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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 ground breaking 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:

Joining us today is Manu Bhagavan, a professor of history, human rights and public policy at Hunter College and The Graduate Center. Bhagavan is a specialist on modern India, focusing on the 20th century, late colonial and post-colonial periods with particular interest in human rights, internationalism and questions of sovereignty.

Tanya Domi:

Manu is the author of the critically acclaimed book, *The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World*, published by Harper Collins India in 2012 and updated by Palgrave MacMillan in 2013.

Tanya Domi:

Manu's March 2016 Quartz essay on the rise of global authoritarianism went viral internationally and was published in Czech and German language publications as well as featured in a cover profile in the Berlin Republik Magazine.

Tanya Domi:

Professor Vivian Louie is a professor of urban policy and planning and director of the Asian American Studies Program and Center at Hunter College. She previously was an associate professor at Harvard University.

Tanya Domi:

Louie's research focuses on what it means to be an American in public dialogues and policies, civic education, including ethnic studies and the factors that shape success along the educational pipeline among immigrants and the children of immigrants. Louie studies race, ethnicity, social class and immigration as they relate to educational and political mobilization.

Tanya Domi:

She is author of two books, *Compelled to "Excel: Immigration, Education"* and *"Opportunity among Chinese Americans."* Louie currently serves as a member of the New York Advisory Committee for the United States Commission on Civil Rights, the Board of Youth Communication and the Russell Sage Foundation Advisory Committee for Race, Ethnicity and Immigration.

Tanya Domi:

We begin this conversation with some breaking news. Just yesterday, the US House of Representatives passed a bill to address the increase in hate crimes and violence against Asian Americans during the coronavirus pandemic, clearing the legislation for President Biden to sign.

Tanya Domi:

In a bipartisan vote with 62 votes against cast exclusively by Republicans, the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act was also passed by the Senate last month. This legislation was introduced by Representative Grace Meng of New York and Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii, instructs the Department of Justice to designate a point person to expedite the review of hate crimes related to COVID-19.

Tanya Domi:

Secondly, here in New York State, State Senator John Liu introduced a bill in the State Senate requiring all schools to provide instruction in Asian American history. The bill also directs the state commissioner of education to provide technical assistance in the development of curricula on Asian American history and civic impact and to provide suitable course materials.

Tanya Domi:

Democrats in general have pointed to former President Donald Trump's frequent use of racist phrases such as, "kung flu," to describe the coronavirus as a link to the increase in anti-Asian sentiment. Indeed, hate crimes have occurred throughout the United States culminating in a mass shooting killing eight people and six Asian women in Atlanta, Georgia in March. The good news following these tragic events of intolerance and bigotry around the country is addressed in these pieces of legislation.

Tanya Domi:

We will explore these issues globally, in US history, and why education is the best option to diffuse and reverse bigotry. Welcome to The Thought Project, Manu Bhagavan and Professor Vivian Louie.

Manu Bhagavan:

Thank you, Tanya, nice to be here.

Tanya Domi:

Manu, there is a long history of racism against Asian Americans in the United States. Given your work on nationalism and populism that really burst onto the global stage in 2016, you as an author of an article published in quartz.com that went viral, can you contextual how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped bigotry openly displayed globally during a period of global nationalism, populism and growing illiberalism in previous Democratic states, including the United States?

Tanya Domi:

Indeed, Freedom House has reported that during the past 15 years, there has been a precipitous decline in democracies throughout the world in the wake of the pandemic. Are there any notable policy responses that you might point to?

Manu Bhagavan:

Well, first, thank you again for having me, Tanya. It's a real honor to be speaking with you again and also to be in conversation with my friend and colleague, Vivian Louie.

Manu Bhagavan:

So as you point out, the world remains in the grip of a authoritarian, populist wave. I think that language, which we used in 2016 to refer to an increasing popularity of strongmen politics and a

decreasing interest in democracy has expanded right up to and including terms like outright fascism. That, of course, is language that we veered away from initially because of everything that it signifies.

Manu Bhagavan:

I think it's fair to say at this point, that many of the world's leading authorities on the subject of fascism have concluded that it has reemerged as a real threat to our world today, and not just in any one country, but now as a global phenomenon rooted in multiple countries and speaking across borders at the same time.

Manu Bhagavan:

So for the last several years, what we've seen is threats to democracy and to existing democracies, old and new, across the world. This challenge has come from within systems of democracies itself. So first, it's been fringe individuals or fringe parties, which have steadily moved towards the center in the United States as I'm sure many listeners are aware. This has occurred within one of the two major parties of the United States posing a significant threat to our system of government. So what has been the result of this?

Manu Bhagavan:

Well, as strongmen leaders, and almost everywhere they've been men, there are exceptions, like Marine Le Pen in France, but she has yet to win, and strongmen leaders have taken power in country after country. After they've done so, they've made the claim that democracies have been inefficient and incapable of dealing with extent crises, and that they promise swift delivery and utter incompetence and recasting the country's pride in history and so on and so forth.

Manu Bhagavan:

What the COVID-19 pandemic has done is revealed in place, after place, after place, after place that what strongmen unsurprising are ultimately after has been power and their own cults of personality. And generally speaking, they have proven to be very ineffective at actual governance, which is why the worst hit countries in the world by COVID-19 are places that had strongman leaders. That continues to be the case.

Manu Bhagavan:

Now, the strongmen, as a general tactical maneuver, have sought to consolidate their power by playing on majoritarian sentiments in their countries on racism, on xenophobia, on misogyny, just the particular combination depends on the particular location. As a result, over the last several years, we've seen increasing waves of hate crimes, that is hate crimes statistics in country, after country, after country across the globe have been on the rise for the last several years.

Manu Bhagavan:

With the COVID-19 pandemic, unsurprisingly therefore, strongmen across the globe looked immediately for scapegoats. They used hateful language to specifically target particular communities or peoples that they thought they could blame them for the crisis, and then therefore get away with not doing anything to solve the problem. The result of this, because the pandemic had origins in Wuhan in Hubei province in China, because of that, many strongmen and their allies across the globe, and so in countries across

the globe not specific to anyone, began to cast blame on Asians and use vitriolic language that spurred those who believed in their cause to act on those insidious impulses.

Manu Bhagavan:

The result has been a dramatic rise in anti-Asian violence and this we can see in the United States, in Great Britain, across Europe, across many other parts across the world, including within parts of Asia itself as, for example, in India. So that in a nutshell is where things stand as of right now.

Tanya Domi:

It's, I think, a very good overview for our conversation. It is grim, in my view, and it's difficult. I can just look at Europe as a Europeanist, which is what I am. You're looking at an LGBT free-zone in parts of Poland that is as big as the country of Hungary, where they're declared they should not be there. They're banned. It's an unbelievable moment in world history.

Tanya Domi:

So Vivian, as you know, you teach Asian studies at Hunter College and you know US history well, I'm sure, there is this saying in US history, "the yellow peril," which was evoked very early in the country and during the 19th century. The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in late 19th century to FDR's most shameful act in the issuance of Executive Order 9066 in February 1942 that incarcerated mostly Americans of Japanese ancestry following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. These people were considered enemies of the state. Also, Germans were also interned, but they were interned on the East Coast and not at the levels and with the devastation that happened to Japanese families who lost everything, stripping them of their property and finally, reparations were granted and presented in 1988.

Tanya Domi:

Given all that you know and seeing this most recent violence, from your perspective as not only somebody who teaches Asian studies, but you also are a human rights professor, why is education so crucial to countering this recent violence?

Vivian Louie:

Thank you so much, Tanya, for having me on the show. It's really wonderful to have the opportunity to dialogue with you and Manu, so thank you to you both.

Vivian Louie:

Definitely, we need education and we need bold and broad and deep education at a level that our nation has never had before at a level that we can definitely reach. So let me just define this. So we need education that teaches us about the historical and civic contributions of Asian Americans, and about our nation's own immigration history of exclusion and inclusion. That's because the experiences of Asian Americans as situated within that history of America.

Vivian Louie:

The dream around immigration in the United States is one of inclusion, and our historical record partly confirms this. But, as you've just mentioned, the reality is another part of our history, laws and policies around immigrant exclusion from entering the United States, from having legal rights once they're in the

United States. This kind of bold, broad and deep education is crucial to countering the recent violence that we've seen. Right?

Vivian Louie:

Manu has just given us a fantastic overview. I've already learned so much just from what he shared, that kind of the global dimensions of strong-arm politics.

Vivian Louie:

In the United States, having this kind of education would also allow us to understand how the past 150 years and counting of anti-Asian hate really intersects with and differs from the racism directed at Black Americans, and why and how Latinos and immigrants and Muslims and Jews and women and LGBT communities, just to name some recent cases, how they've also all been targeted in our nation. What drives those processes in our nation and what we can do to actually build a better nation?

Vivian Louie:

And so, education is crucial and it can occur and should occur in a number of settings. Right? We're all part of the City University of New York. We should be proud of that, because CUNY has really been at the forefront of requiring our students to take ethnic studies or social justice courses. We all teach at Hunter, and we should be proud of that. I certainly am, because Hunter College teaches the most students in Asian American studies and offers the most courses in Asian American studies within the City University of New York system. All our Asian American studies courses really help us pose and think through and answer these key questions. Whether the courses are in the social sciences or history, or the law, or public policy, the humanity and the arts, that larger framing is part of those courses.

Vivian Louie:

As you mentioned, Tanya, the education really has to take place in our K through 12 public schools. And so, it's fantastic that you mentioned that new legislation being proposed by State Senator John Liu and his colleague State Senator Kevin Thomas and their colleagues. I just want to give a shout-out to them both, because they're the first Asian Americans elected to the New York State Senate. This occurred back in 2018, which is a fact that still amazes me.

Vivian Louie:

Education is more than just curriculum, as important as that is. Education is what the students need to have to be able to thrive in the classroom, so academic and mental health supports, especially the case after such a grueling year and counting. So Hunter College, for instance, it's fortunate to have [HCAT 00:16:49], a federally supported partner, two Asian American studies that provides these supports to Asian Americans, but to all students.

Vivian Louie:

A third of Hunter's undergraduate students are Asian American. Hunter is an Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander Serving Institution, or AANAPISI, for short. Hunter is the only school in the country to have three concurrent AANAPISI grants to support its students.

Tanya Domi:

That's very significant.

Vivian Louie:

Absolutely. When we talk about education, it's also what teachers need, right, the supports that teachers and faculty need to be able to do this work.

Vivian Louie:

I was recently speaking at a Stop Asian Hate unity rally in Bergen County in New Jersey. Representative Andy Kim, the first Asian American congressman, he gave a great talk, but students also spoke. That's always very cool. Right? So a few local high school students, a college student from diverse backgrounds, a Sikh American, Korean Americans, a Black American student, and their stories were inspiring too. But, their stories really underscored the critical importance of the conversation that we're having today, because they talked about how their K through 12 schooling didn't teach them about Asian American history or contributions.

Vivian Louie:

And then in some cases, their teachers told them that anti-Asian racism did not even exist, or it didn't exist for the students that they were teaching. The Asian American young people talked about how they were left confused. Right? They're hearing this from their teachers, authority figures, but it was so at odds with what they were experiencing, being made fun of on the basis of how they looked, what they ate, the names that they had, being bullied and more recently, what they were hearing about in the news, hearing about from their own family members about what they were experiencing. So the young people were left with no language to acknowledge or even name their experiences.

Vivian Louie:

Education provides that space. It should provide that space for everyone, right, for older adults like myself, for sure. This includes public programming that should be offered by [crosstalk 00:19:14] colleges and university centers and institutes. So just recently, Hunter's Asian American Studies Center in partnership with the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College just held a public discussion on anti-Asian hate with leading experts and community leaders.

Vivian Louie:

The panelists were Chris Kwok, who is an adjunct faculty in Asian American studies at Hunter. He co-authored an influential report, *The Rising Tide of Anti-Asian Hate*. It included former CUNY board trustee and longtime community member Wellington Chen, and New York State Assembly member Yuh-Line Niou

Tanya Domi:

She's really outspoken on not only Asian bigotry against Asians, but also on behalf of women. She's been really amazing to watch.

Vivian Louie:

They were all amazing in the panel. And then just the last point is that this kind of public programming has to take place outside of schools and colleges, right, to have the reach that it needs. So there should be public programming in public libraries, in community based organizations and in workplaces, in all of those settings.

Tanya Domi:

New York would have a great platform to do that. I mean, you have everything from city government, New York Public Library. I mean, you have all these citizen associations. You have a multitude of ethnic media as well. There is a lot of opportunity.

Tanya Domi:

I just have to make a point. I'm thinking about this because you're talking about education. I don't know if any of you watched Rachel Maddow last night, but she did an opening, which you must watch about the engineer who engineered the new Ford Truck 150, electrical truck. It is the most popular vehicle in America. It's a small truck. The engineer's name is Linda Zhang, and she is the face of this truck. I mean, it's incredible. This is the most popular vehicle every made in the history of America.

Tanya Domi:

Rachel Maddow proceeded to tell the story about Linda Zhang coming to America with her parents. Her father was a graduate student. Her mother was a graduate student. They came to New York. She is an engineer. She has worked at Ford since she was 19 years old.

Vivian Louie:

[inaudible 00:21:50].

Tanya Domi:

She is the engineer of the first electrical major vehicle in the United States. Yesterday, President Joe Biden was in Detroit and drove the truck. I mean, he's like, "I'm a car guy." What an incredible free education about this person as an example of what you were talking about. So seeing images of people on TV telling their stories about how they're contributing. I mean, in a world of all kinds of terrible things, I was thrilled that the engineer for this truck that all these guys drive in America, mostly guys, there are women, but a lot of guys drive this truck, she's the engineer.

Tanya Domi:

So anyway, I didn't mean to take you off track. I'm pivoting off about what you're saying. Let me just ask you, Vivian, are you going to contribute to the creation of this high school curricula that may come to pass? I'm sure it's going to be supported.

Vivian Louie:

Yep, that's a great question. I haven't been asked to contribute. Certainly, if I were asked, definitely I would lend whatever expertise that I have to it. I think it's incredibly important. New York State isn't the only state. Right? It's also being considered in Illinois as well.

Tanya Domi:

Manu, so given all that's going on, we see what you have said about the strongman and what happened here in America with respect to the former president. I mean, I began seeing him do it in the press conferences, and he actually would even mock Asian reporters. He was quite intimidating. I think your point about compensating for their inability to govern is quite fitting in this case, but did he not really... I really believe that he lit up the bigotry in America. He actually planted the seeds. It continues to this day.

Manu Bhagavan:

Well, several things, I think what the former president did is that he revealed that much of what many people throughout this country had come to believe about it, that it had moved forward and turned at least several pages from its past and so on, was a bit of a myth. And that the United States has not yet really grappled with its history.

Manu Bhagavan:

There are many people in the country who are resentful and who harbor all kinds of resentments against newer arrivals, from their point of view, who have challenged their existence and authority from their point of view. He lit the match to these fears, inflamed them, and he made racism okay again. He made it okay to be angry at our neighbors.

Manu Bhagavan:

He made it okay to stop trying to police ourselves, to simply say the worst of whatever is running through our minds. That's what he did, I think. He basically authorized and gave a green light to everyone to be their worst selves. He claimed, and his core supporters believed, that this ultimately has allowed them to see their own self interests and to push it forward. So yes, he played up these resentments and sentiments and made them worse. He released the genie from the bottle.

Tanya Domi:

He certainly did.

Manu Bhagavan:

Genies, once released, are very difficult to put back inside.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, he certainly did. I just want to say that he not only did that, but he enacted policies that targeted people as well. So first of all, he reduced dramatically the number of immigrants being admitted to the United States. And secondly, for example, he would target Indian immigrants coming in to maybe work in Silicon Valley, so they started diminishing the number of green cards they would offer to workers. And so, those people are in jeopardy.

Tanya Domi:

The other thing that's an outcome of this, which is an irony and terrible, is that many of the doctors we have coming into America from like Pakistan and other places, and that generally go to places where a lot of people don't want to go, for example, in Montana or out West. Those people aren't coming now, because first of all, the Trump administration turned them away. It seems to have disproportionately affected a lot of Asians in different fields of expertise. Maybe they would have gotten in anyway, because of their skills, whatever.

Tanya Domi:

But also, we know, of course the racial discrimination at the Southern border. Those people aren't entering the United States with skills, because they're refugees. They're fleeing murder, mayhem and death. As you said, Manu, this has been legitimized and I think that one of the most horrible aspects of it, outcome, happened in Atlanta and then it happened on January 6th. I mean, just horrific. And many

of those people were wearing clothing that said, "Six million weren't enough." And so, you're right, the genie's out of the bottle.

Tanya Domi:

Given now we have a democratic government by a very thin margin, we have a democratic government, Manu, what do you think Joe Biden and other leaders in our country should do? I mean, we've just seen some leadership out of the Congress on this act. But, what do you think that Biden should do and others? You have to enlist a lot of people to do this work as Vivian points out.

Manu Bhagavan:

Well, let's answer this question this way, Americans were recently polled on who they thought, who were some of the prominent Asian Americans that they knew. They were asked on who they were. Do you know what their answer was? They couldn't name anybody. They couldn't name anybody. Their answer was Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee. Now, why this is amazing is because the question actually specified, not just who were the Asian Americans that you knew, but who is the most famous, or most illustrious, or most powerful Asian American, whatever, something to this effect.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Manu Bhagavan:

Those were their answers. This is particularly astonishing, because Kamala Harris is the first Asian American-

Tanya Domi:

Yes, vice president.

Manu Bhagavan:

... person to be elected vice president.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Manu Bhagavan:

Of course, and there is also a whole range of other popular figures in movies and television that they could have also have named well beyond Jackie Chan-

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Manu Bhagavan:

... or Bruce Lee. So what this speaks to, I think, is a broad invisibility of the community. It also speaks to the fact that there is an inability to see the diversity within the community. So it doesn't register that there could be many kinds of Asian Americans. So that's the first part.

Manu Bhagavan:

The second thing, I would just say is that, and we can come back to this maybe a bit, Tanya, is that-

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Manu Bhagavan:

... when you parse Asian Americans, the situation in the previous administration was a bit complicated, because there were some Asian Americans, particularly from South Asia and more specifically from India, who supported the administration and found positions within it. Of all minority communities, in fact, it was Indian Americans, as far as I can tell, who were among the only ones represented in that administration, or in supporting roles in it. So we can come back and talk about that.

Manu Bhagavan:

The third thing I'd just say is now specifically to answer your question, what can the Biden administration do? Well, the first thing is that the Biden administration must recognize that there is an existential threat to democracy. What it can do is defend democracy, because anything else it does, if it doesn't do that, will be incredibly short-lived. And so, it must focus on defending voting rights. I know this isn't specific to what we are talking about [crosstalk 00:30:54], but maybe it wasn't the answer that you're looking for.

Tanya Domi:

It's directly connected.

Manu Bhagavan:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

It's directly connected.

Manu Bhagavan:

If we don't protect voting rights, if we don't have free and fair elections and whatever legislation might be passed in this very evenly balanced Congress and with a democratic administration will simply be undone or overturned very shortly thereafter. And if there is no sustainable democratic institutions to move things forward thereafter, what happens next is dreadful to think about.

Tanya Domi:

Agreed. Speaking of immigrants, Vivian, the idea of Asians as the model immigrant. Our colleague, Margaret Chin, has written a book about how Asian Americans hit the bamboo ceiling in terms of climbing in corporate and not getting into the C-suite very frequently. That's a great piece of work by Professor Chin who talks about how they don't get to advance given the circumstances.

Tanya Domi:

But, there is this construct that, "Oh, the Asian Americans, they work so hard. They've been economically successful," but as we all know, there is a spectrum of economics within the Asian community. There are many people, including here in New York City, who are essential workers that come from those communities. Many of them suffered disproportionately at the height of our pandemic, living in group homes in Queens is an example, working in restaurants and delivery services and really quite poor, in many ways. How does this model stereotype, how does that work against Asians?

Vivian Louie:

Sure. Thank you so much. I also wanted to thank Manu. That was just a terrific landscape of why this moment and what we need, for sure. I just really appreciate how Manu framed that for us. Education definitely is the core democratic institution. Right? It's pivotal.

Vivian Louie:

So what I wanted to say is, you're absolutely right, Tanya. Asian American Pacific Islanders as a term describes about 23 million Americans from about 50 ethnic groups with roots in more than 40 countries, so this is an incredibly diverse group. Certainly, they're diverse in terms of socioeconomic background or status. Right? In fact, Asian Americans, for a long time, have been the most economically bifurcated group in the United States.

Tanya Domi:

They're at the highest level of income, and they can be at the lowest. It's a huge spectrum. I've had many conversations with Margaret Chin about this phenomenon, yes. Right?

Vivian Louie:

That's right. That's certainly the case in New York City. We have some terrific reports, for example, by the Asian American Federation that really highlights those disparities along the lines that you've just mentioned about being essential workers. So for example, I think more than half of all Bangladeshi New Yorkers, according to one of the reports that they produced, the Asian American Federation [inaudible 00:34:20], work in industries that were disproportionately affected by job loss in the wake of COVID-19, and that includes, of course, the transportation, rides for hire, basically, the taxi industry broadly defined.

Vivian Louie:

So what I wanted to say about the whole issue of Asian Americans as a model minority as well, if I may, is to really push back against this kind of narrative that's out there right now. And that speaks to Manu's great point about this invisibility, this broad invisibility. Right?

Vivian Louie:

One of the narratives that is out there right now is that Asian Americans just don't speak up. I really want to push back against that, because based on an empirical basis. Okay. That, in fact, there has been considerable push back by all Asians in the United States against exclusion, especially through our legal system.

Vivian Louie:

And that Asian Americans have been at the forefront of landmark policies and Supreme Court rulings around birthright citizenship, around the right of English language learners to supplemental language instruction in our public schools, push back against rescinding naturalized citizenship on the basis of race or ethnicity, push back against the racialized and religious profiling of Arabs, Muslim Americans, Sikhs and South Asians who are mistaken for being Muslim after 9/11 and in the wake of the 2017 travel ban.

Tanya Domi:

I think those are really important points. I want to talk about the mayor's race, how it should be addressed here in New York City. But, I also want to offer to people, I'm not sure I've ever told Manu this, I certainly haven't told you, Vivian, but I was a chief of staff in the Hawaii State Senate to the first elected Chinese state senator in the country. I lived and worked in Hawaii for almost six years. I was an army captain, and I was discharged there. I went directly into politics because that career was delayed by life circumstances. I was a minority as a white person, who are called Haole in Hawaii, which means you're an outsider, but you're always white.

Tanya Domi:

And so, Americans of Japanese ancestry, the great history of the 100th fighting brigade in World War II. Daniel Inouye injured his arm. The US senator of many years, Spark Matsunaga, he wrote the US Institute of Peace bill that funds the US Institute of Peace based in Washington DC, Spark Matsunaga. And so, I learned so much, and about mainland Chinese versus Chinese from Vietnam, or from Singapore, and all the political dynamics of that.

Tanya Domi:

It's unfortunate that Hawaii is in the middle of the ocean, because we can see that Mazie... And I actually worked with Mazie Hirono when she was in the state legislature, so I do know her of many years. I worked with Ben Cayetano, who was the first statewide Filipino official elected in the United States. He was lieutenant governor and then became governor.

Tanya Domi:

But I will say this, that there is, I think, the visibility issue and me with my communication's hat, I would tell Asian American organizations if they can do anything is that they should be running ad campaigns and telling people's stories. I think that would really help on the education front. We can get beyond these karate actors from 30 years ago, because there are some amazing people out of this community that are indeed great Americans.

Tanya Domi:

So speaking of which, hatred and bigotry, and as Manu has laid out for us what Biden needs to do, we have to do that at the state and local level too. Here we have a mayor's race that's been called the most important mayoral election in a generation. We have six minorities, three men, three women, our friend that was leading, as you pointed out, Manu, Yang has now dropped considerably. So given the fact that hate crimes have been so palpable and the numbers have occurred at levels we've never seen before, as you pointed out the spike in hate crimes all across the world, including in the United States and here in New York City, should not these issues be at the forefront of discussion in this mayoral's campaign?

Manu Bhagavan:

So Andrew Yang has been, for the duration of this campaign, the leading candidate for mayor in poll after poll except in a poll that just came out, most recent poll, which appears to signal a very serious and perhaps precipitous drop for him. So he was in the lead, has dropped by double digits, I believe, and is now tied for the number two spot with another surprise contender who appears on his way up again, which is Scott Stringer. Who is Scott Stringer? So the top three candidates for mayor right now, according to the last poll that I saw, are Eric Adams, Brooklyn Borough President, Andrew Yang, and Scott Stringer.

Manu Bhagavan:

So let's just talk about Andrew Yang for a minute, because he reflects so many things that, I think maybe Vivian can help us parse a little bit more.

Tanya Domi:

I'm sure she can.

Manu Bhagavan:

Which is that Yang is someone who achieved national renowned when he ran for president in this last election cycle. In that process, if I recall correctly, The New York Times and perhaps some other publications, encouraged him to consider a run at something more local or smaller, and they specified mayor of New York, which is exactly what he wound up doing.

Manu Bhagavan:

So it is particularly strange and mysterious, to say the least, that Andrew Yang appears to draw significant support from white supremacists and most notably from Stephen Miller, the former president's advisor. Why is this? This is a question I cannot answer. I don't know. And to be fair and clear, that to be fair to Yang and clear on the subject, Yang himself has, I believe repeatedly, repudiated and rejected that ideology and that support. It's not like he's claiming it, by any means. But, that has not stopped them, by any means, from continuously expressing their support for him. I'm unclear as to why this is.

Manu Bhagavan:

At the same time, Grace Meng, who is one of the people behind the anti-Asian hate bill that you mentioned at the top of the podcast has endorsed him for mayor as has a national AAPI organization. So the politics that are involved with Andrew Yang as a candidate, what he stands for, and where in that mix is the specific Asian American identity is, I think, a very serious question that is beyond me. Maybe Vivian can shed some light on it.

Tanya Domi:

A right wing PAC has been launched to support his candidacy. A right wing PAC entered into the money game. It was announced two days ago.

Tanya Domi:

The other thing I'll just say about his politics is this really play-to-hand and appealing to, and this speaks to education, Vivian, to the ultra Orthodox in Brooklyn, who have been evading the curriculum requirements by the State of New York for a considerable long time. A lot of politicians, our colleague,

David Bloomfield, has been a critic on this, who is a urban ed professor, about why are politicians not keeping the yeshivas accountable in accordance with the state curriculum requirements? And so, Yang actually said, "Sure, I'm fine with that. It's a religious school, you can do whatever you want." So let's hear your thoughts on this, Vivian.

Vivian Louie:

Sure. Wow! Yeah, it's a great question. I do want to point out that not all Asian Americans are united behind Andrew Yang's candidacy. But in fact, there is a petition going around, and this has been publicly documented. That's how I learned about it. Asian American New Yorkers who are progressive and are pushing back against his candidacy. Last time I checked online, I think it was about close to 800 folks had signed. That's the first thing I do want to point out is that there is no monolithic Asian American vote. There isn't one in the nation. There isn't one in New York at the local level, for sure. But, there are possibilities, right, for them to be a swing vote. That's a separate conversation.

Vivian Louie:

I think the issues are really out there. The issues have been presented in public dialogues. Some of them I've watched, that have been sponsored by Asian American communities organizations, right. Do you vote someone who might look like you, broadly defined, okay, or might look like they belong to the group which you belong? Or do you vote for someone whom you think has the skills and can do the job? Do you vote for someone who has stood up for your communities in the past, because they've worked in government before in an elected office? I think those are the... some of the issues that are percolating in the Asian American community. I should say, it's not like you can't be in one band, not in the other two. They are intersect as well. Right?

Manu Bhagavan:

Vivian, you and Tanya, a few moments ago were talking about the model minority, the concept of the model minority. Within the field of Asian American studies, this, we've often referred to as the myth of the model minority. That's what you were parsing here, which is that, in fact, Asian Americans are variegated and that they're not one homogeneous group and they do many different kinds of things, and have faced many different kinds of challenges as well as, of course, they've successes. But abstracting this out, the explanation for the model minority was to wedge the community against others, to pitch them as a successful community and to therefore show the potential of the country, if you only just, quote unquote, "worked hard."

Manu Bhagavan:

Now, when you looked at the numbers within Asian Americans and you see how varied the community in fact is, it all falls apart because what you had was very, very selective immigration and that helped to skew the results, so that you wound up with these highlighted success stories. And then you also had a narrative, which only focused on those.

Manu Bhagavan:

So what I'm wondering is, how much of the support for Yang simply stems in particular from white supremacists, which is the deployment of the model minority against welfare and social programs to help poor and marginalized communities of color in the United States to say, "Look, here is Andrew Yang who says, 'Social programming is wasteful. All you need is universal basic income.'" His idea of universal basic income, I might add, is too low, in my opinion.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. [crosstalk 00:47:00]. Critics of that, his proposal, is about that as well too, Manu.

Manu Bhagavan:

Right. So he'd taken this idea, which stems from better ways to serve the needy, and then has shrunken it, so that it won't have the needed impact. And at the same time, I think he also threatened social programs, because this is his primary idea, that it's this in lieu of social programming. To me, that's what I see as possibly what the issue is. That's why he seems popular to them given the overall framing of the model minority versus other communities. What do you think?

Vivian Louie:

I think that's a brilliant conception that you put out for us, Manu. I did not know that Stephen Miller and that white supremacists are supporting Andrew Yang's candidacy, so that's news to me. Again, as you say, he's apparently disavowed, right, that, so just to be clear about it. But, I think you're absolutely right. I mean, the model minority was born as a wedge, right, that supposedly Asian Americans, their success, such that it is, that's another story, but that their success is born out of their willingness to work hard, and the fact that they keep quiet, put their head down and they don't complain. That's why I push back so hard around this current narrative in this present moment.

Manu Bhagavan:

Right.

Vivian Louie:

But, I do think in this particular instance, yes, one can definitely see him as a foil, right, to progressive politics, liberalism embodied in the other candidates, who, as you say, Tanya, are also minority candidates. I mean, it's just playing out. Right?

Tanya Domi:

I would just like to ask both of you, I mean, you're both scholars, you're eminent, I mean, very impressive work that you both have done, and I would ask you, I mean, I know people will say when you're in the academy in the ivory tower, it doesn't really connect with the rest of the world. What's interesting to me about CUNY is, I think it's quite the opposite. We're in the academy, but there is a lot of engagement going on in terms of research and how people are working using research to affect policy.

Tanya Domi:

I would just say that given both of your places at Hunter and at The Graduate Center, Manu, what work are you doing at this moment you think that reflects, or how you see the world at this moment, and how we can improve the state of Asian Americans and their human rights?

Manu Bhagavan:

Well, I am currently engaged in writing a biography of Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, who was one of the most important women in the 20th century. Eleanor Roosevelt called her, the most remarkable woman she'd ever met. She was a person who broke many glass ceilings. She was one of the first women cabinet ministers in the British Empire, the first with any real authority. She was India's first

ambassador to the Soviet Union. She was the first woman ambassador to the United States. She was the first woman president of the U.N. General Assembly, among a whole range of other achievements.

Manu Bhagavan:

I'll put it to you this way, one quick anecdote which is, she's in San Francisco and she's seated at a table in a restaurant. People outside realize that she's inside and they swarm into the restaurant and surround her table trying to get her attention and trying to get her to say hello to them and sign somethings. Seated right across the room from her is James Cagney, one of the top movie stars of that era, who is completely left alone as they mob her in this table. Now, that's a sign of how-

Tanya Domi:

That's great.

Manu Bhagavan:

... immensely popular she actually was. This is internationally. This is specifically in the United States, but this level of popularity was true in many parts of the world for her. So on the first point is simply that, yet today, when I just said that I'm writing a biography of Madame Pandit, I think most people who are listening would be like, "Who?" So I think what this again reflects is several things. One is a person of achievement and politics who was erased in measure because of her gender. As a woman, these were not accomplishments that were recorded. I mean, they were recorded, but they weren't accepted into the pantheon of things that were worth remembering.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Manu Bhagavan:

There's an active erasure, is what I want to say, of certain kinds of histories and the act of recovering them, and talking about them, and giving them life again, I think is incumbent on the larger mission of trying to redress historical wrongs and to forge better relationships today.

Manu Bhagavan:

And then the second point, I would just say, is that in addition to that at a very general level, she was someone who was particularly important in the United States and especially in terms, of all things, race relations. She and a series of other visitors from India, many of whom were women, played influential roles in informing race justice and broader civil rights and feminist movements in the United States. So to that extent, I mean, I hope to be able to shed some light on the role that she specifically played in this and the conversations that she had. And to that extent, therefore, I think, I hope that the book will also contribute to a deeper understanding of Asian American, perhaps really at its broadest sense, because these are Asians in America, in helping this country live up to its ideals.

Tanya Domi:

We will have you back to talk about that book, and I look forward to reading it. Vivian...

Vivian Louie:

Yeah, thank you so much. Manu, I look forward to reading your work as well. It sounds amazing. So I'll start talking just about the research that I'm doing, and then I just also wanted to give some strategies to folks in their every day lives. And then I wanted to give a shout-out to you, Tanya.

Vivian Louie:

So the first is the research that I'm currently working on is actually about Asian New Yorkers and their political mobilization and their civic engagement. We talked about the mayoral race, but in fact, this is a historic election for another key reason. There is a historic, record number of Asian Americans, East and South Asian Americans, running for the local offices. That's stunning. Right?

Vivian Louie:

Some of the key things that are emerging from that... I mean, I should say, I'm very much in the early stages of the work, but some of the key things that are emerging are the themes that Manu raised, and that we're really talking about in this conversation, about hyper visibility, when times are bad being scapegoated, but then also being invisible, on the other hand, right, Not having voice, or expressing voice, but not getting heard. So that's what I'm working on.

Vivian Louie:

The second thing that I want to address is, I'm often asked by folks, "What can people do in their every day lives to affect this kind of social change that we're talking about?" And so, with regards to education, I just want to say that there is so many things you can do. Okay. Legislation, not your thing, I get it. Contacting representatives should be your thing, but maybe it's not really your big thing. But, you can ask your public library branch if they do an event about Asian American history and issues. You can work with the staff to organize the event. You can create a learning community at your workplace, right, have monthly learning lunches to learn about these critical issues and what we should be doing. You can volunteer at a local community based organization and help organize events. You can build the coalitions that need to happen across race and ethnicity, for sure.

Vivian Louie:

These might seem very basic to us, but I think that it's just important to name it and then to have folks think about what they are empowered to do, what they're ready to do at the present moment.

Vivian Louie:

And then the third thing that I wanted to say, Tanya, is I actually am a foreign newspaper journalist from way back, [inaudible 00:56:00] ago. I just wanted to give a shout-out to you and for having this be a topic of your podcast, because no newspaper, and just journalists in general, tend to focus on breaking news. That's with good reason, right, because news that breaks is timely. But oftentimes, it's at the expense of "news that ooze," to quote from Eugene Roberts, the legendary news editor. This is the news that unfolds, and the slow work, the incremental work, the day-to-day work.

Vivian Louie:

The news doesn't always do a good job of covering them, and so I think it's important that this is part of the story, right, about where Asian Americans fit in the unfolding story of America, and what we can learn to actually build a better America. That's part of what your podcast is doing, but I think we need

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more of that, more coverage in the media about all these people who've been doing the work, right, as Manu was saying that are apparently invisible to Americans, and what we can be doing together.

Tanya Domi:

I want to say that what you're both talking about and what you're both contributing to is expanding what it means to be a democracy. Democracy is for everyone and all of us together being acknowledged and being rewarded for our merits and our hard work, but not being scapegoated by those who may want to abuse power.

Tanya Domi:

That's really, I think, what's on the line for so many of us as we look forward into the near future, not only this mayor's race, but the midterms and then 2024. There is so much work to do. I look forward to seeing both of your work. I can't wait to see your book, Manu. If Eleanor Roosevelt said this about Madame Pandit, she has to be a remarkable woman. It takes one to know one. So thank you both so much for being here today.

Manu Bhagavan:

Thank you, Tanya.

Vivian Louie:

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Manu Bhagavan:

Thank you, Vivian.

Vivian Louie:

Thank you, Manu. Thank you, Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project. Thanks to our guests, Professor Manu Bhagavan of Hunter College and The Graduate Center and Professor Vivian Louie of Hunter College CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

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.