

I-P<>LHYS

INVESTIGATING POLARIZATION IN HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEMS

I-POLHYS Talks

Interview with Myra Marx Ferree University of Wisconsin-Madison

Transcription of the full interview

The video-interview is available at www.ipolhys.it (“Talks” section)

The interview was carried out on June 27, 2023

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Transcription

Question 1

How would you define political polarization? Could you please make one or more concrete examples of how it manifests?

00:00:12

Myra Marx Ferree: I think the important thing is to make a distinction between polarization that exists and active polarizing processes. In polarization as a process both sides have to be moving away from each other, not just one side reacting. So there is a tendency to talk about backlash, for example, as one side is changing, but it only makes sense to understand the changes - let's say from the right - if you understand the changes that are happening on the left. I don't really like left and right as terms, but I think they do capture for a general public the idea that this has to be a two-sided process. A really great article that I would recommend to you, it may not be of general public interest, is Jason Ferguson's “The great refusal” which is in the American Journal of Sociology this year. And the subtitle is “The West, the rest and the new regulations on homosexuality between 1970 and 2015”. And what he shows it is not that you have countries, especially, let's say, African countries or Eastern European countries, acting alone in putting in new regulations to repress homosexuality. You also have countries in Europe, in the US, in Latin America, putting in rules to legitimize and accept homosexuality, and both of those policies are happening back and forth. It's not like one goes, and goes, and goes, and then finally the other jumps in. It's a back and forth that's been happening all along.

There's a term in political science called the “Overton Window” that says, these are the attitudes that are acceptable in a democratic society to bring up. These are the things you can talk about, you know. So taking political prisoners and whipping them in public is outside the Overton window. What polarization means is that this polarizing process has opened at a pretty wide Overton window. You can say a lot of things that are pretty unacceptable to one side or to the other side and it just pulls this window wider in terms of what kinds of things can be talked about that didn't used to be talked about.

Question 2

Studies about political polarization often distinguish between mass and elite polarization. How would you define them and in what relationship do you think they stand? Can you please help us understand by giving us some practical examples?

00:03:23

Myra Marx Ferree: Talking about the Overton window. That's something that elites can open by talking about things or talking in ways that were unacceptable. Okay, so explicit racism or derogatory language about women has been outside the Overton window in the United States since the 1970s or early 1980s. But elites who speak that way open that window, that kind of elite action. But the mass attitudes are there that make it in some ways impossible for elites to open an Overton window to talk

about things, if there isn't already a polarized position, strong differences among population attitudes that divide possibly demographically, possibly politically. But if you think about mass polarization as attitudes that have some demographic division, some emotional division, some sense of loyalty to leaders, you're thinking about attitudes that people perceive to be important issues. So people can be very distinct about their attitudes towards vegetarianism. But unless vegetarianism is somehow or another brought into public discourse as important like it has consequences - we are going to make it impossible to slaughter cows or selling meat will be illegal. Then, being a vegetarian or being anti-vegetarian, being carnivorous is not a political thing. It could be very strongly held: vegetarians can be very committed, meat eaters can be very committed. But it's not a political thing until the elite step in and propose policies that make those divisions important.

So the Catholic Protestant division in Europe was very important when monarchs were said to be able to determine the religions of their populations, and the religion of a population had something to do with national identity. After democratic revolutions and socialist politics, the split between Catholic and Protestants became less important. People were not regulating what specific religion you had, after the eighteenth century. The important split was one between religious and secular. Secular was not an attitude that was really visible politically. It was not usable politically until that became part of a politics that went in with democracy, socialism, a variety of political engagements. That said, religion should not be the defining feature of a State. So, then, religious versus secular became an important political issue that could be polarized because you could debate feverishly whether or not religion should be the basis of a State.

Elite polarization means that there is a degree of divergence among the political decision-makers. The democratic decision-makers that would allow them to capture these issues right. If there's no division among elites about vegetarianism... [shrugging her shoulders]. If suddenly there was a party that came in saying: "Vegetarianism is absolutely essential for the survival of the world", then that polarization would become important and political. In the US, there was very little polarization among elites about socialism. Socialism was bad, foreign, dangerous, anti-democratic. So anything that got labeled socialist was outside the Overton window. That's helped keep the American Welfare State very small and very fragile because you can't talk about socialism, or you couldn't talk about socialism. That Overton window has actually moved to the left. We can now talk more about socialism and democratic socialism. Still not easy, but it's possible, that window has moved that way.

Another example is in the UK. There's a strong division among younger generations about whether or not the monarchy is useful or useless. There is, however, in the UK, political elite, no party, that is, anti-monarch, that would abolish the monarchy. There is a space there a party could in principle arise to capture that anti-monarchical opinion among young people. But it isn't there. It's possible, I could imagine the Greens, environmentalists in the UK, deciding that part of their appeal would be to be anti-monarchical and turn that into an issue that they could use.

Question 3

Is the distinction that studies make between ideological and affective polarization still valid? If so, how do these two forms of polarization differ and how do they intertwine? Can you please help us understand by giving us some practical examples?

00:09:51

Myra Marx Ferree: I think there's always affect in polarization, because, as I said, it has to be understood to be important in some way. And important means it has some consequences for your will, for what you do. And your will is connected very much to your feelings. You can know all kinds of things.

You can make commitments to all kinds of things in principle. As they say, you can talk the talk, but will you walk the walk? Do you have a will to do something? And it usually takes more affect of some kind. Love, hate, anger, fear motivate people to do things. So the degree of affect is important. Nationalism is a good case in point. Nationalism, there could be a high degree of affect, patriotism, for your country, for its leaders, for the interest of the nation, unless it becomes important to defend the nation in time of war. Look at how Ukrainian nationalism bursts into flower because of Russian invasion. Ukrainian nationalism was a kind of ambivalent feeling until Russia made Ukrainian Nationalists and nationalism the most important thing. Once you have an enemy or something that threatens the nation, you go to war, or you see some process that is eroding the boundaries of the nation, or interfering with the nation, nationalism is kind of a latent thing. You can think of it as polarized, not in the sense of - within the population - it's nationalist or it's not nationalist, although Ukraine is a good example where there was both nationalism and not. In the US, there's a lot of nationalism known as patriotism, but it wasn't really evoked nationally in a polarizing way. It was only evoked against others who are outside the nation. "We're going to go to war against them."

So, in the Reagan era, in the very early 1980s you could talk about US exceptionalism and "The city on the Hill", and US Democratic experiment. But until you get into a kind of anti-Soviet discourse, nationalism doesn't involve hating anybody. Same thing, you could have competition with China. but when that competition with China is polarized into a national threat, then you get hating China and fearing China, and responding to China as this polarized thing. Now, that's not an internal polarization, and I think we often make the mistake, in talking about politics, to take the nation for granted. Is that the only terrain on which politics is carried out? Is polarization only about divisions within the nation? Why do we assume that polarization can very often be directed outside, and can be very unifying inside a nation? But notice how many nations split. Is Catalan nationalism inside or outside? Is East Timor's nationalism inside or outside? What are the boundaries of nations? And after about 1918, when the ideal of multi-national empires began to be replaced with the idea that nations were ethnically homogeneous, contained democratic entities of self-determining same people, the issue of sameness of the nation became a polarizing question both within and outside of existing national boundaries. So the whole question of nationalism as a polarizing attitude for elites to seize upon includes whether or not the EU is a threat to national identity, and national sovereignty. Brexit certainly took advantage of that sense of threat from the EU, but at the same time it mobilized. Brexit recreated and re-strengthened what were declining feelings of nationalism. In the Irish case where the North and the Republic of Ireland, where religion had become much less salient, young people were not so divided on the historical religious division, suddenly there was a new way to have a division. It was between the EU and the UK. It was on Brexit. And the North took the UK and the South took the EU side, and it became a new division. Again, is that internal or external? It kind of all depends on what you think the nation is there. but I think national feelings are very polarized and polarizing, and leaders are used to using nationalism as a polarizing kind of belief, commitment and taking people to war. I mean, there's nothing more expressive of a polarized emotional commitment than being willing to die for something.

I think, and here I would mention Jane Mansbridge as a theorist of democracy who makes the point that democracies can have highly polarized positions on many issues, as long as the democratic rule holds that loser speaks, and there will be a return to the engagement. So you really only get into a huge problem if you say: "Okay, it's now decided: the position that lost is now one that is punishable is now not speakable, if you are now a traitor, if you say this, you are now an anti-democratic torch error, if you say this, you cannot be allowed to say this. You are undermining the state, you are undermining the nation. You are a danger to us, if you take that position, if you've lost." That's when people turn to violence. It is unacceptable for you to have that position. If the stakes are all or nothing, either Catalonia is or is not part of Spain, or if the Basque nation is or is not part of Spain. The stakes are all or nothing.

And so the tendency of the Spanish government, the Catalan resistance, the Basque resistance is to turn to violence, is to say, we can't speak, therefore, we cannot engage democratically over this issue. This is not a debatable issue anymore. As long as issues remain debatable and are not used to exclude people from the politics, so your opinion is not acceptable to say - and it all depends on the norm, what the norms are of democratic engagement in a particular context, to know whether or not people have gone too far, are really ignoring the norms of making democratic decisions.

And here's a good example, I think. In the US the norms of democratic debate demand that legislators speak politely, yield their turns neatly, not interrupt each other, all stay on the floor of the House, and behave politely to each other. How much they, however much they may in their hearts disrespect the other, the rules of a democracy and the loser speaks rules is you shut up and listen when the loser speaks. In the UK, those democratic rules are different. Parliamentarians shout at each other, interrupt each other. The Democratic Parliament is a cacophony of voices, a lot of people trying to talk at once and shouting and yelling, and that's perfectly normal. So you have to interpret the violations of loser speaks within the norms of democracy as they are experienced in one place or another. So in the US for a legislator to interrupt the President or the Speaker of the House, or whoever is speaking, to interrupt and yell at them, that's a violation of the norms of democratic conduct. It's not violence, but it's a normative violation, and is reacted to very strongly, as you know, that's an anti-democratic thing. At the same time, if you violate the norms of democracy by not letting people speak, you are the party in power, and so you don't allow the other party to introduce their motions or debate their ideas, you silence them, that also is a violation of democracy. And the two tend to feed into each other. So the more that people are silenced, the more they'll shout back. And that polarization is more visible and more emotionally visible than it would be if the democratic norms of the particular place, of how do you carry on a democratic debate in Germany, in the UK, and the US, if it's clear that people are following shared rules for good, well-functioning democracy that tends to bring down the emotional atmosphere. It tends to say: "Okay, if we didn't win this time we'll win next time. This will work out okay."

Question 4

Based on your research work and your knowledge of this field of research, what would you say are the dimensions along which polarization occurs more neatly? For example, do you see ideological cleavages such as that between right and left being of the utmost importance or do you think other elements, like gender, class, ethnicity, religion, issues, levels of engagement in politics also play a part? Can you please help us understand how any of these dimensions that you think are relevant play a part by giving us some practical examples?

00:22:31

Myra Marx Ferree: So I think the important thing - and this is your next question about what are the dimensions on which polarization occurs more or more deeply - is between authoritarians and democrats, that used to be between monarchists and democrats. So, democratic revolutions often had to assert their rights. The political question of hierarchy versus equality is still unsettled and anything that engages that question of who has political power, is it hierarchical? Is it democratic and equal? Authoritarianism was once contested in the form of like, when it was about religion in Europe, it was often between papal authority or democratic State authority. Now you see much more strongman militarism versus democratic constitutionalism. But that is still a polarizing force, because it leads directly into debates about legitimate decision making, the boundaries of the Overton window, what you can discuss, what you can say, and what you can't. It's the: who gets to make those rules? How do they use those rules? Now the assumption has been that the democratization is tied to national populations,

the democratic nation State. But the choice here about a democratic nation State is undermined by political decision making, that is outside the boundaries of the nation State, and that was put outside the boundaries of the nation state for good reason, polarization between nations, between France and England, between Germany and Russia. We've had lots of very bloody wars in Europe that were nationalist. And so the EU, as a peace-making institution. was an attempt to pull a lot of conflict out of national borders. The UN is an attempt to pull a lot out of conflict out of national borders. International human rights courts are an attempt to pull conflict over boundaries and over criminal behavior by States outside of those national boundaries and make democratic decision making happen somewhere else.

Question 4 a

Besides the dimension of authoritarianism and democracy, are other elements like gender, ethnicity, and class important?

00:25:48

Myra Marx Ferree: I think all of those issues are actually issues of authority versus democracy. So liberal democracies did not at first undermine patriarchy. They accepted the idea that men were the decision-makers. Men were the only politicians, men were the heads of households, men were the ones who held property. Liberal Democracy empowered individual men and men collectively. And I call them liberal democracies as breadwinner-brotherhood states. And I have some articles that focus on the question of the breadwinner-brotherhood State as the essence of liberal democracy. Because the question is, as gender is changing, the boundaries of liberal democracy are being challenged? Do men have to cede power to women? Are families necessarily male-headed? Are women able to exercise authority as heads of state? Okay, a lot of those kinds of questions about misogyny and feminism are bound up in the power relationships, the hierarchical power men assume over women. Even the language in which we talk about men's jobs, and the loss of men's jobs in industrialization assume certain things about the breadwinner-brotherhood nation, and family.

Similarly, the boundaries of democracy within nations are challenged by the global migration of populations which is only going to continue to increase. So then, the question is, if you're going to have a democracy, who is allowed to participate in that democracy? Do you have to be the same ethno-religious background as the nation imagines itself as being? Whether that's whiteness in the US, or whether it is French Catholicism. But there is an imaginary unity behind the nation. It's an imagined community to use Benedict Anderson. Yeah, language about this. So the question is: What is race? What is gender? What is immigration? What are these issues? There are issues about the boundaries of nations and the boundaries of power within nations that are like the meaning of what hierarchy and authority are. So if you, as a ethno-religious national community are being challenged, let's say, by the EU to admit new members, is that a threat to your understanding of democratic power? Or is that, in fact, democratizing your population by making it more inclusive, more equal, not sustaining hierarchies based on ethnicity and religion? Do they matter or not? Is one religion better than another is one ethnicity better than another? That's hierarchy! Is one gender better than another? And should they, because they are "better", be able to exercise more power?

Question 4 b

And are these elements involved in polarizing processes?

00:30:10

Myra Marx Ferree: I think it all depends on how they become entangled with this overall nationalism and authoritarianism versus democratization. If the nation imagines itself as democratic and that's really important, then a lot of the focus is on "Is this becoming more or less democratic?". In the US, a lot of polarization is around how the parties has seized on polarization to make different kinds of claims about what is or isn't democratic. And even to defend violence as a democratic necessity. You don't see that same debate about national violence, or one party silencing another party in Germany, even though in many very significant ways, the Afd in Germany has been silenced by the other parties. It moved in to capture a polarized constituency that the two major parties, the Spd on the left and the CDU-CSU on the right, they were not capturing that sense that our nation was at risk, our democracy was at risk, because they were basically saying: "We need the population for a labor force". And so there was a consensus there in the middle among the elites, so you have a party coming in from the outside to seize it. The last time that happened it was on the left rather than on the right. The consensus between the Spd and the CDU-CSU was that paving the entire country was good, nuclear power was good, and the Greens came and said: "No, it isn't". And women do not belong in politics. That was also a consensus opinion at that time, that got fragmented and fractured, and the Greens captured a position which is not the position of the mainstream parties and it's still not the position of the mainstream parties, though they've moved in a greener direction. Same thing with the Afd. They're anti-immigration. I would say racist understanding of German history and German nationhood is not something the parties the major parties want to accept. They have too strong a sense of national history to ever accept that. That's not so true in France, for example. It remains to be seen how that plays out in Sweden, but I think it's important to see the parties that come in from the left or the right. Are elites trying to capture polarizations around things like nationalism? And who is the population that we should be representing? And that is a gendered, and raced, and ethnicized, and religious. And you can't separate them and say it's one or the other, because it's really intersectional. It's about them as a whole kind of otherness, somehow. Who is the true democratic population?

Question 5

What is the role of the media with respect to polarization processes? Do you see any similarities and/or differences between the role played by traditional and digital media? Can you say anything specific about the role played by journalists?

00:34:02

Myra Marx Ferree: Well, you asked the question in a leading kind of way about traditional media versus new social media. And I don't believe that traditional media is a thing. Media has always been changing the media modalities. First, you get newsprint, and then you get radio, and then you get TV, and then you get the Internet, and then you get social media. So you're constantly having newer modalities. But the old ones don't go away. So you have multiple modalities. Okay? And the number of modalities continues to increase, and I think they will continue to increase. I think what's really important here is journalism as a profession. And as a profession, journalism has been squeezed very hard by the national and international systems of compensation and employment. Professions, almost by definition or by some people's absolute definition, have to control access to that profession. It's not just an occupation. It's a profession. And, being a professional journalist requires journalists to control who can be a journalist. And that control has become much weaker, much more contestable. Lots of public speakers who are not professional journalists are able to access large audiences across multiple forms of media. Journalists do not control access to any of the old or new media.

All those modalities of media are controlled by corporations, by states, and by states and corporations

in cooperation and or conflict with each other. So states and corporations use their control over who speaks to large populations with these various modalities to control who speaks, right? They have control over the modalities. So they have some control over who speaks. You see a lot of complaint now that the new social media corporations are not exercising enough control over who speaks. We've gotten used to the levels of control that are very high, and it's not about a profession of journalism. So journalism as a profession is a niche, is a fringe thing in this terrain of speakers. So knowledge, widespread knowledge, the knowledge economy is an ever larger part of the overall economy, and of the overall power of the state in the Foucaultian sense.

Doing politics and doing profit, getting power is driven often by knowledge. And the shorthand for that is the knowledge economy, or the knowledge state, or the technocratic state. So the conflicts over knowledge control are very sharp between states and corporations, but also between people who have different political positions. One corporation's control over its spokes-people, and the media that it controls is contested by the state in some nations, and is supported by the state in another nation. States agree what kinds of things belong inside the Overton window and what don't, or states begin to say some kinds of knowledge are not acceptable. They should not be taught in schools. They should not be in newspapers. They should not be publicly spoken. And those can be claims that things are too racist or they're not sufficiently white supremacist or racist, right? It's not necessarily one side or the other. That's what I'm saying.

Polarization is about, in part, a struggle for control over the media between corporations and states, both of which are multiple, so it's not the Corporation versus the State. Corporations can be fighting each other. Corporations can be cooperating with the state, fighting with the state, fighting with a local state like Florida, and cooperating with the national state like the US - Disney Corporation being a case in point. And the United States has a lot of rules explicitly about democracy requiring speech. So the rules about loser speaks. And we will re-engage on this issue, because the loser is to speak become codified in the debate about free speech. Can people say these things? We have a rule saying, democracy means there is free speech. People should be able to say these things. So when somebody tries to shout somebody down or when a corporation takes a position and the state tries to punish the corporation, the free speech claim is mobilized to support the corporation, when the State tries to shut it down, or to stop a corporation from taking a certain kind of position. It could be a racist one, it could be an anti-racist one. But this whole question of who controls over who speaks and what are they allowed to say, what is within this Overton window of acceptable speech for democracy. So some things are clearly not acceptable. The classic example in the US is you can't call fire in a crowded theatre to make people run away and trample each other. It's dangerous. What speech is dangerous? What speech is equivalent to say there's a fire in the theater and causing a stampede that kills people? Is calling for gun control or gun safety regulation within the boundary of free speech or not? Is insulting, using derogatory language towards women or ethnic minorities acceptable or not? Should it be shut down? Should corporations punish it? Should the State punish it? Or is that just "free speech"? How much free speech is allowed by the democratic rules? That's a huge debate in the US. That is tied to this wider Overton window of things that are acceptable and unacceptable that has been opened on both sides.

Question 6

What are in your opinion the best methodological approaches to study and understand polarization?
00:42:21

Myra Marx Ferree: I raised the example of Jason Ferguson's article about polarization on LGBTQ issues

and he looks at it purely in an elite policy kind of way and says, “Look, this is how different countries have been responding and polarizing in this global scene”. But I think very similar kinds of techniques that would separate out the degree of change that's going in both directions, from change that's only moving in one direction or another, could be done within countries, could be done around a whole variety of different issues, could be tied to a whole variety of mass as well as elite policy questions. So, you know, how have States in the United States, at the elite level, responded to childcare and state provision of childcare, as the fear of socialism has been reduced, as the Overton window has allowed people to call for things without being labeled socialist, and outside the realm of acceptability. So one could look at childcare debates, or one could look at death penalty regulation. Not just things that have to do with gender or not just things that have to do with race but a whole variety of issues, you could see how they polarize and how they are actively polarized by the positions being taken on both sides. In other words, that it's an iterative process, and that we do harm to the idea of polarization, if we assume that polarization is only being driven by, let's say, a move to the right, or a move to the left. So both sides are active. Neither side is a passive victim of what the other is doing. And, while people would like to claim that they've been victimized, those claims are themselves entries into that public debate and asking for a reconsideration, right? So, I think that that notion of getting into the iterative process of democracy that both sides speak back and forth, losers speak, winners speak.

If you just follow the policy changes as Ferguson does at an international level, you can see how the winners change across countries as they participate in or resist what they see as an overall globalizing trend towards inclusion, and they don't like it or they do like it. And some of the reasons why they like it and don't like it don't necessarily have to do with homosexuality per se. They have to do with saying that you are different from those people, those people except gays. We are not like those people, therefore we don't. Those people don't accept gays. We are not like those people, therefore we do. And you can see a lot of that back and forth, happening at many different levels. I would say that I've observed that happening even within interpersonal debates in the women and gender studies department about trans issues and how do you talk about people who are trans. And you see changes happening back and forth, moving that polarization back and forth.

You're not studying the right or the left. You're not studying feminists or anti-feminists. You always have to be trying to capture the dynamic of what makes somebody feminist by being different from an anti-feminist. If anti-feminists now accept the idea that women can be employed outside the home, then it's not particularly feminist to claim that women can be employed outside the home. But when anti-feminists rejected that, that was a feminist claim. So, the meaning of both sides changes as both sides engage in actively trying to shape the meaning of those terms. So, trans inclusion is just one of the newer instances where feminists and anti-feminists have been debating what kind of trans inclusion, on what terms, how much gender, and in what form should be included, if you claim to be a feminist. So it is happening in a lot of different ways in a lot of different places all the time. And it's at every level, as I say, down to the face-to-face debates within a Gender and Women's Studies Department, let alone an English department, or a History department, or the whole university. But you know, no matter how micro you get, these debates are happening, and they are changing attitudes on both sides. People who don't want to be transphobic move in a certain direction. People who don't want trans people claiming something that belongs to women move in a different direction. So there's a political process behind polarization that's happening on both sides. That's the crucial thing.

Question 7

Over time, polarization has become a relevant political concept and, even more, a paramount feature of

political processes. What consequences does polarization have both “in real life” and within the academic debate?

00:48:48

Myra Marx Ferree: I think it's a question again of academic debates are about knowledge and control over knowledge. And there are many, many speakers, some of whom are journalists, some of whom are not, depending on the national context of media, and, as I say, multiple modalities of media, people who are not claiming to be journalists can still have a lot of influence on the language that is acceptable or not acceptable. So it's not journalists who invented the term “woke”. It's American politicians. But that has spread even internationally to be a code word for some people. Academic language often sneaks out, creeps out, slips out, and becomes a more general language. To some degree, that's true of trans discourse. It was first an academic discussion about intersectionality, transsexuality, transgender. That was a debate that was going on since the 1970s about the boundaries of woman as a category for political analysis within academic circles. But it couldn't stay within academic circles because, of course, students and others who found that language useful took it outside of academia. People intervened as academics, writing op-ed pieces, getting on the radio, making claims, writing books that become popular, putting those ideas out in circulation, intending to reach broader audiences. So, there is no place where you could talk about academic debate as if it was entirely sealed off and closed from popular use. I mean, I think there is a lot of academic language that makes it very hard to use popularly and it's very easily taken up and misused.

So if you have an agenda, for example, around white supremacy in the US, it's really easy to take something that is really an academic language around intersectionality, or an academic language around critical race theory, and turn that into a popular claim about what critical race theory is, and isn't, where people don't really necessarily know what the academic meaning of those terms are, but they take the term critical race theory, and people in academia use the term critical race theory. I use the term critical race theory. I mean something by critical race theory. What I mean by critical race theory is very specific and academic, and is much more limited than, let's say, being anti-racist. I hope to also be anti-racist. But critical race theory is a subset of anti-racist thought, right? And that's not how it's used, once it escapes into the popular language. It becomes something with a very different meaning. It means anything that criticizes race relations, it is critical race theory.

Question 8

Is polarization reversible? In other words, is it possible to move towards a political practice that is more agonistic than antagonistic? How can one think about bridging polarized politics – or, perhaps, there is no coming back from polarized politics?

00:53:08

Myra Marx Ferree: I don't think it's a question of coming back or going forward, again, because it's not a single direction. I think what happens is some of the things that are polarizing, or that have been seized upon to be polarized, become less important for whatever reasons, and there could be a variety of reasons. Economic issues can become more important than immigration issues. Okay, so especially when you look at Europe and you start saying: “How is the crisis of caregiving going to be addressed politically, especially in the context of tight social services, budgets and decreasing ability to provide social services?”

Then you get depolarization, if you will, of immigration, as people turn to immigration as an economic issue, not as a cultural issue. And then it becomes a different issue. It becomes: how well do these immigrants, who come for a particular purpose, and for a particular time, how well do they become

citizens or not? But it's no longer polarized around borders. It's now polarized around who is a good citizen. Or how many rights should citizens have, or how do people demonstrate their citizenship? And people, in particular locals, learn what those rules are, and they may be very different, let's say, in a city like Frankfurt, or a city or small area outside of Würzburg, you know, very different locations. What is it like to have an immigrant workforce in a place like Sicily or a place like Venice? You know, they're very specific, and they're going to have to be worked out in very specific ways, but it becomes less about national borders. It's not as much eventually because of the economic stresses on the system. It becomes less about keeping people out than trying to rethink what the population is, and who belongs, and how do they belong, or we will accept Africans who are Christian, but keep out Arabs who are not or bad. You know, it becomes more nuanced. Which is to say, you're in that Overton window., but you're not pushing the edges of it. You're not continuing to polarize the debate. You're starting to debate within that window. And insofar, as you're debating within that window, you might begin to see the window begin to shrink again. These are the things that we have to settle. How many rights do immigrant care workers have to bring their children to live with them, right? And that becomes a more technical policy question. And it becomes open to people actually getting to know those care workers. They have one of them in their family, taking care of their aunt, uncle, mother, grandmother. It becomes less abstract and more concrete, and the concrete questions become debatable in a different kind of way.

We're seeing that at the moment in the abortion debate in the United States, because it was an abstract debate about the life of the fetus versus the rights of the woman. And that was very abstract and people were prepared to pass all kinds of incredibly repressive legislation that stopped women from having rights to "protect the fetus". Well, as the Dobbs decision becomes effective in making actual policy, a lot of people who were very "pro-life" are now saying: "Wait a minute. You mean a woman who is having a miscarriage is supposed to be at the brink of death before a doctor can help her? Are you really saying that this thing that we've been calling a heartbeat should keep you from taking out a non-violable fetus until it begins to cause sepsis in the woman?" These are practical policy questions that have real things for real people in their lives. It's not an abstract debate about some other bad person having an abortion.

It's more about the terms of the debate, the practical policy considerations. How does this work out in practice? Are more democratic, or can be more democratic? Or what we want to do is to try to make our societies that claim to be democratic, make those decisions more democratically, make more discussion that includes more consideration of the practical policies involved, instead of passing laws that have big, symbolic impact." We don't want any immigrants from x country here", but don't have any practical consequence, when people from x country still have to get out of that country, and if necessary will sneak in, come illegally, do whatever. And once they're there, they're going to make friends. They're going to build communities, and then you've got to make practical considerations about what are you going to do about the person who runs the local restaurant that you like when you discover that he or she is illegal. It changes the debate and that's not by just talking. It's about the realities of policy making. What is being debated? And the more that you can make the debate concrete and practical, the more you can reach places where it's less polarizing, less symbolic.

But it's hard to motivate politicians to do that if and when their fate is tied to winning big, symbolic contests. But the politicians, the elites can often do more to control an issue if they can keep it abstract and symbolic. "It's in favor of my party, my position, my stance on such and such". The symbolic issue can serve elite interests. And that's always the problem. The more you can democratize decision-making, the more you can engage people in actually debating how does this play out, the more you can make knowledge about specific consequences more available to more people. As long as, you know, it's about knowledge, information, and using that knowledge and information to inform concrete decision-making democratically.

I think this is the broad outline. As I say, I've done several papers. I'd encourage people to look at the papers that I've written about both democracy as a breadwinner-brotherhood compact, and about the ways in which the American parties have used very broad umbrellas to embrace social movements to increase polarization, to make it more advantageous for them. And both sides have done this extending umbrella over certain kinds of movements, and have therefore also opened that Overton window. The Democratic party has been willing to accept more of the politics of the 99%, and Occupy, and feminism, and has moved in those kinds of left ways. And Republicans have embraced guns, and symbolic uses of power as patriarchy and hierarchy, and authoritarianism, and anti-alien, anti-foreigner, anti-globalization, nationalist kind of debates, to advance their own causes. Republicans have moved much further to the right than Democrats have to the left, but I think it would be a mistake to say: "Oh, well, we would deal with polarization if Democrats stopped moving left". That would just move the Overton window further to the right. So the debate has to be carried on, but it has to be carried on within democratic norms on both sides. So I'm opposed to shouting down speakers. I'm opposed to calling people names, whether that name is, you know, "you're a dirty socialist" or some ethnic slur. I don't even sympathize with those of my friends who like to call Trump names. I don't think it's particularly useful for democratic debate to refer to Trump as "the Cheeto". Orange and cheats. Every reason why "Cheeto" is a nice symbol for Trump, but symbolic language is polarizing language.

I believe the discourse is powerful, and that because knowledge is a form of power, the language that we use, the discourse that we use in academia, outside academia, there is no hard boundary between academia and the rest of the world. But those kinds of debates do filter out. So I do think that intersectionality, as an academic concept, has had huge consequences for a variety of social movements on the left, in giving much more commitment to anti-racism to feminists, for example, and more commitment to feminism among anti-racists, and more willingness to consider gender and race on the part of economically central, socialist folks. I mean, I just do think that these concepts, like intersectionality, do have power and that we do a lot when we help that power along. And sometimes it scares people. Saying something as self-evident and supposedly incontestable as Black Lives Matter is nonetheless scary to people who are convinced that if black lives matter, white lives won't, and that whiteness really rests on Blackness being subordinate. So again, I do think it's about hierarchy. The only way that Black Lives Matter is scary is if it invokes that hierarchical sense of what one gets, they have to take from the other.