

Robert Talisse [00:00:05] Hello and welcome to the Why We Argue podcast, The Future of Truth Edition. This season of the podcast is produced by The Future of Truth, a project based at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute, which explores what truth is, where it's going, and why it matters for democracy. The project is made possible by generous funding from the University of Connecticut and the Henry Luce Foundation. The podcast features discussions with publicly minded thinkers about the cultural and political role of concepts like truth, fact, expertise, and information. Today my guest is Melvin Rogers. Melvin is associate professor of political science at Brown University. Melvin specializes in contemporary democratic theory with special focus on the traditions of American and African-American political and moral philosophy. Now, in addition to his many professional academic publications, Melvin also regularly contributes to more public-facing venues such as the Atlantic, Dissent, and Boston Review. You can follow Melvin on Twitter @mrogers097, that's M Rogers 0 9 7. All one word. Now I invited Melvin on the program today because I wanted to talk to him about the current state of our democracy in light of the various kinds of social unrest and protests that we've witnessed in recent weeks and months and over the past couple of years. Hi, Melvin.

Melvin Rogers [00:01:39] Hey, Bob, how are you doing?

Robert Talisse [00:01:41] I'm doing all right. It's so good to talk to you.

Melvin Rogers [00:01:43] Wonderful to be here.

Robert Talisse [00:01:44] Fabulous. So, you know, I wanted to begin... I recently went back and reread something that you published in Boston Review back in May of last year. And I wanted to begin by quoting a sentence that you wrote. And the article in May is about Black Lives Matter protests surrounding George, the murder of George Floyd. But here's the sentence. You write, "The danger is that we just don't know if the United States is convulsing because it wishes to be something new and better, or is raging to remain something old and twisted." Now, when I read that a couple... reread that a couple of nights ago, that statement seemed to me to take on a whole new significance in light of the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath. So I wonder if one place we can begin our conversation is... Could you reflect on that a little bit? You do hear the different valence to that kind of statement?

Melvin Rogers [00:02:46] Yes, I do. And of course, at the time, I wasn't quite anticipating... Well, I wasn't anticipating at all that the Capitol would be... That the Capitol would be stormed. But in fact, this is what we are seeing, right. We see a nation that is struggling on the one hand to articulate a coherent view of democracy for all. And we see that same nation, but another portion of it, that is struggling to hold on to various forms of inequality, among which is the sort of greatest danger to democracy, at least American democracy, white supremacy.

Robert Talisse [00:03:29] Right. So, you know, is... Let me ask this slightly differently. Is there an optimistic and again, cautiously optimistic, thought that part of the story of the Capitol insurrection on January 6th is the sort of the last gasps of a social order committed to remaining old and twisted? Or is that too optimistic, do you think?

Melvin Rogers [00:04:08] Well, look, I think, you know, I think we always want to have some cautious optimism, particularly in the current climate in which we're sitting. So it can't all be pessimism. And so there is cautious optimism there. But of course, as we see, Trump will not be like previous presidents, the most recent presidents, in which he would

just simply sort of go quietly into the night. What he has unearthed, what he has crystallized in his presidency continues on. And so and it continues on right in the halls of Congress. So it's not clear to me in the final analysis that we should sit comfortably. And if you want to hold on to cautious optimism, I would lean heavily on the cautious side.

Robert Talisse [00:05:07] [Laughs] Well, that's sage advice. I think that that's got to be true. Do you think... Let me just ask one other sort of again, maybe a kind of political science question. Was Trump the catalyst? When you say your Trump unearthed this? I understand the metaphor. Did he bring this to the surface? Was he the product of forces that, you know, in light of certain, you know, pretty obvious demographic and sociological changes going on in the country? Were those changes the things that made Trump possible? Or was Trump actually, you know, the mover, the causal agent, that you think that sort of brought this all up to the surface?

Melvin Rogers [00:06:05] So I think maybe the more accurate description here is that Trump is the expression of that which was latent, that which was, in some instances, in the shadows. If you want another metaphor, right below the surface. Right. All movements, positive or negative, often need a leader or a set of leaders to help crystallize the expression of what that movement is about. And sometimes it's a momentary movement and sometimes it's a movement that has been raging right below the surface for a very long time. And Trump came along and was the sort of expressive articulation of those sort of elements that are latent in American society.

Robert Talisse [00:07:13] Well, can you say a little bit more about the elements? So, you know, one way in which, you know, one might think about the election, the ramp up to the election, all of the awfulness that's occurred since the election. You know, one way one could think about this is to say, well, these are people who, you know, are profoundly mistaken about certain factual matters. You know, they believe that the election was rigged, that the voting machines were changing votes, that, you know, world leaders from other parts of Latin America were somehow involved in, you know, fixing the election. That's one story, is that there's this sort of large scale and, you know, highly successful disinformation campaign that has prompted people to go and storm the Capitol under the self-description of patriotism and 1776 and, you know, protecting democracy, even. Then, there's this other sort of story. So now that's that's just the public face. That was the PR for what's actually being driven by what I suspect your meaning by these underlying forces. Right. Demographic sociological changes happening in the country that have shifted people's expectations, especially with respect to certain privileges and advantages that, you know, they used to not have... They used to just be able to take for granted. Now, all of a sudden, things are shifting in ways. And those are the real forces. Is that what you mean?

Melvin Rogers [00:09:08] Right? I mean, I think that's absolutely right. We know that there are these demographic changes in which Black and Brown folks are assuming a primacy, in terms of... I mean numerically. And of course, the result of that is the ability to reshape political power and to reshape the destiny of political power. But the other aspect to this, that is to say, what is to make one inclined to be nervous about the demographic shifts, is a set of sort of economic and political transformations that have been going on in the United States, you know, obviously well before the middle of the 20th century. And what I have in mind here is the devastation that has taken place to the middle class, the ways in which some Americans feel sort of alienated in the ways in which they feel that they actually cannot provide a way for themselves. That resentment has opened up a space and they have found themselves basically thrown back on themselves. And when they

have found themselves thrown back on themselves, what have they finally retreated to? Oh, well, it must be because the Black and Brown folks are coming to assume primacy. That's really why we're in this state. And of course, I mean, this has happened, you know, it happened after Reconstruction. This is sort of the standard move that takes place in American politics and American social life, particularly when, just to be quite honest about it, when white Americans feel aggrieved or when they feel that they can't find an adequate job, it must be someone else that is responsible for this.

Robert Talisse [00:11:16] Right. Right. So it's picking up on that, can I just ask, you know, again... I watched the events on January 6th, I was in front of a television when all of this... Not at the beginning, but as this was unfolding. And one of the things that, among lots of things that was shocking to me, was not only the actual impunity with which they walked into buildings, you know, broke stuff, picked things up, went through papers, you know, sort of took selfies. But [what was] was sort of striking to me [was] the sense of impunity, like the attitude that, well, this is what we're doing. We're storming the Capitol. Yeah. OK, you know, these cops are just going to have to go aside because we want to be in that room, and so, you know, you're going to have to let us in. Like it seemed to me so surreal in a way that I just have to.... Like maybe it's just my naivete that I just, I couldn't believe the the nonchalance of it all, in a certain respect.

Melvin Rogers [00:12:34] No, I mean, I think, you know I mean, you really said it all. I mean, I think that's absolutely right. I mean, the one thing I would say about this, and I really don't know what other commentators might think about this, but when you think about the idea of democracy in its classical form, democratia, rule by the people, that sort of term itself does not yet have moral ballast. It does not yet have direction. Historically, our understanding of democracy has come to accrue moral direction through the discussion of rights, through the discussion of the moral dignity of persons, the ways in which Christianity, in various ways, has been subsumed under a broader concept of democracy. But what we saw on display on January 6th was a vision of peoplehood, and these people thinking that they're laying claim to what is rightfully theirs.

Robert Talisse [00:13:35] Yeah.

Melvin Rogers [00:13:36] Right? And no one else's. It is like this. This is our house. And of course, this is what is, I think... It's so important to recognize that the people that were storming the Capitol were storming the Capitol, to be quite honest, in the name of exclusion. In the name of narrowness. That's what they were about. Of course, that's not the modern vision of democracy that we typically discuss and that we claim to live by.

Robert Talisse [00:14:12] Yeah, you know, I had a political theorist friend who hasn't yet completed these sorts of... the data that is being gathered. But there's some reason to think that Trump's rhetoric, you know, whatever one might otherwise think of it, you know, was very rarely about democracy. There's lots of talk about the people and the nation and the country and the who's in it and who's out of it and all the rest. But very rarely, you know, [were] any of the sort of go-to even platitudes of democracy, part of his public repertoire. Which is sort of puzzling about an American president, right?

Melvin Rogers [00:15:09] No, I mean, it's striking. I mean, one of the reasons why I sort of introduced this sort of historical distinction with respect to the development and evolution of democracy and then the move that I made to sort of indicate that this is a group of people who take themselves to be laying claim to what is rightfully theirs. What Trump has basically said to them is that what the people think, and in this case, what white people

think, is what is right about our society. And that's it. And so all of the normal political and philosophical constraints, because we live some philosophy, all of us, we live some philosophy every day. But the philosophical constraints that are typically embedded in how we get on about the business of living together, all of those fall away in the face of Donald Trump and his rhetoric.

Robert Talisse [00:16:19] Right, right. Right. So, you know, one account or narrative that has emerged about the events on January 6th has to do with some analogy being drawn between the people who showed up on the 6th and stormed the Capitol and, you know, did violence to lots of people and killed a police officer, and the protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement in general. Can you tell me what you make of that? The interest in seeing a parallel between those two? That movement and that particular event?

Melvin Rogers [00:17:16] You know, Bob, our democracy so depends on our ability to make careful distinctions. It really does. And our ability to do that has been so flattened because... What people refuse to acknowledge when they engage in this kind of equivalence is that they refuse to acknowledge the sort of, I think, the sort of basic effect that one was engaged in this in the name of exclusion. The other was engaged in this in the name of inclusion and fair treatment. Those are not the same thing. They're just not. I mean, that's not even to say anything about the sort of physicality of what was taking place, what was being attacked and what was not. I just want to talk about what's behind it and what's behind... These are very different things. And we should be able to say one is legitimate and one is not.

Robert Talisse [00:18:18] Yes. But the... What do you make of the sort of prevalent... I mean, so does... Let me put it this way. Does the drive to draw that equivalence among people who want to tell an exculpatory story about January 6th, does that then suggest that maybe, [as] we were talking about a moment ago, that there was the cover story about elections and voting machines and the fraud and all the things that was being explicitly said by Trump and his lawyer and lots of, you know, media friends and all the rest. But that was the cover for this deeper set of resentments and anxieties and grievances that really are rooted in the demographic and sociological changes that have been going on in the country. I mean, I'm just wondering now if the tendency to draw that equivalence isn't a bit of a clue that that former story that we told has got to be right, that really it's about white supremacy. The losing of undeserved privilege that has been in place for so long that it feels like equality and justice. Does that seem right?

Melvin Rogers [00:19:45] Right. I mean, I think that the right the equivalence is an attempt to divert attention from what is really going on, which is what we've outlined earlier, and to divert our attention to the thought that, no, this is just simply what people do in a democratic society when they want to contest injustice. So that's the equivalence, right? They they want us to believe that both are occupying and possess a position of justice and are trying to speak truth to power. And what we're saying is that, well, no, because if we focus on what both are about, we'll see that one is about exclusion, and that sends us to the analysis that we have previously laid out about the demographic shifts and the like. And the other is actually about inclusion, which is about expanding the reach of a democratic goods to all that inhabit the United States.

Robert Talisse [00:20:41] Right. Right. Good. So, you know, a good deal of your... I want to make sure that we sort of, insofar as you and I can, end on maybe a forward-looking note. We're both pragmatists, right.? So, you know, a good deal of your work, both in the

more professional academics and in the public work, you know, has to do with ways in which democracy is stalled and arrested because we as a people or large segments of the citizenry resolutely just refuse to confront facts about our collective history and maybe facts about ourselves. So if that's also part of the story, if it's not also that there are these demographic shifts that are creating all kinds of anxieties on the part of people who are used to getting undeserved advantages, so on and so forth. But that very fact is something that needs to be disguised and camouflaged and portrayed and deflected, you know, sort of presented in a way so attention is deflected from it. If all of that, the resolute declining to reckon with America's history, if that's part of the story of where we're at and why our democracy seems to be hanging by a thread, where do we go from here? I mean, how do we fix that? How can we bring about the needed reckoning?

Melvin Rogers [00:22:34] Yeah, Bob. I mean, you know, look, I think that the "how" question is always the difficult one, is the one we always get stuck on, because of, I think, the various approaches movements have taken in the past. So my sense is that the first thing I would want to say is that we have to continue—both as academics and that bit of us that is public facing—we have to continue to tell better stories about this tradition of American life that we live. Both that side of the tradition that is always concerned with covering its eyes, and that part of the tradition of thinkers and movements that have insisted the hallmark of a democracy is our ability to confront our failures and confront them head on. And that goes all the way back to, of course, African-American abolitionists. You see the transcendentalists. The pragmatists were insistent on this in the 1960s. We think of of of Ella Baker. We think of King. We think of James Baldwin, of course.

Robert Talisse [00:23:43] Sure.

Melvin Rogers [00:23:43] We must insist on those, on doing that. The next thing I think I would say is that we have to have a kind of truth and a reckoning, a commission. I hear some folks talking about it these days. We need to have an airing out and airing of what we have been complicit in internally as a nation. Right, and I think finally, we need to—and here now, I don't really have a clear way of how we're going to do this and it may be attached to the first two—but we need to figure out how to detach our political and moral work from this preoccupation with progress and with redemption. We are so fixated on progressing and redeeming ourselves that we would lie to ourselves in the name of that redemption. We have to pull these apart. We have to let this bit of the American mythos go, because if we don't let that go, will be inclined, again and again, to tell ourselves false stories about what we have achieved and if only to make ourselves feel that we have redeemed ourselves from the sins of the past, the sins that we are currently engaged in.

Robert Talisse [00:25:18] That's a... I mean, all that sounds exactly right to me. But it is also, you know, on the one hand, deeply inspiring and motivating. On the other hand, foreboding in a way, because the task before us, so to speak, is momentous and it's not going to be easy. Is that right?

Melvin Rogers [00:25:48] I think that's right. I mean, this is why John Dewey insisted that democracy is not the easy road.

Robert Talisse [00:25:53] Yeah. Yeah. Well, Melvin, thank you so much for talking to me today and being my guest on the Why We Argue podcast.

Melvin Rogers [00:26:04] Thank you for having me on.

Robert Talisse [00:26:06] You've been listening to the Why We Argue podcast, The Future of Truth Edition. Thanks, as always to our podcast team. Toby Napoletano at the University of California at Merced handles our sound. Elizabeth Della Zazzera at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute is our communications coordinator. And Drew Johnson handles research for us at UConn. We also want to give special thanks to Matt Guariglia for his creative inspiration. Again, the podcast is produced by the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute's Future of Truth project with generous funding from the University of Connecticut and from the Henry Luce Foundation. Thank you for listening. And bye for now.