

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research informing new Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Martin Ruck is a professor in the PhD programs in psychology, in urban education at the Graduate Center, CUNY. His work examines the overall process of cognitive socialization at the intersection of race, ethnicity and class in terms of children's and adolescents' thinking about human rights and inner group exclusion. He is also the Senior Advisor to the President for Diversity and Inclusion at the Graduate Center and has served in this capacity since 2016. Welcome to The Thought Project, professor Martin Ruck.

Martin Ruck:

Thank you, Tonya. Although, this does seem a little bit strange, but thank you.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. It's pleasure. I'm so glad that you're with us now, The Thought Project. This conversation is a difficult one, but let's just put it in its right context. During the past year in America, we have witnessed the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor among many others. The protests that followed has driven the issues of race, racism and white supremacy to the forefront of a national American conversation. Of course, these murders are sadly not recent crimes or tragedies. This has been going on as long as America has existed.

Tanya Domi:

The current, but soon to be outgoing president has also assisted enforcing a confrontation about race in America, too. These issues have affected the academy and specifically, the Graduate Center and the City University of New York. So this is a significant part of the landscape of America that at this moment, holds out some new possibilities with the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris the next month. But we know nonetheless, there is much work to do. It's in this context that we get to have this conversation, Martin, with you as a professor in psychology and urban education, working on the issues of race and racism and social justice with young people utilizing human rights. But you're also in a dual hatted role at the Graduate Center now for almost five years as Senior Advisor to the President on Diversity and Inclusion. I just want to know how you have managed this schedule, mentored students, teach and carry that out every day.

Martin Ruck:

Yeah. When you said that, "dual hatted," like, "Oh, I guess I've cut down," because actually, at the same time when I was doing this, I was also acting director of IRADAC, kind of kept me busy. It's an amazing institute and the programming that comes into IRADAC is amazing. Fortunately, the Dempster does all the heavy lifting. I just, as I said, I just take credit for the successes, but there are other people doing that. So I don't feel like I'm doing this by myself and it's just kind of what you do. You have to just be prepared to help carry water and it's what you do. At the Graduate Center, especially with faculty of

color, when we had meetings that pertain to issues of race, ethnicity and the faculty of color, it's typically the usual suspects in terms of the faculty that are kind of willing to play a role and do this.

Martin Ruck:

So I don't think of this as doing anything out of the ordinary. Then I just reflect back to kind of what my father did when I was growing up and my mother. He always had multiple jobs just to help the family survive. So I figured that's what you do, right? This is just kind of common. This is difficult work, but it's not the sort of hard work and labor that I saw him engaging in. Right?

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Martin Ruck:

So my dad was a janitor, a custodian, and he had four or five different jobs during the day. Then on the weekends, he would deliver dry cleaning to the Black communities and kind of rural Nova Scotia where I grew up. So you work to survive, and I'm kind of doing the same thing because you just work, not so much to survive, but you work so that things will get done and you can help other people, whether it's mentoring students or being involved with diversity issues here at the Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi:

So you've been teaching in these areas for a long time. You're widely published. There's no question that your own personal experience and your knowledge would certainly inform teaching and your diversity work. How do you consciously go about that in your day to day life?

Martin Ruck:

Now, I'm not sure it's conscious. I'm sure it's at the back of my consciousness, but this isn't going to be it. I'm sure this won't be a very exciting interview for anyone listening to this because I'll just repeatedly say, "It's kind of what you have to do." So you don't think about, "Oh..." consciously doing this. It's just helping move things forward, even if it's just a little bit, just helping to move things forward. Who else is going to do it if I'm not willing to do these things? Why would I expect other people to carry the water or do the heavy lifting? That's one thing about being at the Graduate Center is that people are willing to do things, to work beyond their teaching, beyond their coursework. They're willing to attend the meetings and help to make the Graduate Center a better place, which is kind of an ongoing thing. We're always kind pushing to make the Graduate Center better, but it's not easy because this is a bureaucracy. CUNY is a bureaucracy.

Martin Ruck:

We know how difficult it is to change bureaucracies. So how can we make a little bit of an effort, a little bit of lead way? Over the last few years, there hasn't been a lot of leadership at the president level at the Graduate Center. When there has been, it hasn't been consistent. So now, we have a new president and hopefully, we can get traction. I'm assured that. I kind of know that she is genuine and wants to make a change and make a difference, but these things take time. So you just have to keep pushing. Maybe I sound naive at times, but I think you just have to keep... Any movement, you have to keep moving forward. Right?

Tanya Domi:

Right. [crosstalk 00:06:40]

Martin Ruck:

I kind of view these last three or four years as kind of a step back. Hopefully now, we can begin to move forward once again. I remember when Obama was elected and I was sitting home and watching this and people talking about this being in a post-racial America. I just kind of rolled my eyes and said, "No, it's anything but that. And you're going to see it..." [Crosstalk 00:07:01].

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely.

Martin Ruck:

And we saw it even magnified during the current president, during the Trump presidency.

Tanya Domi:

What you say is true. I think it is. It's from one generation to another. We do the work and we push forward in the ways that we can contribute. I'm reminded of that because in this week, actually, it's the anniversary of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery school bus boycott. We think about that and it's one of those... It was a major turning point that Black people organized and boycotted the buses and people walked for over a year to prove that this was unprincipled, unacceptable. It's something to remember about where we stand and what was behind us and what pushes us forward, I believe.

Martin Ruck:

Yeah, just to look back over time in terms of how far we've come, I think wrote an article and kind of the ending was we'd come so far, but we have much further to go. There's some value to look back, but also you have to keep looking forward. We can't be content with where we are.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. What's the next horizon? So in that vein, in the following days and weeks that followed the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, former president, Muyskens, who was interim president, agreed when approach, that we should launch this new diversity and inclusion initiative. That was a new development in your role. Since then, there's been a series of meetings and in the last week, recommendations were forwarded to president Garrell. What are your thoughts been about that project? Full disclosure to our listeners, I also participated in the creating a safe bus space committee. So what are your thoughts about that right now, Martin?

Martin Ruck:

When president Muyskens approached me, I wasn't super... I'm the Senior Advisor to the President of the Graduate Center for Diversity and Inclusion.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Martin Ruck:

It doesn't surprise me that he approached me and then we kind of laid out what he had in mind or just his thoughts. Then I kind of shared my thoughts with him in terms of what ways we might move forward and also, take advantage of the president's advisory committee on diversity and inclusion. Then since the statement that he released, he mentioned that... I was named and our committee was named. So I knew that there was work to be done. I guess what also drives me is the fear of failure. It's one thing to let yourself down and you don't get a paper published or you don't get a grant. It's another thing to let down your community, the Graduate Center, the faculty, the staff and the graduate students.

Martin Ruck:

There are a lot of eyes looking at this. You want people to be part of this and you want people to say, "Okay. We're moving in the right direction." So there was a little bit of apprehension, but it didn't stop me from taking on the lead. I knew I would be working with good people, but that we had a lot of work to do. Sometimes I need to see the end. I need to know how it's going to end, but you have to keep getting moving. One thing in this position that was interesting, I like to get stuff off my desk and this isn't something, this project, however you refer to this, isn't something you can just get done and get off your desk.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Martin Ruck:

So being able to kind of be aware of that and not get too anxious that we're not moving fast enough. I think I might've even mentioned that some of our meetings. I don't know if it was a meeting, the working group that you were part of, that I didn't think we were moving fast enough.

Tanya Domi:

I don't. I don't recall that- [crosstalk 00:10:47] ... But I understand the urgency too. [crosstalk 00:10:54]

Martin Ruck:

Exactly. Especially when I'm cheering three different working groups. So I wanted to get some traction. I wanted to come up with recommendations or something because, in theory, we could have met forever-

Tanya Domi:

True, true.

Martin Ruck:

.. because many times, our discussions would be far ranging. So we had to kind of, how do we focus this and get something that we can present to the president and the senior staff? So I think we did a good job of coming up with recommendations. The working groups were really strong in that sense. Now, we have to move on to the next stage. We have to start to implement some of these recommendations.

Tanya Domi:

So in one of the comments that you've made during those meetings that I really paid attention to is that it's time for white people inside Graduate Center to step up, allies, white allies. Some of those people are well-known to us. They're always stepping up, but this is a moment, a bigger moment outside of academy walls that affects all of our student population. It affects our faculty. It affects the staff. Everyone is affected by what has happened and deeply disturbed by it. So the process itself, I believe it's been a really, really constructive one, but who's stepping up? The question is, who's going to step up to help implement some of these ideas that we feel really strongly about that need to take place? Among our colleagues and among the faculty, they are the leaders. The faculty are leaders. They mentor and teach students and they're everyday leaders inside the academy.

Martin Ruck:

Right. Yeah. There are many faculty at the Graduate Center that are doing amazing academic work, but they're also doing amazing public scholarship and they're also doing amazing mentoring and they're catching up, and then do it almost spontaneously because- [crosstalk 00:12:55]

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. They don't think about it. They just do it. That's who they are. [crosstalk 00:12:58]

Martin Ruck:

... aligned, moving forward. So in that way, the Graduate Center is an excellent place to kind of be positioned because we really are on the kind of the cutting edge in terms of research and scholarship and so many of the faculty here are doing. So how do we engage others that may be less willing to step up? That's a question that I kind of think about or wrestle with. How do we engage? And also, our graduate students. I think sometimes, they can be skeptical because... Yeah, they can be very skeptical because they don't see change happening as fast as it needs to happen.

Tanya Domi:

At a micro level, day to day lives. Right? [crosstalk 00:13:42]

Martin Ruck:

Not easy to be a graduate student. We know the funding issues and it's New York city and it's now COVID. If you were adjunct and making money, you may have lost the position or you may be teaching way more students than you had thought you'd be teaching pre COVID. [crosstalk 00:13:58].

Tanya Domi:

Right. These are real issues, but particularly for doctoral students. It's a long-term commitment to get through grad school and live in an inexpensive city, very difficult and very challenging. This was a particularly, though... I think in these murders that occurred against the backdrop of COVID and young people on the streets demonstrating, which was very inspirational, and I wanted to be out there, but it's too much a risk for me. So I was giving money as much as I could to help people organize. I think all of us were hugely affected by this. Then you throw in the arbitrary travel bans that were instituted in the spring by the Trump administration. You had a community is just rocked. I feel like it was every day, of course, in my other job, I watched the news all day long. I was bracing. You brace yourself for the next event, horrible, horrible event. Children being thrown into detention taken away from their parents at the borders.

Tanya Domi:

It was just one bad dream after another. It felt like we were all living in a nightmare. In the middle of all this, Black Lives Matter, just said, "This is it. Our lives... Everything's on the line. Everything is on the line." Do you see, from that period... I will say this. I've been around politics for a very long time. When I started seeing signs like racial equality in Biden events, you just didn't see that before. You haven't seen them since the sixties. Really, to be honest with you, you saw it in '68. You saw more politicians talk about those who were poor, hungry. RFK was probably one of the last politicians to really talk about the poor. Now, it's a generation later and there is a crack of light. There is a crack of light that's opened up in this moment after a terrible four years. What are your thoughts on that and in doing this work in that context?

Martin Ruck:

Well, yeah. You put a lot there.

Tanya Domi:

Sorry.

Martin Ruck:

No. So many things came together- [crosstalk 00:16:37]

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Martin Ruck:

... at a specific moment in time. The fact that we were in the middle of a pandemic and stay at home orders and we saw George Floyd being murdered, lynched, however you want to describe it on TV for eight seconds, that really captured people's attention and maybe people who in the past, it wouldn't have captured their attention.

Tanya Domi:

I agree. I think for white people, for white people, not Black, not people of color, but for white people, there's the before Minneapolis and George Floyd, and then afterwards, to see that policemen put his knee on his neck for over nine minutes and kill him. It was very shocking, I think, to a lot of white people.

Martin Ruck:

Right. Whereas I saw and probably many other people of color thought as part of a continuum. This is how Black people are treated. From being lynched, to being brought to the US as slaves, and to being lynched, to having the police dogs sicced on them. [crosstalk 00:17:45] ... continuity and this is how you were treated in this country and often, around the world. [crosstalk 00:17:52] ... person of color are different somehow and it just kind of came together and people took to the streets, which is rare in this country, that people take to this being- [crosstalk 00:18:05]

Tanya Domi:

In a long time.

Martin Ruck:

Exactly. [crosstalk 00:18:06]

Tanya Domi:

It's been a long time. In my youth, that's all we did. It was the moratorium, it was racial justice, it's women's rights, it was gay rights. That was the first wave of so many movements. Right. Yes, and it was inspiring. I think it really began to get some traction for white Americans, not necessarily for Black. I'm sure it was inspiring to Black Americans to see so many people marching because not all of us could March. I think it was a wake up call for white people, especially when their children were out there marching shoulder to shoulder with other people of color. That was a turning point, I think.

Martin Ruck:

You saw it at academic institutions across the country releasing statements of solidarity and being more attuned to these things. Even the Graduate Center released statements of solidarity, but also, even released a Juneteenth announcement. I had been at the Graduate Center for 20 years and maybe I'm wrong, but I didn't recall the Graduate Center ever releasing a Juneteenth announcement in the past. There was a heightened awareness. People talk about COVID fatigue, well, statement fatigue.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Martin Ruck:

We have to do more than just release statements.

Tanya Domi:

That's just the first step, right?

Martin Ruck:

Right, and make sure that we kind of move beyond that, that doesn't become all that we're doing.

Tanya Domi:

That's true. Now, what's the difference in... I'll be critical of where I teach at Columbia. CUNY said, "Juneteenth." The governor said, "Juneteenth is a holiday. We are off." The president of Columbia said, "Juneteenth, and we'll start observing next year." You know what I mean? That's the difference and that's a huge difference. It's a huge cultural awareness. It's a huge difference. So I get the best out of both places because there's an intellectual part of me that's very much uptown in my area, which is very arcane and off the beaten track. But what an amazing thing for the governor and the chancellor to stand up and say, "This is it. This is what we have to do."

Martin Ruck:

Yeah, continue doing that.

Tanya Domi:

Exactly. Exactly. In that vein, there are these difficult conversations within the academy and you have basically been leading one in your role as a Senior Advisor. I'm sure it's going to continue. I just had a conversation last week with [inaudible 00:20:45] who talks very articulately about these difficult conversations about the fact that the Graduate Center needs more faculty of color and there's just not enough, and that CUNY, of all institutions, to the City University of New York has got to do better by faculty and hiring process. What are your thoughts on that?

Martin Ruck:

Yes. [inaudible 00:21:07] ... is, who I know quite well, is correct. The Graduate Center needs more faculty of color. Students want to see... It's important to see faculty at the front of the classroom who look like you.

Tanya Domi:

Exactly.

Martin Ruck:

... students of color. White students may, in the past, have not realized that in terms of taking that for granted. But students of color, I think have always wanted to see that, to see more faculty of color and as well at the CUNY campuses. There are more faculty of color at the campuses. The campuses can't be let off the hook because they'd had issues with retaining faculty of color.

Tanya Domi:

Probably maybe a higher attrition rate. [crosstalk 00:21:48] There's it saying, "If you can't see it, you can't be." I've experienced that, for example, with regard to women. There wasn't any women out there. There weren't any women mentors and teachers and things like that. Of course, being gay, that's another part of identity politics, and wanting to see it and be able to relate to it. But yes, absolutely. As she would say, a white dominated organization. It's structurally white. There's got to be change. It has to be changed.

Martin Ruck:

Yeah, from top to bottom because if it is... When I think in terms of the scholarship at CUNY, but also often, it's very kind of... When people are talking about kind of decolonizing the sciences, decolonizing the humanities, kind of this Eurocentric nature of the academy, if we're going to be inclusive, I guess the question is, what are we including students of color in? Are we bringing them into this white experience? That's not better. How do we bring them into a more multicultural experience or an experience where the research scholarship of color is valued- [crosstalk 00:23:05].

Tanya Domi:

And it's also centered in the curriculum. There's a centering of this in the curriculum.

Martin Ruck:

I'm the executive officer of the Office of Educational Opportunity and Diversity at the Graduate Center and we run the CUNY pipeline program.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Martin Ruck:

That office, it really is... The APL, Eric Frankston, is really an important component of that. [crosstalk 00:23:29]

Tanya Domi:

That's a very important program, the pipeline program.

Martin Ruck:

The pipeline program. We've been running... And we have graduate students who serve as mentors to the pipeliners, to the undergraduates. For the graduate students, we've been running kind of a workshop series this semester called de-centering whiteness. That's run by Richard Clark and Chris Hoffman. Those are graduate students in psychology at the Graduate Center. That's been really useful, kind of getting students aware of these notions of whiteness and decolonizing the academy. These are students who are going to be getting their PhDs. If they're not teaching at the CUNY campuses or the Graduate Center, they're going to be teaching at a university campus and having to deal with these issues in terms of the curriculum and notions of whiteness.

Tanya Domi:

Well, I see also, experiencing the Graduate Center, this push to shape public policy. We're talking about public sociology. You're talking about urban ed. Wendy Latrelle is just doing great work over there and leading that discipline in so many people like yourself and Michelle Fein are in that program too, affiliated with that program. Just so many people are actually doing scholarship, leveraging scholarship to make public policy change and change the outcomes. As somebody who's not on the faculty, I see it because it's very different in its culture and its presentation than where I teach uptown. That is really very inspiring at the Graduate Center. There is a commitment to the public good, teaching for the public good, whether it's teaching students or using their knowledge, creating their knowledge to shape public policy. I see it as a very forward-leaning place.

Martin Ruck:

Right. [crosstalk 00:25:35] Yeah. You raise an interesting point. The work they're doing is very important and also work out of the public science project that Michelle Fein and Rita Torres run. [crosstalk 00:25:46] The interesting thing about that is the fact that in many ways, the Graduate Center is very progressive place and doing some really cutting edge leading politics, but at the same time, it's a very traditional place. Often, that is so confusing for students when they're in this place that talks about just all these progressive ideals. They may be in a classroom when a faculty member or another student is either mis-gendering them or there're microaggressions they have to deal with. It's really kind of difficult to get one's head around that. Right?

Tanya Domi:

That's true.

Martin Ruck:

We often- [crosstalk 00:26:26]

Tanya Domi:

... so cool and so wonderful, [crosstalk 00:26:30] ... and then these other things happen.

Martin Ruck:

So bias and racism and discrimination and homophobia-

Tanya Domi:

Yes, trans phobia.

Martin Ruck:

... gender phobia is outside. It's outside the Graduate Center doors. When in fact, no, unfortunately, it's inside as well. That's an issue for a number of students, kind of trying to figure that out and navigate themselves through the Graduate Center, and especially for students of color at the Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Well, I'm just going to say that the Graduate Center and the students are very fortunate that we have you, Martin, we have your leadership, we have your vision because you're a person who makes a difference. I say that as somebody that didn't really know you that well at all. [crosstalk 00:27:15] I just knew work. I've gotten to know you over the last several months and it's certainly been a privilege.

Martin Ruck:

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Tanya Domi:

Are there any last thoughts that maybe now as where less than a 50 days out from the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, do you have any thoughts about America and the future?

Martin Ruck:

Just for the audience, I'm Canadian.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Yes. I know that. [crosstalk 00:27:46]. But you work in America. You live and work in America.

Martin Ruck:

For 21 years, I- [crosstalk 00:27:52]

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Yes, for better and for worse.

Martin Ruck:

Right. So it's often interesting looking at this from a Canadian perspective, if I can actually still hold on to that. I don't see the current president going quietly into the night.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Martin Ruck:

Right?

Tanya Domi:

No, he's dragging his ball and chain to the very end.

Martin Ruck:

What that means for the Biden administration, how difficult it will be to overcome some of the barricades that he's putting in or has put in place, I don't think it's going to be the inauguration and then things will be better. I think it's going to take time to kind of re-balance, if we ever can, some of the political norms and things that he's kind of destroyed or throwing into the-

Tanya Domi:

Aerogated. Yes.

Martin Ruck:

Not to get political, but by the very nature of what we do is political, I don't see the Republican party... They seem to be holding on to him as well. I don't see-

Tanya Domi:

For now.

Martin Ruck:

Yeah, for now. 74 million people voted for him, so that means something.

Tanya Domi:

It does. But fortunately, because of New York's vote, he did not pick up as many people we thought he would. So New York really had the last word on that.

Martin Ruck:

Living in New York, sometimes I do feel somewhat isolated, insulated, not isolated.

Tanya Domi:

True.

Martin Ruck:

Insulated.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, without a doubt. Yes.

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Martin Ruck:

In this New York bubble and being at the Graduate Center, it adds to that.

Tanya Domi:

But that's why we want to live in New York.

Martin Ruck:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

We choose to be here. So usually, the president makes his first call after getting sworn into, the Canadian prime minister and let that be so for you and for us to resume the normal choreography of the American president, and the first woman of color to serve as vice-president, a huge representation symbol and she is brilliant. We're thrilled about her being in this-

Martin Ruck:

Very, very exciting.

Tanya Domi:

Very exciting. Listen, you have your recommendations going forward. There's a lot of support for your work and your leadership. I just really want to thank you today for coming onto the podcast.

Martin Ruck:

Thank you very much. Next time, I won't avoid you.

Tanya Domi:

Very good. Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, professor Martin Ruck of the Graduate Center CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. tune in next week.