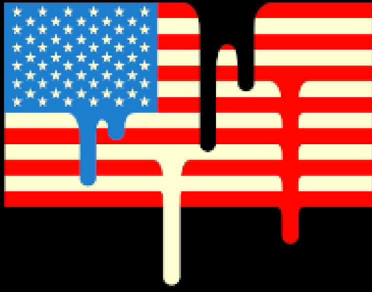

American Poison

How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise

Race, Economy, and COVID-19: How America's Race Problem Exacerbated the Crisis – A Book Talk with Eduardo Porter

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

Wednesday, April 29, 2020, 2:00 – 3:00 p.m. ET

Description

The global pandemic has transformed our lives in sudden and unexpected ways. Much is still unfolding, but the available data suggest the economic and human cost of this crisis will be profound. And these costs will not be borne equitably. Our long-standing divides by class, race, and ethnicity are widening as the coronavirus has a disproportionate impact on workers in low-wage jobs and communities of color.

In a timely new book, *American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise*, *New York Times* economics reporter Eduardo Porter examines "how racial animus has stunted the development of nearly every institution crucial for a healthy society, including organized labor, public education, and the social safety net." Now these institutions are failing us all. This virtual book talk with the author discusses how we arrived here and the lessons history holds for finding a better way forward. As we make plans to rebuild from this crisis, we must not repeat the exclusionary mistakes of the past. We can emerge to a healthier society—and a stronger economy—than the one we left behind, if we choose to make it so.

Learn more about this event: as.pn/americanpoison

Speakers

Daniel R. Porterfield

President and CEO, The Aspen Institute

Daniel R. Porterfield, Ph.D., has served as President and CEO of the Aspen Institute since June 2018. He was selected by the Institute's Board of Trustees because of his intellectual depth, commitment to inclusivity and diversity, and ability to lead a complex, mission-driven organization to create impact and make a difference in the world. His career embodies the ideals of values-based leadership upon which the Aspen Institute was founded. Learn more about Dan here: https://www.aspeninstitute.org/our-people/dan-porterfield/

Eduardo Porter

Economics Reporter, The New York Times; Author, American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise

Eduardo was born in Phoenix and grew up in the United States, Mexico, and Belgium. He is an economics reporter for *The New York Times*, where he was a member of the editorial board from 2007 to 2012 and the Economic Scene columnist from 2012 to 2018. He began his career in journalism as a financial reporter for Notimex, a Mexican news agency, in Mexico City. He was a correspondent in Tokyo and London, and in 1996 moved to São Paulo, Brazil, as editor of *América Economía*, a business magazine. In 2000, he went to work at *The Wall Street Journal* in Los Angeles to cover the growing Hispanic population. He is the author of *The Price of Everything* (2011), an exploration of the cost-benefit analyses that underpin human behaviors and institutions. He lives in Brooklyn.

Maureen Conway

Vice President for Policy Programs, The Aspen Institute; Executive Director, Economic Opportunities Program

Maureen Conway serves as Vice President for Policy Programs at the Aspen Institute and as Executive Director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program (EOP). EOP works to expand individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Maureen founded EOP's Workforce Strategies Initiative and has headed up workforce research at the Aspen Institute since 1999. Maureen also curates a public discussion series at the Aspen Institute, Opportunity in America, which brings together voices from business, labor, policy, human services, media, academia, and others to discuss the challenges experienced by many in today's labor markets and new ideas for addressing these challenges. In addition, Maureen oversees EOP's leadership development programs, which connect innovators, both within communities and from across the country, to peers working to help low- and moderate-income Americans access opportunity.

About

Opportunity in America, an event series hosted by the Economic Opportunities Program, considers the changing landscape of economic opportunity in the US and implications for individuals, families, and communities across the country. The series highlights the ways in which issues of race, gender, and place exacerbate our economic divides, and ideas and innovations with potential to address these challenges and broaden access to quality opportunity. We are grateful to the Ford Foundation, Prudential Financial, Walmart, the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, and the Surdna Foundation for their support of this series. Learn more: as.pn/opportunityinamerica

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Learn more: as.pn/eop

Transcript

Maureen Conway (00:00)

Good afternoon and welcome everyone. My name is Maureen Conway, I'm a Vice President at the Aspen Institute and Executive Director of the Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program and it is my pleasure to welcome you to today's book talk with Eduardo Porter discussing his book, American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise and the important implications of that book for our current context. This conversation is part of the Economic Opportunities Program's ongoing Opportunity In America discussion series in which we explore the changing landscape of economic opportunity and the implications for individuals, families, and communities all across the United States. I want to know our deep appreciation to the Ford Foundation, Prudential Financial, Walmart, Surdna Foundation and the MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth for their support of our Opportunity In America series. At the Economic Opportunities Program, we focus on advancing strategies, policies, and ideas to help working people and small businesses thrive.

Working people and small businesses are facing extraordinary challenges today with over 26 million recently applying for unemployment benefits and millions of small businesses at risk of closing for good. At the Economic Opportunities Program, we recognize that for too long race, ethnicity, gender, and place have played an outside role in who has access to opportunity and who is shut out. And we see today Black and Latino workers being most effected by unemployment and by the health risks that come with being classified as an essential worker. We see Black and Latino owned small businesses facing much greater vulnerability to the economic devastation of COVID-19 and more challenges accessing funding to help get them through. In today's book talk, we'll be exploring some of the history and dimensions of America's racial divides, how we are seeing the consequences of our exclusionary choices play out now and how we can perhaps emerge from the current crisis, not to return to what for far too long we've accepted as normal, but to a healthier society and a stronger economy into a fuller expression of our nation's ideals that equal opportunity and shared destiny.

I'm so grateful that so many of you have chosen to join us for this conversation. Registration for this event has been tremendous and it's included people who are different in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and age. From over 45 States and the district of Columbia from big cities and small towns from nonprofits businesses, research institutions, government agencies, education institutions, philanthropy, and more. At a time when we are struggling with so many fissures and divides in our society, it gives me hope that all of you chose to come together for today's conversation. And just a few notes before we start today's conversation on our technology. Everybody attending today is muted, but we very much welcome your questions. Please use the Q and A box on the bottom of the zoom window for questions or comments. There's also an option to enable closed captions, if you'd like to avail yourself of that, please do so.

We encourage you to tweet about this conversation. Our hashtag is talk opportunity. If you have any technical issues during this webinar, you can chat with my colleagues or email us at eop.program@aspeninstitute.org. This webinar is being recorded and will be shared via email and posted on our website. For today's session we will begin with opening remarks from Aspen Institute, President and CEO Dan Porterfield. Then I will post some questions to Eduardo about his book. Some of my questions are drawing on the questions that many of you submitted. Thanks very much for submitting questions during your registration and then the balance of the event we'll really focus on the audience questions.

And my colleagues behind the scenes I just want to thank them very much for their extraordinary help in bringing these events together. It's a lot of work and we have a great team here. There'll be organizing questions and feeding them along to me and please note that you can also upvote questions if there's a question that you particularly want to see addressed you can give it an up vote. Okay. Now it is my

wonderful privilege to introduce Dan Porterfield President and CEO of the Aspen Institute. And I know today's conversation is near and dear to Dan's heart. Dan, we really appreciate you joining us today and I turn it over to you.

Dan Porterfield (04:46)

Thank you, Maureen. Thank you to all who have made this event possible, especially Eduardo Porter who wrote the great book that we can dig in and talk about with him. The Economic Opportunities Program at the Aspen Institute, it has been leading the charge to make sure that we as members of a society ask ourselves the hard questions constantly about what is it that we can do collectively to promote a free, just, and equitable society. And those are big words. And the history of the American experiment has been to call up those ideals and then honestly to fall short of them in so many different ways and times. I say that not as an indictment I think, but as a statement of fact. Concepts like structural racism, unconscious bias, white privilege are incredibly powerful for understanding the reality that we're in and the way we live in today's world.

It's been a part of this country's history from its very founding. There's so much to understand about this. And there's so much to think about. And then when you say, given how much racism and other forms of prejudice have defined the American experiment, how do we understand our history in a way that could allow us to break free from repeating some of the dynamics of the past in order to create a more just, a more inclusive, a more equitable, a less discriminatory society. And I think Eduardo Porter is one of the most clear thinking social analyst I've ever come across. I remember a few years ago reading one of his pieces in New York Times and reading it like five times over. It was so rich with economic analysis and social theory, so learned and so thoughtful and so hard hitting.

And I can't remember now, I think it was around the challenges of ending or addressing rural poverty or the biases built into the economic system or the challenges in claiming that education can genuinely lead to social mobility the way it's practiced in this country. Or something about the tech revolution, but whatever it was, because of now I've read everything since then. And every time I read his work, I feel I need to sit down and get very quiet and very still, and let myself think. That's quite a gift, Eduardo. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Maureen Conway (07:22)

Great. Well thank you Dan, so much for joining us today too and we really appreciate you taking the time and your leadership and challenging all of the Aspen Institute to pursue a more free just and equitable society. Thank you so much. And that was a great little bit of background on Eduardo, mine was a bit more straightforward. Just for those of you quickly who don't know, Eduardo. Eduardo Porter is an economics reporter for the New York Times where he was a member of the editorial board from 2007 to 2012. And the Economic scene columnist from 2012 to 2018. He was born in Phoenix, grew up in the United States, Mexico, and Belgium. He began his career in journalism as a financial reporter for Notimex a Mexican news agency in Mexico city and also worked for America Economia a Latin-American business magazine and for the Wall Street Journal before joining the New York Times.

And most importantly, for the purpose of this conversation, Eduardo Porter is the author of this book, if you can see it. American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise, which you can get shipped to you in hard copy as I did, obviously. Or you can read the E-book version or you can listen to the audio version, which I also did and can recommend. Actually, I can recommend them all. They're all good. There are many options available for you. Eduardo, thank you so much for joining us today. It's really a pleasure to have you and see you. The first and kind of obvious question for you is, for you with sort of your significant and global career in economics journalism and business reporting how did you come to write a book about the role of racial hostility in America?

Eduardo Porter (09:12)

Thank you, Maureen for this introduction. Thank you very much Dan, for your kind words. Thank you everybody for being here and listening. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to get the word out about American Poison before this amazing audience. I do hope that you find my thoughts compelling. I have two stories to kind of answer your question. One is old and one is relatively new, please bear with me for a minute. My awareness of the American social contract started sort of taking shape, hazy and inarticulate when I was a kid. I lived in Mexico, I moved to Mexico when I was six to be closer to my mom's family. But I came back to the U.S. pretty much every summer to Phoenix to visit my grandparents who lived there.

And one of my first images of the United States, or at least one of the first images that I can remember having was their house. It was not really fancy, it was in a working class neighborhood, pretty far from the money. But it had this wall to wall carpeting. It was air conditioned all the time had this big TV and a cassette, it had a 8-track technologies that most of you've probably never heard of, had a huge refrigerator and they had a pickup truck and a Pontiac and a trailer, which they would take up every summer to Sedona and park at this trailer park overlooking the Oak Creek, they were not rich. My grandfather was a retired electrician who had moved from Chicago to Phoenix to work on the Salt River Project then my grandmother was a librarian. They had stories to tell about soup kitchens during the Great Depression. They were retired on social security and they live a frugal life, but it was really not an uncomfortable one.

And I remember being there with them and thinking that where I lived in Mexico, electricians didn't get anywhere like this kind of life. I was raised in a privileged situation, but in a country with enormous inequities. And comparing that Mexican reality to my grandparents' house, the electrician's house in Phoenix, I kind of was forced to accept that the American social contract was better. No other country I knew and actually no other country I came to know for a long time after that, it seemed to have created, succeeded in offering ordinary class people, a true shot at prosperity. At the end of the 1990s, I returned to live in the United States after college and having lived in a few other places. When I got here, I lived first in New York and then I moved to L.A. for a few years writing for the Wall Street Journal about Latinos in the United States.

And what struck me then was how little America resembled these childhood memories I had. As a reporter pouring through the poverty stats and the numbers on showing Americans really dismal health situation, statistics about kind of really threadbare social cohesion. The idea that then that kind of took over in my mind was, how could a country this rich provide such a crummy deal to so many of its people? And so I came to kind of understand that my grandparents really lived in exception. It was not the rule. They achieved their prosperity through a really narrow window of opportunity within a few decades after World War II. I also now understand that that window was really narrow because it was really only open for Whites.

And the question that popped up from my mind at the time and that I've been chewing on ever since then and from which this book ultimately emerged, is why did this window close when so many Americans were still on the outside. And it was around then that I kind of took interest in a lot of the social science about racial divisions. There's been a lot of research by economists, by sociologists, political scientists, psychologists about kind of how intense racial divisions are in the United States. There's a bunch of names for them. You can call it contempt or you can call it fear or bigotry, racism. But there was all this research about how these feelings stand in the way of developing the kind of empathetic thinking that underpins this sort of richer social safety nets that helped pull other societies together.

There's research about how immigrant kids entering public schools in California encouraged American parents to pull their kids out and put them in private schools instead. There's research about how cities with more diverse communities spend less on public goods like trash collection and the street

maintenance. There's research on how White Protestants put less into collection basket at church as a share of blacks in their congregations rose. And so my aha moment, kind of the epiphany, when I was living in L.A. which was an enormously balkanized city. And looking through these stats and looking through the kind of the dismal social and health outcomes and economic outcomes for much of the population of the United States, the thought that jelled in my mind is why doesn't the U.S. behave like the prosperous country it is?

And my conclusion, I couldn't really quite escape the conclusion was that racial divisions just got in the way of empathy. Now that's the old long, admittedly part of the story. The new side of the story, and I promise it's shorter, happened just a few years ago when Donald Trump decided to run for president. From his very first speech where he blasted Mexicans as rapists and thugs screaming illegally over the border, the president has worked really hard to rekindle the racial and ethnic divisions that lay just below the surface of our political consciousness. His overt racial appeal to racial animus came to me like a slap in the face. It reminded me kind of abruptly of how racial hostility could further poison our future as demographic change transforms our racial and ethnic reality.

In those speeches, Trump portrayed himself as the voice of white America. That America which has forever held the reins of power, building the walls and pulling up the drawbridge to stop the rise of a truly multiethnic, multiracial nation. And witnessing such a large share of white America, circling the wagons to kind of protect their historical privilege. I felt I just had to write this book, I just had to make the case that these politics have forever damaged the fabric of the nation. They are undermining our social contract and they're really, in my view, turning us into a failed state. I guess that was a bit of a long answer to your question, but those are my motivations.

Maureen Conway (17:02)

Yeah. Thank you. I just want to do a little on terms, I mean your title notes kind of the issue of racial hostility. The book starts actually with that story of backlash against immigrants, mainly against Mexicans which some might call ethnicity divide rather than a racial divide. Can you just lay out a little bit about how you think about the concept of race versus the concept of ethnicity and do you see these categories kind of shifting or changing in some way? And I'm also just curious sort of, as you've worked on the book, did your sort of understanding or sense of what race means, did that change at all as you were working on this?

Eduardo Porter (17:43)

That's a really interesting question Maureen. And it's a question that people at the Census Bureau have been grappling with forever. As a little aside, I remember covering the results of the 2000 census. And as part of that coverage, I discovered that they had had all this trouble about whether they were going to use an ethnicity question alongside the racial question, was it going to go before the racial question or after the racial question. And how they decided to frame this. Whether they decided to put it, whether they decided to include it or not was going to really alter the distribution of responses. And so one of the conclusions that I draw from this is that race is really kind of like a social and a political construct. It's not a biological truth. It's more like a product of our political understandings, our social relations, and at the end of our bureaucratic organization.

And just to answer how I think race fits alongside ethnicity in a way, I think as a social and political construct, as a tribal dividing line they're kind of indistinguishable and in fact, as a system of political organization, you can say that they also share things with religious difference and other cultural differences or differences in language. I think that the way that they shape our society and they shape our politics are by bundles of otherness that are used for organizational purposes to preserve the power and the privilege of one group versus another, for example. And so I started off with this book with a

sense that, I don't think that there is a really relevant difference between these two terms when it comes to how they've been used to organize American society.

And I came out of writing that book even believing that even more strongly. And especially by looking at the political narrative out my window and how arguments that have been used in a very specific Black, White, racial context were now being deployed against Mexican immigrants, which on the census form can put whatever race they want and they have their own little ethnic box, which is Hispanic or non-Hispanic. It seemed to me that these things were just basically bureaucratic differences that did not really have any specific social or political reality of their own. Of course, the most consequential racial division in the history of the United States is that between Whites and Blacks.

Even as I'm saying that, I feel that I'm being remiss for not referencing the history of racial violence against native Americans, but to be fairly honest, to be very honest, it is an experience that I did not cover in the book. It is an experience that I have not very well educated in. But just to throw that out there but you even as I say this, I also say the Black, White racial dividing line is not the only one. It's hardly the only one. Racial otherness has been deployed by Whites to assert their privilege versus Jews and Central and Southern Europeans in the early decades of the 20th century against the Chinese and against the Japanese, very definitely up to very recent speeches from our current president against Mexican and Central American immigrants.

Maureen Conway (21:36)

Category?

Eduardo Porter (21:38)

Just the ambiguity of it is all these categories are actually not even very solid in time or place, these shifts. Italians and Southern Europeans were the racial others in the American Northeast of the early 20th century and in fact, if you think of the Immigration Act of 1925, it was basically designed to stop Central Europeans and Jews from coming into the United States and Portuguese and Italians. But then these groups whitened over the course of American history as they became richer and as some research has found, the great migration of African-Americans from the South into the Northeast and the Midwest encourage White America to invite the Jews and the Central Europeans and the Portuguese into the fold of whiteness.

Just as a final thought, I think that for a long time the debate over racial divisions in the United States has kind of missed this part of the story. This part that there is a lot of complexity around the notion of racial divisions. And I think it's critical today to acknowledge it. Because as I think I pointed out a moment ago, I think that immigrants especially poor immigrants from Mexico and Central America, the guys picking your strawberries and delivering your seamless are amongst the most vulnerable racial others today directly threatened by the president and his supporters.

Maureen Conway (23:03)

Yeah, thank you. And I like that bundles of otherness and just sort of how you want to bundle it changes over time. I want to shift a little to, one of your contentions in the book is sort of that the weakness of our social safety net stems from this sort of legacy of racial animus. And I'm wondering if you can just kind of unpack that a little bit. You've spent some time in Harlan County, Kentucky and maybe you can sort of say, how does that work for people there to somehow be convinced that it's important for them to deny people a benefit that they don't even know, don't even live in their County. And by so doing end up denying themselves that very same benefit. How does that process work? Can you unpack that a little?

Eduardo Porter (24:03)

Just to come clean here. I don't have any training in psychology, and I did not really explore the individual psychology that leads to these outcomes that you're talking about, these attitudes that you're talking about. And I think that is a shortcoming of my book. I just kind of just went and looked at them and saw that they were there. But I have very little understanding of how does an education that's permeated with a racial means and racially coded thoughts help to create a character that includes, that has such very deeply embedded racist biases as an adult. But the contradiction does very much come to my mind. It's one of those things that really slaps you in the face. Because what is true is the people that have been in Harlan, Kentucky are some of the people that are most reliant on federal aid in the entire country.

There's 10 counties in the United States, maybe 11, where over half the personal income on average of people there comes from federal programs. From food stamps to social security to Medicaid. And Harlan, Kentucky more than 50% of their income comes from the feds consistently votes for politicians that oppose big government and any sort of expansion of the social safety net. I was there once at a town hall when the past governor who was a Tea Party stalwart guy called Matt Bevin and he was there talking about bears in your trash with a group of locals gathered around there and everybody was kind of grunting and resenting and suddenly he kind of started talking about how undeserving people were taking advantage of Medicaid and laying on their couch and getting handouts from the feds and the people in that audience really came to life. The applause rippled through the hall. It was a crazy change in energy.

And I think that the Harlan and other similar areas in Appalachia are really overwhelmingly white. I think Harlan in the census comes up at 97% non-Hispanic White. I think nonetheless, their opposition to bigger government is still couched in that kind of rhetoric about undeserving others, lazy others, corrupt others. And so thoughts that I heard in a County that really has no immigrants was how can we take care of immigrants if we can't even take care of ourselves as an argument against a broader social safety net. And it's not just in Appalachia, these kinds of means and thoughts pop up in other places that probably have never seen a person of color or a Hispanic or an immigrant.

There's this other place that I write a little bit about, which is Fremont in Nebraska. There are really no immigrants in Fremont, Nebraska, maybe 10. But in 2010 and again in 2014, the people of Fremont, Nebraska voted in referendum for the toughest municipal ordinance against illegal immigrants in the United States. It barred employers from hiring illegal immigrants, which is already in federal law. I don't know why they thought they had to do that again. And then they had an additional provision barring landlords from taking illegal immigrants as tenants. Now again, this is a place where there are no illegal immigrants. There are barely any immigrants. But still the sense of threat from an abstraction was very real.

Kind of to maybe connect that better to your question, Maureen. Maybe the thought is, and right now I'm coming to think about how a lot of the vote in the 2016 election for President Trump was in a lot of counties where there were not a lot of people of color and not a lot of immigrants. It's kind of a political argument about how Browns or the immigrants were bad for us, played best or played particularly powerfully in places that did not really experience immigrants in a day to day life. For whom immigrants or people of color are more of an abstraction.

And I sort of think that how these things affect the social safety net are as well like that, they're detached. It's not like you perceive, there's a lot of Latinos and African-Americans in my neighborhood and then, Oh yeah, I can see that they're really lazy and living off of handouts. And that's how I build my belief. I think the beliefs are mediated through the political system and in fact the less you know about the real lives of people of color, of immigrants the easier it is for you to assume these kinds of attitudes that it's these guys that are just leeches milking the federal government.

Maureen Conway (29:30)

Yeah. I wanted to also ask you about sort of the labor movement and you spend some time writing a little bit about it in your book and obviously sort of the labor movement, it only can be successful by sort of, it's a union, people working together and sort of solidarity toward that common purpose. And yet you sort of described how some of issues racial animus, kind of weakened and it has a complicated history growing up out of immigrant laborers and various things. And it's kind of complicated history, but it's obviously not strong in the moment, but there has been a resurgence of labor activism in recent years, both within traditional unions and in alternative forms. And we are seeing much more diverse kinds of labor organizations. How do you see sort of the role of worker organizing in the time of a very diverse workforce? How do you see that kind of going forward? And do you see any models of sort of worker voice or worker power that are working well?

Eduardo Porter (30:39)

Yeah. Well, taking a step back, I write about the labor movement in American Poison, just to underscore how racism made it tough to create the kind of institutions that would help improve the working conditions of American men and women. I noted in the history of organized labor how divisions of race, racism kind of made it impossible to create a cross racial, cross ethnic labor movement. That in my view would have been much stronger and much more powerful. And so just racism got in the way. That's just one particular instance in how I see racism warping our institutions in a way that undermines us as a society. But now thinking about the presence and into the future, I think things like the Fight for $15 do sort of justify a hope that kind of new kinds of labor activism might improve jobs and living standards. I really take a lot of hope from that. But I would still say that resurgence is perhaps a strong word here.

We are living in a country in which most workers do not have voice. Unionization rate is quite around 7%. And as far as I can tell, it has not rebounded. It's pretty much either stuck or in continuous decline. But I would agree that one of the most important challenges we have to overcome now to improve the lives of working women and men is to find ways to give workers voice, to give them more leverage at the bargaining table. And that goes through some form of labor organization. What kind of models are available out there? You look around the world, people talk a lot about Germany, where they have things like sectorial bargaining, where you're bargaining, you're sitting around the table and you're bargaining for the entire steel industry or the entire auto making industry.

That is kind of an effective way of what they call taking wages out of competition. You're not going to compete by paying less. In Germany, there's also union representatives on corporate boards, which also helps companies keep the interest of their workers in mind. Whether that can work in the American political system, is uncertain and I would not hold my breath. I'm kind of trying to remember back when the Volkswagen opened a plant was it in one of the Carolinas and the German chief executive was encouraging the workers to join the union and it was the governor of the state that actually came out against it trying to stop them from unionizing. I'm not sure that looking to Germany, it would be great but I think we have several political hurdles between now and then.

And then the broader thought connecting it to my general thinking in American Poison is that to succeed, the labor movement really needs to invite the new America and the new America today, it means people of color and especially immigrants and their kids. And that we have good models out there. The Service Employees International Union has been actually great at working with Latino immigrant communities for a long, long time. I'm thinking way back to the 1990 to the Justice for Janitors campaign, in the West coast. UNITE HERE, for hotel workers is also really good and they happen to have memberships that are extremely diverse with lots of immigrants, lots of Latinos, but not exclusively Latinos. And I think that these kinds of unions which actually not coincidentally are the strongest unions in the country suggest to us that a labor movement of the future to have any power, has to be very aggressive about being about everybody, about representing everybody.

And it's not super clear to me that the entire labor movement understands this. And I'm thinking, not that long ago to kind of the early, mid 2000s, the AFL-CIO had a real hard time trying to support immigration reform. There was this effort under the George W. Bush administration to create an immigration reform package that would open a road towards legalization and ultimately citizenship for undocumented immigrants in the United States. And I remember the AFL was really twisted into a pretzel over that. It kind of saw the idea of immigrant work in a way of a competition to native workers. And just to say that it's not really clear to me that the entire labor movement has really thought this through. But I do think that this has to be in a really overt and important part of the strategy.

I think that these new models that you're referring kind of Fight For $15 type. They're really interesting strategies. They're not going after collective bargaining, but they're going after legislation and changing legislation at the state level has proven, they've been able to do this. And so I think that we should be looking for new leavers beyond the traditional kind of sitting down with management to renegotiate wages and benefits. But I think that ultimately this is a political battle. And I think that the stronger the labor movement makes itself by including more of this country, the stronger it will be to wage it.

Or maybe I have one last little thought about this. I don't want to ramble on too long, but I think COVID raises a question for me. And I think I was talking about this with you before Maureen, I kind of suspect that coming out of COVID the push for automation in companies across the country is going to be very strong. The kind of worker replacement ethos that has been with us for some time is going to come out resurgent out of this for the standard health reasons. Gosh, my workers get this thing and I can't keep my factory open, so let's get rid of workers kind of thing. I see that and I think that the job for organized labor right now is going to get way more difficult. It's going to get really, really tough. And I think that the argument for really strategically thinking this through and building political power is just and all the more important.

Maureen Conway (38:28)

Yeah. Let's talk about that a little bit more. Let's talk about sort of the implications of the COVID-19 crisis. Because sort of we have this situation right now, we're all kind of in our homes. Me with my fake background, we're all separated from each other maybe with our families or with a couple of roommates or something. But we're not sort of interacting with people very much. At the same time, we sort of see some common news and we're experiencing kind of a common threat. Maybe not all common news and I think that it's been interesting sort of seeing the ways in which some sort of kinds of workers have been lifted up and sort of newly recognized in terms of the value that they bring.

If we think about workers in grocery stores, workers in the food chain, workers in the healthcare industry, particularly sort of lower not just the doctors and nurses, but also the certified nurse aides and that sort of technicians and stuff. I'm curious, in some ways we seem more divided than others, but in other ways it seems we're more willing to sort of see our need for a kind of common supports and insurances and help. How do you see this crisis affecting kind of our politics and our policy choices?

Eduardo Porter (39:54)

I think what the outcome's going to be, after this has come and gone and is a really interesting question, but I think there's too much uncertainty between now and then to actually make any sort of definite answer. You could, and I've been thinking of stories to write for the paper for the times about this. And one of the stories, one of the ideas that has been bouncing around in my head is, will we come out of this with a stronger support for the social safety net? I remember when the Great Recession hit and then after the housing crisis in 2008, and the Obama administration really, really had the battle to get past a fiscal stimulus that was smaller, that it was less than a trillion dollars and it actually passed without a single Republican vote.

Now, flash forward to the present, we pass a 2 trillion package with like a week of debate, and I think everybody voted for it. You could say, well, okay, we're frankly, maybe we're recognizing that having a social safety net is kind of useful. But I am not enormously optimistic in this kind of forecast. I was talking to this historian at Stanford who wrote a book about how the only moments in which humanity has managed to really, really reduce income inequality have been in really big crisis. Like massive Wars, pandemics, natural calamities. And he goes back and looks back through the stone age up until through the late 20th century. And I called him up and I asked him, does this measure up to the kind of thing that will really get us, and he goes, Nope. The call to arms that you need to really justify this kind of a rethinking of society is a really, really big lift.

Now also, I'm going to tip my hat to the sense of community that COVID has built in some places, but I have a hard time running with it very far. I think it's probably true of many people that have done amazingly altruistic things and are donating their time and putting their health at risk to be sure, but across society I'm not convinced. And in particular, if you look at who the epidemic has hit, it's really hard to buy into the notion that this is a common threat. I think maybe you point out this moment ago, but you know in Chicago the share of African Americans dying of COVID is double their share in the population. The death rate of Latinos in New York city is double the rate for non-Hispanic whites. If you go to Manhattan the infection rate per capita is about half or even less than half than it is in the Bronx. Common threat, let's take it with a grain of salt here.

And what this threat has done is it has, in fact, it is really reiterated, reinforced the kind of structural inequities that have been with us for a really long time. And I don't really see that changing as we go back to work. I see that especially if automation is a bigger deal. I think that the people on the bottom half of the wage scale they are going to have a way harder time of getting their finances and their lives back in order that people on a higher up on the ladder. But at one point though and it's clearly affected the poor lower income and it's clearly affected the Black and the Brown way disproportionately. I'm not sure that, that will be true one or two months from now because I think what's happened now is that COVID has really attacked urban centers. Most are more densely populated and so forth. But when COVID moved over to less populated parts of the country, that's where poor White America predominantly lives.

I would not be surprised to see this kind of disparate impact on the poor there, but the poor there are going to be more often white than they are here. Just to say I don't really see this as a common threat. I think this is a very, very differentiated threat. And then what comes to mind is, again, what's our shortcoming these are the other countries that have dealt with this thing, why are we doing particularly badly and well, it's the social safety net thing. We just didn't have one. Alone among the world's rich countries, the U.S. is facing the epidemic with 27 million people that don't have health insurance. We are facing it with the stingiest unemployment insurance system amongst the rich countries in the OECD. We don't have mandatory sick leave. We have virtually no mandatory childcare. We're entering this with a real, really soft underbelly. If anything, this is proving to us that public goods are actually very valuable. And the U.S. was really kind of foolish not to build some.

In other talks I've given about this book, about American Poison, I often stop at one of the things that I stopped to mention is America's infant mortality rate. Because that's thinking back to how I got to this book. That was one of the first stats that I looked at and said, what? Infant mortality in the U.S. is amongst the highest in the OECD. It's maybe fourth from the bottom, Chile, Mexico, Turkey might be below, but really scraping the bottom. And what's weird is we have one of the most sophisticated healthcare systems in the world, a lot of the technologies that have been developed to keep premature babies alive or developed in this country by American scientists. And yet we have kind of the infant mortality rate of Croatia.

To me that's always been a perfect illustration of what happens when you do not build the kind of safety net welfare system apparatus to put a floor under the lives of people on the unfortunate side of life. But now I think that COVID offers even as good or better an example of that, we are suffering very,

very high death rates compared to other rich countries. We've had a very, very hard time in slowing this down. We've come very close to, to face shortage of hospital beds, shortage of ventilators and again we do have this with 27 million that don't have health insurance and their odds of going to the hospital and are probably going to be pretty depressed because of that.

Just to finish this thought, the other day I was reading about Sweden. Sweden is following an entirely different strategy for COVID. It's kind of they've let people out of the streets, they didn't close schools, they didn't close businesses. They sort of asked people if they could to maintain social distance. But this was kind of voluntary. And in part it's because I guess the Swedes sort of respect authority more maybe. And so they voluntarily stayed at home and things. But also, what I've read is that Sweden is kind of pursuing more of a strategy of herd immunity. The idea that if enough of their population gets this virus the country as a whole will become more or less immune and numbers that I've seen is that you need about two thirds of the population to have been hit by the virus to achieve this sort of herd immunity.

I was thinking, well, how come Sweden follows that strategy when certainly we're not. We're trying to the best we can to really tamp it down on the disease. And one of the thoughts that came as well, you know what, Sweden has a much, much stronger healthcare infrastructure than we do. In terms of available beds and available respirators and the available physicians. The U.S. has 2.6 doctors per 1000 people. Sweden has 4.1 and its public healthcare system by the way. And also because of this kind of more robust safety net. And one of the things is, Sweden does not really suffer a lot of the really bad health outcomes that are one of the consequences of America's more entrenched and deeper poverty.

Their life expectancy is higher. They have fewer chronic conditions. Their obesity rate is lower, they have less diabetes, they have less cancer. Across the board, you see what I interpret as the outcomes of a healthier society that has been kept healthier by a very, very generous, a much more generous than the United States investment in kind of public goods to keep so many people from falling through the cracks and will then that allows them to think, okay, I can let more people get infected, there's going to be probably less of them to get really terminally ill and my healthcare system has more capacity to support however many ill people we've got. And so I'd say, well, okay.

We were unable to build such a safety net. And one of the things that that did was it closed off an opportunity. We could never do that because we have so many people on the bottom end of those rungs of health and income and living conditions and we have a hospital system that really is nowhere near the capacity to support a really big surgeon, that is really not available to us. Anyway, I don't know if that answers your question Maureen.

Maureen Conway (50:17)

Yeah, that's great. I'm taking a couple of questions from the audience now because I can see we're kind of getting a little close to time. I'm going to ask you two that have been passed along by my colleagues. And so one is what lessons should be taken from the current COVID crisis and earlier crises about the role of reparations that should or could play in the future of our political economy. And the other question is on top of the divides mentioned class, race, geography, have you looked into the role of faith traditions in the decades that you've been doing research? And what have you learned about the role of faith traditions. If you have a couple of quick answers on those, because I do also want to ask you, before we go to give some examples of things you've found that also gave you hope. Sort of what are some things that gave you hope and maybe we can build on.

Eduardo Porter (51:13)

These are difficult questions.

Maureen Conway (51:14)

Yeah.

Eduardo Porter (51:20)

And they are questions that often get me in trouble. Let me address the geographical distribution question. Are there different expressions of racial hostility around the country? And my answer to that is for sure, yes. And there's been not only different expressions of racism, but a very, very different history of racism and how it has affected our politics and our institutions. It has been very, very different. And for instance, you have the South, which is kind of the cradle of racial discrimination segregation because of historical association with slavery of course. The South and its history had, for instance, one of the most aggressive integrations of the educational system in the country following court desegregation orders starting in the 60s and '70s, which kind of goes against the grain of things of the South.

But then on the other hand, this very effort towards desegregation delivered the South forever to a party that is today trying to attach worker requirements to food stamps and Medicaid. And the Northeast and the Midwest had a different set of racial conflicts. For a long time, there was a standard belief that segregation and racial discrimination were Southern problems. And so a lot of the court and solutions to desegregate were seen as not necessarily in the Northeast and the Midwest. That proved to be a really big lie because even the migration of African Americans North starting around World War I and up until the 1970s was met with enormous hostility by Whites in the North.

You can just look at the history of Detroit for instance, and some Newark, massive racial riots, enormous conflict between Black neighborhoods and White police forces. And then in terms of integration even as the South was making enormous inroads in integrating its schools the Northeast and the Midwest were maintaining extremely segregated school system. And the school systems in the South became more integrated than school systems in the North around the 1990s and the 2000s. What's more, residential segregation in cities in the Northeast and the Midwest was really, really intensive to peaking in the 1970s. The idea that this was an area of less racial conflict or more racial harmony in industrial America should look again.

The experience of the West again is more mixed. And also because I think the Latinos and Asians in a way kind of contributed to the story and I think changed the story in a substantial way. I think in a way they kind of acted as a buffer between the Black, White divided. And so the Black, White divide was less prominent in the history of this region. This created other dividing lines and I do talk about them in the book, which notably in California, the Black Brown conflict has had its pretty dark moments. But I think that overall there, if you look at patterns of segregation and so forth, it kind of looks less intense. Because of this richer ethnic mix, because you'll have Latinos in the neighborhood, you'll have Asians in a neighborhood and you'll have non-Hispanic Whites in the neighborhood.

Maureen Conway (55:27)

I want to move you to saying a little of...

Eduardo Porter (55:30)

Reparations? That's the one that gets me in trouble.

Maureen Conway (55:32)

Okay. So you can skip reparations and talk a little bit about, because we just have a few minutes left.

Eduardo Porter (55:38)

Oh, okay. I'm sorry I have taken too long.

Maureen Conway (55:40)

It would actually be really great to just hear about what gives you hope because I think that that would be helpful.

Eduardo Porter (55:44)

Okay. So what gives me hope. All right. The U.S. for all the kind of dismal sort of events in the history of our racial relations. We did have the Civil Rights Act. We did have the Voting Rights Act. We did have Brown vs Board of Education. We didn't have the Fair Housing Act. There have been moments in our history when we've been able, if only momentarily to push back against discrimination segregation. Often at the cost of a lot of violence and the lives of people of color. But we have been able to push, there has been success at moments of pushing against racism meant towards creating idea of a more inclusive society. And so I take some hope from that. And if you tell me where would I look more intensely? Where would I think that that offers the most promise? I would argue that the area of most promise is the area of residential integration, where we live, who we live with, who we live among.

To my mind, that action there carries the most promise for us to be able to build a more, kind of an inclusive society, a more inclusive sense of what it means to be an American. And that there are some moments of hope there too. Residential segregation in urban America was intense in the 1970s and the late 1960s was this moment where riots happened across cities in the Northeast and the Midwest where the Kerner Commission was appointed to look at, are we going up in flames? And then somehow out of this experience you could say from the ashes of Detroit, the U.S. sort of changed direction. And if you look at residential living patterns by race, from the 1970s, up until not that long ago, in fact, perhaps by some studies even continuing today. The U.S. looks, at least urban U.S. looks less and less segregated, more diversified.

Maureen Conway (58:12)

So in the '80s?

Eduardo Porter (58:15)

The average White person lived in neighborhoods where 88% of the population was White. And by 2010, she lived in a neighborhood where 75% was White. There's been a kind of, we're nowhere near where we've got to be, but that movement is, I think a dynamic that offers some hope. I'm not saying this is free or even that it's going to continue or even the disease is good as I think it might be, but it is a place that I look for progress.

Maureen Conway (58:47)

Yeah. Great. Well thank you. Eduardo, it's always such a pleasure to talk to you and this has been a fascinating conversation and I think the idea of sort of integrated living leading to other things is a great one to live with. It gives local, state, federal, all a role in thinking about where they play and lots of folks can think about what their role is and moving forward. Thank you so much for joining us today. Like I said, it's always a pleasure to talk to you. I could talk to you for another hour, but I think we'd end up losing everybody. I want to thank our audience again for joining us. It was great to have you with us today. Many thanks again to my Aspen Institute colleagues who do such a fabulous job in organizing these things. Please take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey at the close of this webinar, or send us an email at eop.aspeninstitute.org. Let us know what you think. We'd love to hear from you, and we hope you'll join us again. Thank you.