from sun up to sun down, so in the Summer, 14 or 15 hour days. The ones who had won reforms had won a ten hour working day, which stretched from six to six, with two hours for lunch and dinner, so the eight hour day was really a reenvisioning of the day as workers controlling two-thirds of their own time. There's a chapter in Capital where Marx talks about the working day and he talks about it as the one reform that actually gets to the heart of matters of who controls labor and who controls life and kind of leads to other changes.

ME: I just wanted to sort of sort of moving on to the 1960s, which...

[CROSSTALK]

ME: And I know you used the term Rainbow Coalition. Again, it's another moment in history where you find a lot of really interesting parallels with the emergence of the black movement a lot of other movements sort of coalesce around it. Especially in Chicago where they start to see the blacks as the vanguard of the revolution through, but instead through these sort of Maoist [INAUDIBLE] Marxist terms.

[SOUND]

ME: And then sort of women come up, we have the Gay Liberation Front, the Brown Berets, and all of these people. I don't know, they're sort of inspired by that. I don't know, like for me--I'm not trying to make this argument sort of an ethno-nationalist perspective or something, but what is it about black America that does this? [INAUDIBLE]

DR: Well, I think in both these instances--the end of Jim Crow and the end slavery--it was this bedrock of reaction that it couldn't move, it was impossible, it was natural, that white supremacy was going to be the order of the day. So when people managed to shake that that--really beginning in the 50s, but certainly by the middle of the 60s. I think you get this questioning then of all of these other natural hierarchies including, especially male supremacy in that period. So that you got in a replay of the first women's movement growing out of first wave feminism, growing out of black struggle. And then second wave feminism, also grows out of a black struggle. And this also brings up and this might be one of your later questions, but ending of civil war movements, ends up to be kind of tragic. That the women's movement and the movement of emancipated slaves, can't really get along by the end of the in 1860s. The labor movement kind of in general, excludes both black workers, and women workers. So to say inspiration that people are inspired by other people doesn't mean that that solves every problem

ME: Right.

DR: From that point forward, and I think we see that in the 60s too in which there are the women's liberation movement, that we got had its own limitations.

ME: Right.

DR: The official labor movement, mostly didn't figure out a way to get very much behind civil rights, but definitely not behind black power or...

ME: Right.

DR: I lived in Chicago in some of that period and it was a really interesting period in which you had, including young poor whites who were organizing alongside Fred Hampton, and there's beginning to be good writing about that now. So it was a fascinating period but it also came up against its own limits, pretty quickly sometimes.

ME: And one more question just.. Well, not one more question, [LAUGH] Another question I wanted to ask was, do you see that kind of politics possible today? And especially in terms of the way in which our movements, for example, Black Lives Matter movement and everything the way we ask or seek demands or sort of our emancipatory imagination "Where we wanna go." Do you see that a kind of universalizing thing that happened for example, in the brief period in the 1860s and the period of the late 1960s, do you think that that is another possibility or do you think there are some barriers to that kind of Rainbow Coalition?

DR: Yeah... I think this is a really important point, I think, that there are always barriers, but I think the really key point to make is that Black Lives Matter is itself a universal demand. It's not an ethnoracial demand--just. It's also a demand that creates all kind of space for everybody else in society, to have forward motion, in terms of social movements and even when it receives when Occupy receded, I guess, your show takes its name from...

JT: Yeah, yeah, I was in New York at the end.

DR: When occupied receded. It kind of receded in the context of elections. So I think that there are some kind of interesting parallels in which you have these insurgent social movements that don't quite know how to fit in to this.

[SOUND]

DR: Mania of election in the United States in some ways. And elections are so long now, they... like half the time is election season in the United States. So these movements both of them more or less stayed out of the electoral process, or tried to use it to their own ends without joining one candidate or one party or another but they really have had their impact. I mean, you would not get anything like Fight for Fifteen successes, if it weren't for Occupy. It just made all the difference in the world or...

ME: MmHm.

DR: I guess, Hillary Clinton's for Fight for 12, but whatever it is, that would have been impossible four or five years ago, as well, so they clear away a lot of space. And... I think there are barriers I think that one of the things that kind of disappointed me and that I've been trying to write about is I think that the immigrant rights movement and Black Lives Matters still... the coalition, there hasn't quite emerged in the way that it might emerge. And it's a funny thing 'cause a lot of the activists are involved in Fight for 15 as well, which is often immigrant workers as well, as Black Lives Matter, but at the level of rhetoric, there's a lot of endorsing of each other's demands. But at the level of

demonstrations and the like I think it's slow to develop. You know, people are oppressed they're commonly oppressed, but they're oppressed in very different ways.

ME: Right.

DR: And so I thought about this in St. Louis a lot. I was mostly involved with the Ferguson Movement, in St. Louis.

JT: MmHm.

DR: One of my kids is the attorney for a lot of those Ferguson lawsuits. And I thought a lot about how the kind of confrontational tactics with the police, which I thought was often tremendous and really made the movement take off. It also pretty much meant that what the government now calls unauthorized immigrant workers aren't gonna show up for those demonstrations, right? Because that's the very last thing you want is to be penned up in a situation like that and have your immigration status surface. So I think sometimes we think when coalitions don't develop it's all our fault, and we can't... We're not smart enough to do the right thing or committed enough to the right thing, but often it's really about, how the structures of oppression hit people in different ways and therefore, there's a certain logic to them not fully coming together in the same tactic in the same movement.

JT: One of the things that I'm thinking of as you've both been talking... Is this argument that Nikhil Singh made in *Black is a Country* where he argued that black liberation has always been about making arguments that appeal beyond the nation, right? That they... They always draw on the universal yet often times, the tactics or the solutions manifest themselves in a national framework. So, I'm wondering how that argument played out in your own research for this book, and whether that was something that you found to be true in talking about emancipation.

DR: Yeah... I studied with the great African-American historian Sterling Stuckey who now is retired from Riverside but at the time we were both at Northwestern, and Sterling's book on black nationalism is called *Slave Culture*. And he's still, he's the first person, I think, to really make in a full way the argument that Nikhil also makes--this came out in the 1980s, from Stuckey--and he argued that there was this long tradition of black nationalism that comes out of not individual, relatively privileged northern leaders, but comes out of the culture of slaves. And then the northern leaders kinda struggled to catch up...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...with the egalitarianism and the cultural creativity and unity that slaves had achieved. It's a really interesting argument, but he identifies a kind of a black autonomous tradition, that doesn't so much focus on separatist, but focuses on people who argue for black institutions, and black power but not a separate black state. They don't wanna go back to Africa, so his Nationalists are Paul Robeson, and W.E.B. DuBois and in the 19th century Henry Highland Garnet and people who were very much stay-at-home nationalists and who wanted to make an impact that... changed the whole nation... both by creating space for African-American liberation they change the nation, but they

also realize that they had to change the nation if they really wanted to create space for black liberation. So both of those things were true, at the

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...at the same time. And I feel like I always keep coming back to that early work by Stuckey, and by George [INAUDIBLE 22:18], and other historians of that generation who really were reflecting on the 60s, but mostly wrote about the 1800s as historians. So I think that I love Nikhil's work, but I think that there's also a kind of a pre-history to that of the people who are making this kind of broad argument that black nationalism is repeatedly about reaching out and making coalitions, and it's not an inward looking movement...

JT: I mean, I'm wondering Mohammed, if you can chime in on this since you've done so much research in this area.

ME: Right, I think one of the main researchers--I also [INAUDIBLE] really, really useful I mean, it was an honor thesis that was totally aborted because I'm still working on my writing skills [LAUGHS]. The thing that I was looking for and I'm reflecting in the same way that you were reflecting in 2011. I think 2011 was the year that changed a lot of our generation, especially with the Arab Spring, and not only in terms of what happened and getting rid of the regime and to us--I mean, I don't want to speak blanket to us--but to a lot of students my age or to a lot of people my age who were radicalized by this period, it wasn't so much getting rid of, for example, Hosni Mubarak.

DR: Right. Right.

ME: or it was what was happening in the squares. These solidarity, things these questioning of the very idea of leadership. And so I was trying to trace this idea of a black autonomous tradition in the same way that these historians were...

DR: Yeah.

ME: ...That sort of askews leadership. And I found sort of this narrative of the self-activity of the slaves, the self-activity of them, and the ways in which, they... But I was wondering where to look, for example, for the political institutions that weren't bound by an idea of taking over the state... like in Haiti or something. Like the political institutions that were autonomous and that was sort of a dead end for someone like...[LAUGHS]

DR: Yeah, so in what period were you talking about... were you looking at?

ME: Especially during this period... slave revolts in the 1800s.

DR: Yeah. Yeah.

[CROSSTALK]

ME: But even during... I wanted to see if there was, for example, contestation what Haiti would look like in those kinds of things.

DR: Yeah. Yeah.

[CROSSTALK]

DR: Yeah, I think the so-called Negro Convention Movement which are mostly in the 1840s and 1850s, and mostly by state. I think they're an interesting example of that. Of course nobody was above ground, advocating for slave revolts in a practical way. Some people would have debates about whether violence was justified or are not.

ME: MmHm.

DR: And the Negro Convention Movement ended up being a lot about opening schools, opening trades for Northern African-American, free black Northerners, but they are kind of a well-documented area of people that are more or less in this milieu that Stuckey's talking about. That they're not interested in going to Haiti.

ME: MmHm.

DR: They're not interested in going to Liberia.

ME: MmHm.

DR: But they're... or Nicauragua... they're interested in black autonomy within the United States, separate organizations in order to have an impact on the whole of society.

ME: Right.

[INAUDIBLE]

JT: One of the... also just to think about this one of your interesting arguments that you were making was the way in which revolution, or revolutionary moments become co-opted, right?

ME: Right.

JT: And then the ways in which those who once were revolutionary oftentimes end up participating in that co-optation.

ME: Right.

DR: Right.

JT: And I know you talked about it a lot through Black Lives Matter and I'm sure that you as well, Dave, have examples of ways in which these very powerful revolutionary moments become co-opted.

ME: Right, exactly and just to expand on that in my argument was, was that in the 20th century, you had this conception of class suicide, almost, amongst middle-class intellectuals.

DR: Right.

ME: They understood that, okay, we have to betray our calling Frantz Fanon says we go into the colonial universities and snatch the information away and give it back to the period.

DR: Right.

ME: But there was never this understanding of abolishing the idea of the middle class itself, there was always this sort of understanding that there always has to be a sort of cadre that leads the passive masses.

JT: MmHm.

DR: Yeah. Yeah.

ME: And that was another thing that I was trying to see is how could we get past that? And I think that sort of segues into the topic of your next book, and I was wondering if you had anything to say about that for example?

DR: I do wanna not leave your work too quickly [LAUGHS] and to think about whether things have changed at all since Black Lives Matter. And I think that as pessimistic, as we can be, that there are some things that are kind of different about this moment. One thing, at least in the Midwest is so often the leadership is female and queer to begin with, so you're not really talking about a black self-activity inspiring feminist self-activity, or queer self activity, you're talking about the things at every moment.

ME: MmHm.

DR: ...being already embodied in some of the same people, and again, that doesn't solve things.

ME: Right.

DR: it creates a different situation than we've seen before. I also think that for better and for worse, there've tried to be discussions about leadership.

ME: MmHm.

DR: and tried to be a sense that in Ferguson, people wanted to say that they were all leaders and sometimes that was tactically a smart thing to do, that you didn't know that the police for example, couldn't pick off...

ME: Right.

DR: at a leadership.

[CROSSTALK]

DR: Sometimes it was a little bit true, it was something that people were striving for. But then you have to ask yourself, if you say that, but the social media and intellectual arguments, that people are commanding are still middle class people are better at that sometimes...

ME: Right.

DR: ...than urban masses young people are. There was a really interesting formation in Ferguson, of young people who camped out when... where Mike Brown was killed and first older black women set up this kind of vigil for the first few nights, but then this little core of about a dozen, two dozen local, sometimes very young, like fourteen year old kids started camping there, and it made it more like Occupy then like episodic demonstrations. There was a core of people there every night.

ME: MmHm.

DR: And then the people who came and joined that encampment, were right away trans people and some trans people of color, some not. And so you had this astonishing Ferguson is a very isolated place, it doesn't have cafes or things that where you'd have this public culture, but all of a sudden you had in this encampment. These people that were just going through astonishing transformations. But that little group, I think, didn't really succeed in becoming necessarily, the leaders of the large group.

ME: Right.

DR: We don't know what's gonna happen to them ten years from now and some of them will still be really young [LAUGHS] ten years from now, but... It's an interesting thing where people want to get away from this old model of a cadre leadership, but it's sometimes not that easy to do, and it's not just a matter of proclaiming that we're done with it also. Then you have to ask, Well then, who does get to lead if there's still are leaders in fact even if people are disavowing the idea of leaders who are those people? and how can they make things more democratic? That's a hard set of questions.

ME: I think ones we all have to work to think about it.

JT: So how did this, how did you jump from Seizing Freedom

DR: Yeah.

JT: to this new project or is a new project something that you've been working on for quite a while, and now just got back to... how did these... How do these two things tie together for you?

[CROSSTALK]

DR: I get talking about this tonight, but about...

JT: Yeah,

DR: about five years ago, I guess, I was finishing this book, on the middle class. And then in the terms that we've been talking about it here, Arab Spring kind of took over.

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...my writing and I decided to do this other book instead, but both of them had compelling deadlines [LAUGHS] So the Seizing Freedom book... if it was gonna be associated with 150th anniversaries of emancipation, it needed to come out by 2015 when which it did, but the middle class book was meant to coincide with this election because I thought that in the presidential elections--last couple of presidential elections--people fell all over themselves to be the best advocate of the middle class.

JT: Oh yeah.

DR: Didn't matter too much of who was Democrat or Republican,

JT: Yeah.

DR: ...or if it was Clinton or Obama in 2008, they were both using the word middle class as many times as they could and saying that that's what they were all about. So I thought that would be a moment to kind of say, Well what do we really mean when we say

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...we're defending the middle class? And in a curious way it hasn't quite happened that way. The Hillary Clinton campaign, has--and I guess you'll get to really see this in the next week--cause this will be a place with a lot of advertising.

JT: Oh, it's coming...

[LAUGHS]

DR: Yeah... but they've kind of dialed back the middle-class rhetoric, and I think it's partly because they're starting to be some polls in the United States that show that not so many people So self-consciously, self-confidently say that they're middle class.

JT: Yeah.

DR: there was a poll the other day that supposedly 48% of people when offered the choice said that they were working class in the United States now.

JT: MmHm.

DR: So that as things fall apart in a lot of middle-class--so-called middle-class--households, I think you've had this change in self-identification and the politicians are the... The posters really are the first people to pick up on that. And so I think kind of strange sort of way, my guess is that Bernie Sanders as a socialist who you might expect to use the term working class a lot ends up being the advocate for the middle class rhetorically. That's what he's fallen into. And a lot of the unions now say that they're preserving the middle class.

JT: Right.

DR: So you have this kind of unstable pattern of uses of middle class that in a way I'm kind of glad I fooled around and didn't do the book when I thought I was gonna do it because I think it's becoming even more interesting set of questions about what the middle class is going, what it's even gonna refer to as time goes on.

JT: Right. I mean, I think one of the most interesting aspects of that term itself is how it gets deployed either as an umbrella concept, for everyone in the United States, right? Or for one little narrow group. And I mean now both Clinton and Sanders have referred to poor people in this campaign as of their "thing" ...you know people who exist. The working poor, has now become a term that...

DR: Yeah...

JT: and both of them are using to actually talk in that... of course, for Clinton still the middle class is the highest one she'll talk about, and Sanders will at least refer to Super Rich elites, whatever term it is that he puts on it...

[CROSSTALK]

DR: Yeah... yeah, that's another legacy of occupy, I think.

JT: Yeah. Oh for sure.

DR: It just sorta elbowed its way...

JT: And I mean the Sanders himself has been very clear about that, he said, in many interviews that the only reason he's even able to even do this...

ME: is because the [INAUDIBLE] 99% of the world...

JT: Yeah.

DR: Yeah

ME: something that Occupy [INAUDIBLE]

JT: Exactly.

DR: Which actually also influenced my thinking because one of the things that-- I come, I write mostly from a Marxist tradition--and one of the things that was a habit for us as Marxists, was to say, When we'd see these polls that 90% of United States citizens believe that they're middle class... or if the questions asked in a certain way, they'll say that they're middle class... Our response was to kind of say, Well that's that's stupid. They should be convinced to own being working class, and are the questions should be asked in a different way? But then, Occupy the 99% and the 1% is very like that 90% middle class break down. So I had to kind of rethink that the 99% and 1% however, imprecise really did have an impact...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...in getting class in a general way back into the discussions in US discourse. And so maybe there was something about this huge middle class, self-identification that we could also look at and try to figure out what was really going on there...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...without just saying...No, it's wrong

ME: Right.

DR: ...and not being able to say anything after

JT: Yeah.

DR: after that...

ME: So do you think that the middle class... there is a some kind of liberatory project that could be based on the idea of a middle class?

DR: I'm not sure.

[LAUGHS]

DR: And after all this, I'm still not sure, but what I am increasingly trying to argue is that the middle class actually... that we need to explain why 90% of the people sometimes think that they're middle class and in doing that, you know, I... As materialists, we can't just say, Oh they're fooled, they're always fooled.

[LAUGHS]

DR: So, I wanna argue that the middle class actually grows out of common experiences in social relations, but that mostly those experiences are not pleasant experiences.

JT: MmHm.

DR: So one of those is that the middle class historically has been the class with access to credit, and the whole idea of character and credit...

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

DR: ...has meant that the middle class is the borrowing class among--obviously the very rich have access to credit in a completely different way--but the middle class is really for a hundred years now, particularly an indebted group of people.

JT: MmHm.

ME: MmHm.

DR: ...and not just in the last ten years, but throughout. Surveilled labor and being judged at work by your personality has been hallmark of what it means to be middle class.

JT: MmHm.

DR: And so, when novelists were trying to portray the US middle class in the early 20th century...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...again and again, they wrote about lower middle class young women who were kind of the most looked at

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...workers in society.

JT: MmHm.

ME: MmHm.

[CROSSTALK]

DR: The most judged

JT: The most precarious

DR: by their appearance and their way of being and the expectations and their fashions and so, it's Kitty Foyle or it's Sister Carrie or it's that kind of a character that

JT: MmHm.

DR: that told us what the middle class was. But in general office workers, and sales people, if you go all the way back to Bartleby as a fictional character, white collar worker, these are the people whose boss is right there, observing them, whose personalities count as

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...sales people, so... and often middle-class people are quite overworked, they're the group of people that that don't have protections of federal labor law. If they're salary, they don't have protection regarding over-time.

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...so when we say now people work longer than they did 50 years ago a lot of that is concentrated in office work and in certain kinds of service work, so I want to kinda connect middle class with misery, rather than the thing that we get to and then we made it

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...and that we have to preserve. Because I think that in some ways it's increasingly impossible to live a happy middle-class life in the United States for most people. And it's not just that people fear they're falling. It's also that they fear that it's a miserable way to live anyway if you're... You know, if you're working 60 hours a week in order to be in debt and consume and try to get some little bit of dignity through the consumption that you don't have at work. I think it's a... It's not just something that people aspire to, I think it's also something that people are anxious about and fear and they don't just fear falling out of it. They fear staying in it...

JT: MmHm.

ME: MmHm.

DR: it's not a place for people to thrive. So that's kind of what I'm arguing for is a materialist view that starts from surveillance at work, over work--in terms of hours--satisfaction through consumption. And you can see then how among wage workers, the group that was most talked about as middle class are auto workers at the height of trade unionism so people talked about them as blue-collar aristocrats or middle class workers and they were an extraordinarily, surveilled...

JT: Yeah.

DR: ...group of people. They were people after World War II who went into debt to buy houses and whose response was to then take as much over-time as they could possibly get. I know so many auto workers growing up, who had a very nice cabin that they had been able to build out in the woods somewhere. And they worked seventy hours a week [LAUGHS] to have the cabin and they couldn't... you know, they could never go because of that. So, I'm kinda interested in how those things structure a middle-class existence.

JT: I mean, one thing... as you're talking that I'm wondering is like what are the ways in which race inflects your story of the middle class?

DR: Yeah, yeah, I mean, one of the things that is really interesting is that if you put, if you graph middle-class wealth kind of say the people who lie in the percentile between the thirtieth percentile and the seventieth percentile of wealth and you kinda call that the middle class, if you graphed that, the white middle-class wealth is like 15 times as much as black middle class wealth.

ME: MmHm.

DR: So if you wanna talk about a black middle class and you do it by percentiles within

JT: MmHm.

DR: The black community, those are still people that have almost no or negative wealth. They might have more income, but they have very little wealth. So that... the idea of middle class, I think, obscures race in certain ways. When we talk about the Black middle class, there's a lot of political commentators now who sort of wanna explore class within the black community--Adolph Reed and Keeanga Taylor and people--and I think it's a very important discussion to have, but we ought to realize that we're talking about people who have within the whole society often very little...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...wealth. Have historically had the kind of black middle class occupation that Franklin Frazier wrote about in Black Bourgeoisie was a postal worker.

ME: Right

DR: ...or was a Pullman porter on the railroad trains. That wouldn't have been a middle-class occupation necessarily in the larger.

JT: Yeah.

DR: ...society, but in the black community it was. So I'm trying to tease out some of that, but this is the first book I've written in a long time that's not mostly about race.

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...so I'm also trying to figure out where it fits into this larger--or different--story.

JT: Yeah, except, I mean, in certain ways, since you're telling a 20th century story, it's very much about the state building whiteness.

DR: Oh yeah

JT: Right? through...

DR: Of course... yeah.

JT: the subsidizing many of these these trappings of the middle class.

DR: yeah, the suburb, the...

JT: Yeah.

DR: yeah... and even white-collar and sometimes... The first presidential campaign that really road the term middle class a lot was Bill Clinton's first victorious campaign. And the polster who engineered that campaign was very important for a while. A more or less Marxist academic, a political scientist named Stanley Greenberg. And when Greenberg, wrote his book on that campaign he called it middle class dreams. It was a study of voters in this county outside of Detroit and they're continually referred to as middle class...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...people. And then only years later do people realize that these were auto workers and that his research was actually funded by the UAW, but he doesn't ever let themselves let them talk about themselves, as workers. They talk about themselves as middle class, and their grievances are about black people or about welfare, and so he kind of allows for this discourse that's centered around the fact that for many of them... and he says this at one point, being middle class and being white and being anti-black or kind of all part of us...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...of one package and his--the kind of Clinton position, the Greenberg position--was Well, we have to understand that, and we have to dial back on demands for affirmative action, and we have to accelerate rhetoric about crime and welfare as we know it, if we're ever gonna capture those middle class people. But in some ways, these were actually working class people whose racism, made them identify very strongly as middle class...

JT: MmHm.

DR: ...at least in those interviews.

JT: So, I mean I think we're coming a little bit to the end of our time here, but I know Mohammed and I were talking about something as we were putting this interview together, which is that you've written 11 books at this point something like this. Ten or eleven books...

[MURMURS]

DR: Maybe...

[LAUGHS]

JT: And you've made some references to your political trajectory here and there, so what have been some of the larger themes or commitments that have motivated your academic work?

DR: MmHm.

JT: Like how have you thought about your scholarly work in the context of what it means to be a human? [LAUGHS]

DR: Yes.

JT: ...in the 20th century.

ME: MmHm.

DR: Well, I only went to graduate school because the New Left ended in the way that it ended, I kind of came along at the very end, the last part of SDS... I was at a campus so small that we didn't really even realize that SDS didn't exist anymore [LAUGHS] so we still had a very vibrant SDS chapter, and went to national meetings and stuff, but it was over in many ways, and then when it was definitively over in 1974... I was getting ready to law school and somebody told me that you could go to graduate school and read books, and actually you get paid a little bit for it, and I thought, Oh well that's what I'm interested in because I wanted to figure--I didn't think I'd teach--I had been teaching high school a little bit, by then, and I liked that, but I didn't think I'd like colleges, and so I went to Northwestern, just thinking I'll do this for four years, and try to figure out what happens to social movements.

JT: MmHm.

DR: And then by then there started to be some other social movements that were important, and so I didn't have such a postmortem view of what I was doing. I had thought that that were still struggles to be had, and I liked the teaching, I came to figure out that I liked the teaching part of it. But my formative influence was, I was in Summers, I was in a little town at the bottom of Illinois, where the Ohio and Mississippi meet called Cairo, and... And it got the Civil Rights Movement so late that it already was time for black power, so there was this extraordinarily exciting movement, some of those same people that were in Chicago, came down and helped lead struggles in Cairo.

And I went as a 13-14 year old kid, I went to this little Catholic church, black Catholic Church purely because mass was 20 minutes long, 25 minutes long, and the Irish church, was an hour and a half long. [LAUGHS] And so I started going there, just out of luck, and it turned out that the mass was so short, because it was the center of the social movement, and people after church would then kind of stay and strategize and talk. They were extraordinarily welcoming to me, and so even though I grew up the rest of the year in a town that was what in the Midwest was called a sundown town, a town where African-American supposedly have to be out of town by sundown. I had this experience in the, in the Summer where I could feel like I was part of this important--it was important--social movement and then that... An extraordinarily racist town in its own way, but half black, and half white, contrasted with living in the sundown town, the rest of the year. I think it made me think... Oh, right, there's something about race, that's really complicated. That it is not just one thing, and it's not just easy to say white supremacy is this and Black subjugation is this, that there are very different kinds of ways that it's lived in local situations. So I just kinda got hooked on studying African-American history with Stuckey, and then got convinced that I as a white, even not at all by Stuckey and black historians, but by white scholars who taught me that there was no place in African-American studies for white scholars. So I ended up turning the labor history. So, my early work is kind of on trade and work history, and then my career has been about half in African-American Studies Department, so it hasn't worked out that way at all, but that was kind of the wisdom at the, at the time. I feel very lucky to have been around these kind of moments of black self-activity. What we were talking about at the beginning, how they opened up space for other people to think things that they probably would have never gotten to think about, otherwise.

JT: Well thank you, this has been a wonderful conversation.

DR: Great, great...

[CROSSTALK]

JT: Thank you Mohammed.