Mistrust: How to revitalize civics at a moment of low public trust in institutions

May 20, 2021

- Hello, I would like to welcome everyone, to what I know will be a very fascinating conversation with the amazing Ethan Zuckerman who needs no introduction. One of the best global thinkers there is imaginative, creative, insurrectionist, but also institutionalist. Ethan is a Professor of Public Policy Communications and Information at University of Massachusetts Amherst and the founder of more good things than I can list. He also told me that he's written two books and a big report during the pandemic, Ethan You're amazing.

- Well, thank you and Martha, thank you so much for being here and talk about needing no introduction. I'm sharing the stage today with Martha Minow. She's the 300th anniversary university professor at Harvard University. She's the previous Dean of the law school. She took over from some slacker named Kagan, but, you know fortunately was able to grab the reigns and she's, you know one of the world's leading human rights scholars as well as, you know, personal idol of Barack Obama. So speaking of needing no introduction but we are here today to have a conversation with all you wonderful Berk folk. Who've joined us. Martha, maybe I'll lead off a little bit and just sort of talk about the book and then we can have a conversation about it.

- Wonderful.

- So first of all, thank you all for coming. I know that yet another zoom call is really no one's idea of a good time at this moment in the pandemic but I'm really so thrilled to have a conversation with my friend about this book and a little nervous because this is a book that offers perhaps a bit of a provocative thesis. So let me try to lay out the rough case and then Martha and I can consider tangle a little bit about it. This is a book that I wrote really over the nine years that I spent at MIT's Media Lab, where I was running a center called the Center for Civic Media. It became sort of a hotbed for activism, for people who wanted to make social change using technology or media. And at some point in my time there, I get really interested in whether my students were ignorant of civics or just really skeptical of it. And I ended up sort of coming to the conclusion that many of the people that I was working with actually understood real well American political processes but were simply very skeptical that it was a way that they personally were likely to make social change in the world. And the more that I looked at this, the more that I realized that when we talk about social change in the 21st century we still tend to use the ideas and the language of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. We tend to think in terms of Supreme Court victories protests and movements, legislative action leading to a system of greater justice. And what I found with a lot of the students that I was working with were incredibly skeptical of this theory of change. They didn't see real change happening particularly from Congress, but even from the courts. And they felt like as individuals this was not a way that they could make change. So I started asking this question, was there something that had changed between the 1960s and present? And obviously there's lots of things that

have changed between the 1960s and present. But one big thing that we probably don't talk about enough is trust. If you asked the average American whether they have a great deal of trust in the federal government to do the right thing all or most of the time in 1964 77% of people would have said, yep, tons of trust. If you asked that question of people right now, about 13% of them will tell you that they have a high degree of trust in the federal government. It's not as smooth slide. It's actually a really weird slide. This trust goes down really sharply in the 1970s comes back under, Reagan stays up a little bit under Clinton, but it has been very very low for the entire 21st century below 20%. It's not just trust in government it's trust in institutions of all sorts. If you ask people, do they trust the banks? Do they trust churches? Do they trust unions? Do they trust newspapers? All those numbers are rock bottom with some rare exceptions. People trust the military more than they trusted at the height of Vietnam. Maybe that's good news. Maybe that's not good news, but it's not an indication of a lot of trust in systems. The reasons for trust are pretty complicated. It may have to do with rising inequality. It may have to do with better access to information. It may be particular. It may be that people lose trust in institutions as they publicly fail. We know that trust in the Catholic church went way, way down after the Boston globe reported on sex abuse. We know that trust and business went way way down after the 2008 crash and the bailout sort of following it. My question is, what does this mean for civics? And what I end up arguing is that maybe it's okay. to be someone who doesn't feel particularly capable of making change through electing candidates through office through bringing cases to the courts through what we might think of as the traditional model of activism maybe we can activate a broader set of tools. Perhaps we can help people find paths to social change, not just by using the lever of law, but also using levers of social norms of markets, of technology. And the book talks about some examples of how activists are able to make change using these different levers. So I look for instance, at the idea of encryption as a way to make progress on debates about privacy, where we haven't had serious legislative debates about privacy, but an individual Moxie Marlinspike is able to release Signal and suddenly put very strong encryption in the hands of lots of people. And by getting incorporated in WhatsApp actually bring it to a very, very large audience. And then the last thing I'll just sort of say at the beginning of this is that I try to make the case that it's okay to position yourself as someone who doesn't trust in an institution so long as you're trying to figure out what to do about that institution and that you might be able to go into that institution and try to bring it back to its core values. And there I look at someone like Larry Krasner in Philadelphia trying to use the DA's office to turn, you know the act of prosecuting crime into something that's about justice rather than something that's about punitive punishment. So there's someone working very well within the system but really trying to take it back to its core values. Our job is not to incarcerate as many people as possible it's to achieve justice. You can relate to an institution by pressuring it from the outside and hoping to strengthen it. And this is a very journalistic way of going. This is a very activist way of going. And I talk a lot about lessons going back even to the Black Panthers of trying to hold institutions responsible through that outside pressure. But then I also talk about this notion that there may be institutions that are just no longer fit for purpose. They're just not doing the work. And they're just not trusted to the extent where we can make real progress through them. And I think a movement like defund the police actually forces us to take this seriously. There may not be an incremental path to change within the Minneapolis police department may actually have

to take that institution and radically rethink it if you want to make some progress around it. So the thesis of the book is lots and lots of people don't trust institutions anymore, telling them get over yourself and trust the institution. Not very helpful, trying to help them figure out how they can be politically efficacious, either from pressuring an institution, building a new institution transforming an institution using this wide variety of levers. These are all productive ways to go forward. But then of course, you write a book like this and not only do insurrection storm the Capitol forcing you to deal with that whole question of just how far away from the institutions do you wanna go, but then you find yourself on a video call, you know with a noted constitutional law scholar and you know Harvard law professor. And you start wondering what have you really done with your life and what sort of questions we're about to face here. So maybe we can use that as an opening, a place to be...

- That's fabulous. Well, first I want to say that everyone buy this book maybe steal the book, but most importantly, read the book. It actually is a book most needed. I think at our time it gives us a map a landscape and a really, a very clear eye view of dangers. Although I believe you wrote it before January 6th.

- True.

- And yet, in some ways you forecast the risk of people taking over the Capitol. I do think that the book includes both many wonderful examples of constructive efforts, whether they're outside pressure points on people inside of institutions or their end runs around them but it also includes some windows onto some terrifying alternatives and some of which we're starting to see unfold in real time. So I wonder if you don't mind just explain to people what do you mean by an institutionalist and an insurrectionist and then throw in the question. Can someone be both? Is this something that you can combine?

- Yeah. So thank you. And thank you for, you know, in many ways, like bringing me to the hardest question first, right? So a lot of the book pivots around these two terms institutionalist insurrectionist, these are not my terms. I stole them from Chris Hayes who in a really terrific book about meritocracy and, you know, sort of shifting political sense in the United States suggest this idea that you can't really think of the U.S in terms of left and right anymore, you actually have to think two dimensional. You have to think left and right. Institutionalist insurrectionist. So what's the distinction, institutionalists believe that the best way to make social change is to become part of an important institution and help shape it to be better, right? So the institutionalist approach to this says the police department isn't working I'm going to be a good cop. I'm gonna get recruited. I'm gonna move up the ranks and I'm gonna train people to respect human rights. And I'm gonna be involved with community policing. The insurrectionist approach looks at this and says have you looked at our institutions lately? You're nuts. There's no the way that I'm becoming a cop. In fact, I think we needed to defund the police, throw it out and think about an entirely different model of security. How does it play out in political terms? Well, actually, we've got a pretty good lesson through the last couple of elections. Hillary Clinton is a left, a somewhat left institutionalist consummate institutionalist, you know knows how the system works has been Secretary of State can pull on all the levers.

Sanders by the way, claim to be a left insurrectionist. I don't know that he's an insurrection. He spent his entire career in government. I'm not sure how radical the guy actually is running against right Institutionalists, like Jeb Bush, you know, had been governor knew the system and Trump who I think arguably really is an insurrectionist who really comes in and says "you shouldn't trust these institutions. I don't trust them. I'm gonna blow them up." Clinton loses not just due to a poorly run campaign not just due to misogyny, not just due to all the sort of factors that Yochai Benkler and others are talking about with the media. But we were at an insurrectionist moment. We were at a moment where people on the left end right. We're pretty dissatisfied with systems. This book, if anything is not a Trump book it's an occupy book. So we can go back in history and sort of I remember under Obama, you have people on the left occupying cities for a year, at a time to argue that late stage capitalism and democracy is not working well for anyone. So occupy looks at this whole thing and says none of this is working. We've got a model, a different way to live but that ends up channeling the energy. I would argue to Donald Trump who sort of comes in and says "you shouldn't trust the system, frankly you shouldn't trust anyone." The book was intended to be a civics guide for insurrectionists. And what I meant by insurrectionists in that case were people who had lost faith in institutions and who would therefore work to create new institutions in their wake. I don't believe in a world without institutions. I think despite all the rhetoric around decentralization and such, it's really hard to have a functioning society without institutions. So fast forward to January 6th you have people who are fueled by mistrust and it's been weaponized by Donald Trump. Donald Trump's presidency tells people don't trust the media, don't trust the government. There's a deep state working against me. The only person you can trust is me. And then, you know, gives them a target to go after. And you have a literal violent insurrection. That's obviously not what I'm trying to celebrate in the book. I'm really trying to celebrate movements that are looking at an institution and saying, this is so corrupt that we need to think about alternatives to it but I've got to wrestle with the fact that the book is sort of anticipating a mood of insurrection, a sense in which the systems are dysfunctional to the point where many people are frustrated with them. And Martha I'm curious. I mean, do you buy that diagnosis of a high moment of mistrust? Does that feel familiar or am I being young and idealistic and sort of ignoring these systems?

- I think what you just said was a wonderful statement of our moment, and I absolutely agree that the statistics that you cite as well as just other sources of information demonstrate to me not only the declining trust in established institutions, established religions established universities, established experts but also a generational cliff where the distrust is greater even among younger people. And maybe the voting records of this 2020 election have turned some things around in that regard, but there's a really profound risk of a generational disengagement. And I think you rightly identified disengagement as the real enemy. I mean, I'll never forget actually being in a very strong argument with someone during college about Ayn Rand and how I really disagreed with her. And somebody else walked up to us and said what are you talking about? We explained, and that person said, well why do you care about that? And I thought, Oh, that's the person. I really...

- That's the problem.

- That's the problem, so I guess so where perhaps we differ although I don't know how much we do is that you find value almost undifferentiated in a variety of insurrectionist activities. Whereas I would identify a difference among those that are and I'll list the ones I like. And then the ones I don't like and see.

- Sure.

- Those that are seeking to pressure on the outside onto players on the inside though, you're quite right in describing the difference between the march on Washington, in the civil rights movement where there were sympathetic people on the inside versus the women's march against Trump but that's one model and I'm for it. But a different kind is to build end runs around institutions which I think can often be very constructive where it's the Black Panthers actually providing resources or coders, as you have helped to marshall creating alternative pathways for people to access resources and communication. I distinguish those though from something that I'm old enough to remember yippiedom, something more like, well, just burn it all down. And it's all expressive. And we feel good 'cause we are so great in our coolness. And I guess, although occupy had some elements of hope so did Arab spring, they seem to be dominated by what I'm describing, which is if we trust resist and sit down, then we've accomplished something. And I have less confidence in that. And then one more category cryptocurrency. So the building of alternatives that are not just alternatives that help people get something that they need but actually take down further destroy the trust in existing institutions, whether it's nations or monetary systems that worries me.

- Yeah, so the good news on this is that at the end of the day, we actually end up agreeing but it's worth exploring both of these because they actually open up some interesting dynamics here. I said in many ways that this book was my response to occupy. It's not a pro occupy book. And I say that with some caution my partner who is downstairs and as a practicing psychologist that I think fortunately is with a patient was one of the organizers of occupied Houston. So it was a big part of her and her identity. What I worried about with occupy in many ways what was the theory of change, right? And I think this is in many ways what I would sort of diagnose when you're sort of looking at the Yippies or when you're looking at people, essentially saying, look this system is really screwed up. And to the extent that you could find a theory of change for occupy, it was either we're going to model more just communities with the hope of sort of scaling that up. Or we're going to pick a specific issue where we could make real structural change. So I'll tell you a version of occupy that I actually am very supportive of. It's the occupied group in Springfield, Massachusetts. I'm a Western mass guy, Western Mass is not Eastern Mass. And we have both serious rural and urban poverty. We have very serious problems with opioids. Springfield right now has only a 25% vaccination rate as compared to something like 60% statewide and occupy in Springfield started occupying every home that was scheduled for eviction. And so over and over and over again, the police and the Sheriff's department would come and face 10, 20 30 occupiers with a movement called Nobody Leaves which I think is just a great sort of name for it. And what it did. It actually had a very interesting theory of change which was every time you had this confrontation between the activist and the police. The media jumped in. And so questions of housing, questions of housing, justice and homelessness,

and Springfield has sort of vaulted to the center of the political agenda here. So the key is not whether the groups look silly or not. It's sort of whether they actually have a theory of change operating behind it. Now we get into cryptocurrency it's possible for that theory of change, just to be bad and wrong, right? So almost for a sense of completeness, there's a chapter of the book that looks at this idea of what do you do if you want no institutions. And you know, it looks at this idea of bit nation, could you have a blockchain base national identity that puts you in someone else's regime? And I basically ended up concluding like, no, like at certain point you're still standing on the planet within a territorial, sovereign nation and people are gonna hold you to it. But beyond that, I mean, Martha like cryptocurrencies are a symptom and they're a symptom of people being willing to trust some institutions and not others, right? So if you are convinced that cyber currencies as currently conceived are somehow better than fiat currency you're making a bet on math that you probably don't understand code that you probably haven't reviewed and companies which have this odd tendency to just sort of disappear and take people's money with it like Mt. Gox.

- Yes.

- Yet people are willing to do it. Not only are they willing to do it they're willing to do it. Knowing that in first generation, cryptocurrencies, the transaction costs for one Bitcoin transaction uses enough electricity to transport my heavy, but to the grand Canyon in my electric car, that's not an exaggeration. I actually uses enough electricity to get me 2,500 miles. So how much do you have to mistrust the banks the federal reserve, et cetera to put your trust into those systems. So when you read something like cryptocurrency as the symptom, rather than as a solution it should be bright blinking red lights. These are people essentially saying we just don't trust how these systems currently work.

- That makes a lot of sense. I do tend to think that the speculation in cryptocurrency has more to do with the speculation on the stock market. That there's an irrational exuberance period that may have less to do with trust and distress than it does with gambling. But I'd like to get really nitty gritty. Why did Fix My Street work in Britain and Fix My Transport, not work and explain what those are.

- So thank you. Thank you for getting into the details of this. And by the way, if you ever have the pleasure of having your book talked about by a respected scholar, one of the loveliest moments is when they pull an example deep from inside of the book, this is always a ton of fun. When you sort of get into this these are both projects started by my friend Tom Steinberg, and he ran a group called My Society. And My Society is one of the very best examples of trying to use civic technology to make government services better and Fix My Street was a system that basically lets you complain about a pothole or some other sort of problem, very specific to your neighborhood and what the My Society system did was route your complaint to whoever in government was most directly responsible for this which was usually your local district counselor. And one of the things that it did, which was tremendous was sort of help you follow up on it. So when you didn't get a response within a week which was the legal requirement for that person to get back to you, My Society would say, "Hey, did your counselor get back to

you?" Oh, no. What a surprise mark that here, you know, now we're going to escalate this up the chain. We're gonna talk to that person's, you know, superior. And it was this wonderful sort of powerful system to get people to get more responsive government. And it had some really positive effects. They ended up going out and trying to do survey work on finding whether people had more confidence in government. It turned out that if you had used the system and gotten responses, you ended up feeling better about your local government. You felt like your concerns were being heard. So they tried to scale it up to bigger problems. And they tried to scale it up to things like the bus that serves my neighborhood is consistently 20 minutes late. And they sort of assumed that it would work in the same way but it turns out that transport is actually very very different than just a local problem. It's got different supervisory agencies. It's got many, many, many more people involved. And what they started finding was that people would use the system and frankly just be really frustrated with it. And they ended up at a certain point essentially saying this doesn't work. It turns out that simply telling the transport company that they're not doing the job, isn't actually getting us accountability. This isn't just a matter of making things more accessible. You'd actually have to build social movements around this. My Society looked at this and said, "look, our job is not building social movements so we're going to get out of this particular space," for me what it does is sort of suggest that a lot of the civic tech solutions that sort of say if we could just make people more accountable if we could just make our government more accessible it would all get better. And I think the response as well, maybe sometimes sometimes we get evidence that government is working very well. Sometimes what we actually do is get evidence that a system is just very badly broken. And so accessibility and transparency are probably necessary, but not sufficient conditions to try to actually improve sort of government confidence in one fashion or another.

- Very helpful. And it does seem that either of those examples differ in many ways from the me too hashtag or the, if they gunned me down hashtags. So that the goal of some social media civic media projects is not to make government more accountable. It is to build a movement or to allow the mobilization of people to change the agenda if you will, of what is on public and private agendas and you so usefully use across the book, the framework Larry Lessig and others have advanced to keep straight. And in our minds, these different domains of law code markets and norms, it did strike me that the norm one was one that you have a lot of confidence in. And I wonder if you can say how do we know what should be under norms and what should be under code and what should be on clock?

- So give me a moment to walk a path which is gonna walk me straight into the lion's den. 'Cause it's gonna walk me right into Supreme Court cases. And you know here's a place where you may be able to help me and all of this, but let's start with If They Gunned Me Down. Okay, so If They Gunned Me Down is a hashtag based social movement. It is started by a young lawyer from Jackson Mississippi named CJ Lawrence. Actually he's one of my favorite interviews for the book has become a good friend. We're Twitter friends now but CJ react acting to Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson Missouri posts a pair of photos of himself. And in one he's sort of, you know, it's a Halloween party. He's drinking out of a Hennessy bottle. He's got to durag on. And then in the other photo, he is onstage valedictorian of his graduating law school class. And bill Clinton is in the front row behind him laughing uproariously at a joke he cracked. And what

he says with this is If They Gunned Me Down which photo would the media use, and this is a reaction first of all, to the fact that immediately after Michael Brown's murder, there are lots of photos of his corpse in the street being circulated. And then when those photos start being replaced with photos that they take from Mike Brown's Facebook page, media almost to a one use a photo of Mike Brown shot from the ground looking up at him on a porch, he's flashing a peace sign. He's scowling. He looks like a tough dude but if you look closely, he looks like an 18 year old guy trying to look like a tough dude. I remember being 18 and trying to look tougher than I was. There's all these other photos on Facebook including one of him sort of face on with baby cheeks. And it's from the same time period. It's the same kid.

- Baby face. Yeah.

- But it really, really differently. And so CJ starts this this takes off three days after this campaign starts. There's a New York Times full page article about it. And you look on Google right now. Okay. Do a search on Google images, search for Mike Brown. What you will find for the most part is Brown in his graduation gown which is probably the right photo to have used. You will find occasionally this porch photo but it's mostly actually in clips from my talks like, unfortunately like I have probably given second life to that image but this is a very successful campaign to go after a normative change. When we think about black people killed by police and boy there's a lot of them what imagery gets portrayed to use portray those victims. And the answer is yes, in many cases it's imagery that makes them out to be violent or dangerous. And so CJ wanted to call this out because it's not necessarily the legal shift. That's the most important thing in Mike Brown's death, it is an understanding of the racial violence and oppression that black people are suffering on a very, very regular basis, not just at the hands of the police, but at the hands of a system that tends to assume the worst about race. So why does norms change matter? So let's go look at a couple of court cases, right? If we look at Loving versus Virginia. So the case that establishes the ability to intermarry if you look at public opinion on interracial marriage at the time when Loving gets decide.

- 1967.

- Thank you.

- In '66, 14% of Americans support interracial marriage. Now people push back on this. Are you asking black people as well as white people? I don't have the stats on who's polled by it but those are Gallup's statistics sort of going out and looking at it. So what's happening in '67 is that the courts are leading, right? The courts are coming in and essentially saying we know America doesn't like this but this is the correct thing to be doing. We have to recognize that these are fundamental human rights. So let's fast forward to Obergefell, right? So in Obergefell we're establishing the right of same-sex couples to marriage. If you take a look at public acceptance, it's well over 60% if you poll Americans and sort of say is it okay for gay men to get married more than 60% will say, of course it is. And in many ways Obergefell is sort of catching up with the public opinion. One of the arguments that I would make is that between the heart of the civil rights movement and our contemporary political moment is that norms are now leading

laws in some cases that we don't have an activist Supreme Court that is pushing social justice and racial justice and trying to pull America along. We have the entertainment industry, we have social media we have political and social movements moving the electorate and sometimes, and not always, sometimes the courts finding a way to sort of follow behind. And so that's the conclusion that sort of leads me to this point of saying, look, I love my friends who work in public interest law, who work on social change, who work in human rights. But I think we neglect the normative piece of this a good chunk of the time. And I think trying to figure out how to win those norm space battles as a way of getting us to those legal battles. Now, like I said, I've just walked right up into the lion's den. I don't know if I'm reading that correctly.

- Well, you're a lion Tamer. Then what I would say, I couldn't agree more. The only things that I would add is that for most of American history, the court system certainly the Supreme Court of the United States has been a reactionary force.

- Yeah.

- And it's not surprising. It's the justices are appointed after successful careers. They tend to be a generation or two older than the median in the country. They only get appointed if they have the right networks and they're acceptable to the political parties. It's not surprising that they're usually a break on social change. What is surprising at this moment is that we have an activist court, but on the right.

- Yeah. That is trying to drag the country in a direction that is not the majority's views.

- Right. But it is not progressive. What I would also say just to add. 'Cause I think what you did was quite lovely is to say the Supreme Court didn't want to decide Loving versus Virginia. They had the question presented for over 10 years and they kept postponing and postponing. They were dragged into it. Once they decided the case, they went full force and they said they use the phrase, you know "Virginia defenses law against interracial marriage by saying it treats whites and blacks the same." No, it does not.

- Yeah.

- It substantiates white supremacy. The only time that phrase has been used by the United States Supreme court. So when the court gets dragged into a fight but it has good lawyers it can actually do something decent. Bryan Stevenson who you describe vividly in the book. Who's one of the most effective advocates in the Supreme Court. He says, quite frankly, "I can win individual cases in the court, but we're not gonna have systemic change until we change the narrative." And that is why he has turned as you very well described to building a Memorial about the history of lynching and a museum that links slavery lynching and mass incarceration. It's about a narrative. And I think that the theory of change and you put that on the table. So I want to come back to...

- Yeah. Please.

- The theory of change that connects the dots between narratives and institutions is something that I think is worth discussing versus narratives and insurrection. So here's the theory of change that if you get a different narrative, the people in the institutions have a different idea or something else.

- So let me go there because that's fantastic. But let me actually say something about Bryan because Bryan actually had a lot to do with my motivations for creating this book.

- So I mentioned that again. Came out of my time at MIT. It also came out of my time with open society foundation. So I spent some years on a board of the U.S programs of open society foundation where I got to serve alongside Bryan Stevenson but also alongside Sherrill IfII who heads up the legal defense fund of the NAACP. So if you wanna learn contemporary activism getting to learn from those two is about as good as as it gets. And I found myself sort of crossing swords with the two of them, right? They are both enormous believers in the power of law to bring about justice, but they are also brilliant multifaceted thinkers who just, as you described Bryan has really gone from a transformation of realizing that with the equal justice initiative. Yes, he can win some key cases, but unless we actually deal with things like the legacy of lynching which is something that both of those scholars have worked on we can't actually have the sort of larger transformation. And so that ability to sort of work on narratives and to sort of say look, we need to understand that there is a terrible legacy in policing in America that goes back to lynching. That goes back to slave patrols that these things have to be addressed. As we try to address the very real problems of police violence. This has to be sort of part of the equation. And so me sort of learning, you know, enormous respect for legal theories of change, but also sort of wondering what has changed between the Warren Court and the Roberts Court, right? 'Cause there's quite a bit that changes between those two. That was a huge motivation for this. So what are you doing when you're changing the narrative? I think the first thing that you're doing when you're changing the narrative is you're inviting people to ask whether an institution is still the right one for what we're doing at this moment in time. So institutions generally have been created for a particular moment for a particular solution. And we wanna ask ourselves the question is that institution working the way that we want to work. And when you change the narrative and you sort of point out this just isn't working very well for us right now, this is leading to a culture of violent confrontation between black motorists and white police officer white and black police officers. You have to sort of look at this and say do we need to sort of rethink these institutions? And also perhaps think about the context in which they came up probably the wackiest furthest out there idea in this whole book is where I advocate for the big house. I ended up advocating for turning the house of representatives into an 11,000 person body. This hails back to George Washington saying that we needed to have representation of one representative for 30,000 people. One for 40,000 would be too much. It would alienate us. But if we think about that context if we think about that idea that we really do want to know our representatives in the people's house. And we think that we're no longer in the context of needing to fit into a physical room we can deliberate on electronic systems. We could have representatives who are not in Washington where they could be lobbied. You can radically re-imagine these institutions. So for me, Martha, that's the big thing I want the

narrative change to encourage people to re-imagine. I think in many cases right now our failures are a failure of imagination as much as they are a failure of systems. What we believe is possible in transforming institution is so narrow and it's so much politics as the art of the possible that we aren't willing to consider the ways in which these institutions in many cases just are flat out failing us.

- Oh, that's so well-put, you know, Hannah Pitkin the political philosopher described institutions as products by people that end up carrying on what people imagine long after the people have died. And sometimes the not fulfilling at all what the goals were of the people because the institutions start to serve themselves. And it's that tension that you illuminates so well we have several questions and I'm just gonna put to you.

- Please.

- One from Marcy Burningham asks about the relationship between your work and Albert Hirschman's ideas about exit, voice and loyalty.

- So I love that Marcy came up with that. I was describing it's chapter seven or chapter eight of the book where I'm looking at people who want to create no institution in the place of an institution, right. So the folks who are trying to create their own nations and Hirschman in fact is who I use an, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty is exactly what I use for people who haven't read this book like throw this on your summer reading list. This is one of those rare moments where a political economist can be a summer beach read 'cause there's books only about 70 pages long. I actually read it for the first time in a Chinese restaurant and like ended up spending three hours over lunch. 'Cause I was just so fascinated by it. But Hirschman basically says, look, when we don't like what a firm is doing we can either raise our voice and say, "Hey your product sucks, please make it better." Or we can just go and we'll go to another firm. And the markets will tell people that that firms no good anymore. So on and so forth. So you're reading this and you're sort of like, okay, economics, that makes sense. You know, here's where voice comes into play and then Hirschman twists and sort of says "you can't exit a nation." And so when it comes to citizenship you only have voice, right? There's really not the ability to pick up and move somewhere else for the vast majority of us. And so what you actually have to think about is the importance of voice and how you use voice to try to steer the nation back to its roots. And so, you know I try to make the argument that, you know, the Peter Thiel's of the world who want to escape broken nations either seasteading or by moving to Mars are sort of missing the fact that the whole point of nationhood is that your wellbeing is tied up with millions of others. And this is why institutions end up being indispensable. You can't actually exit them. You can make them better. And maybe occasionally there's the moment where we sit and say, this one's so broken. We actually have to tear it down and start from scratch. But the notion of actually being able to successfully exit them probably doesn't end up working. So absolutely props for bringing Hirschman into the conversation. And if you haven't read this little book it's just really worth your time.

- Super, the whole idea that we can trust an institution is itself kind of hard to believe because as you explore really trust is interpersonal and it's based on proof and it's more likely to be face to face and people are more likely to trust the local than they are the more remote. And so once you have lost trust in national institutions, it's very very hard to build. Barbara Fister asks about the immediacy of social media and organizing on the fly versus insurrectionists inclined folks on quoting her spending the time to organize a more long-term sturdy movement as Zeynep Tufekci has described in Twitter and Tear Gas and does our social media networking faith favor emotional and fast public response rather than doing the hard work of making change. And I will just throw in what the psychologists and economists tell us about fast thinking versus slow thinking.

- So I should just say that for people who don't know Barbara she's an incredibly accomplished libraries scholar. She's written probably the best paper in the last couple of years about misinformation called "Lizard People in the Library." And it's just this fantastic look at the challenge of combating movements like QAnon that are so good at using social media and are so good at using it to sort of create doubt and the ways in which these movements have sort of anticipated that the media literacy strategies that we use to sort of try to get out of missing this info. And actually they're using those strategies because frankly they've, they've learned really well for them. So again, on the summer reading list, totally worth your time. I mean, Barbara, I think what Zeynep does so well in Twitter and Tear Gas is sort of makes the case that social media lets people organize movements really, really fast. And those movements tend to be fast but fragile, right? They're good at mobilizing people around emotion. They usually haven't worked out. Some of the deep contradictions within, Zeynep work is really rooted in the Arab spring. And she's watching things like conservative protesters and gay lesbian protesters get out and match together because they can agree that they want Mubarak out, they can't agree about anything else, but they can get together for that sort of moment of counter power. What it actually comes down to sort of governing they're gonna be completely lost. And I think that's right. I think that fast social media organizing tends to be at its best when it's trying to mobilize around emotion. And I think a lot of the movements that I talk about in the book like Me Too, use emotion extremely effectively listening to people who've been victims of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and sexual violence and listening as people are willing to talk about something that they haven't talked about before is an incredibly, emotionally powerful moment. And that's a movement that has had enormous impact at least at the individual levels of individual predators starting to get held responsible for things. What I don't know that it's very good at is necessarily envisioning an organizing and building the more, just the less misogynistic the more equal society that we need to build. And so for me in many ways, the challenge of this book was how do you take these fast insurrection movements seriously? How do you give them the respect they're due but also the skepticism that they're often due. But I do think there's enormous work that has to come after an argument like this, which is really how do you sort of build the new institutions? Barbara just joined me on stage last week at a conference that I was holding called re-imagine the internet which was thinking about this question of how we might start building more robust internet institutions but that's early work. And this book is really the warning about taking these movements seriously.

- Well, no, one's done more than you have to envision what a different kind of internet structure would be. And I'm very hopeful about all of that. I do think that it's not just the internet though that has brought us this contrast between the quick emotion and the hard work of building. I think about the French Revolution. And I think the jury's still out, frankly there were bad things but it hasn't really built a better structure. I hope so. Sankalp Bhatnagar asks about can you say more about how institutionalists and insurrectionists enroll others in their changes how they call our attention to the work they see as needed how they bring us through to the work with them and ourselves.

- Sure, so I think institutionalists recruit through some pretty well established methods, right? If you've ever been involved with a political campaign you probably have a sense for how institutionalists work. They invite you to put up the lawn side then they invite you to phone bank. Then they invite you to volunteer for the campaign. You find your way sort of into those structures and you learn how those structures function you learn how they work. And as you sort of level up and skill and ability you level up in your sense of efficacy. So you feel like, okay now I understand the energy of a political campaign. Now I can participate in a much more successful fashion. And then you tend to replicate the same system that sort of came up and you tend to sort of say, okay, let me recruit the next set of set of people. Insurrectionist movements tend to start from the point of skepticism. They tend to sort of say here is something that is not working. And let me point out to you why it is so broken. And then it tends to mobilize, right? Insurrectionists tend to be very quick to take the social media. They tend to be very quick to take to the streets. Then if you're lucky there is some careful hashing of methodologies. So one of the insurrectionists movements that I ended up talking about in this is Sleeping Giants and Sleeping Giants is complicated and it's gotten more complicated in the course of writing the book. When I started writing the book, Sleeping Giants was an anonymous movement. Now we know that it's two individuals who've actually had a falling out but the theory behind Sleeping Giants is okay. We can demonstrate to people that their websites are hosting ads from far right-wing movements who they might not wanna host ads from. Let's help people figure out how to pull their websites out of that rotation. And then the far right wing properties won't be able to advertise on them and then they'll lose the money in the process. There's 1,000,001 different ways that you could have tried to mobilize people against Breitbart which is their chief target. They found one particular intervention and by sort of channeling that broad sense of rage at disinformation and media manipulation and then sort of focusing in a place they figured out how to have that tactical intervention. What insurrectionists can have a very hard time with is getting beyond that rage and the specific points of a function to thinking about how you have that systemic change. So one of the movements that I'm gonna be watching I think a lot of people are going to be watching is Defund the Police, and essentially saying, okay, you know you've made a pretty good case. There may be police departments where yet another round of civilian review boards is just not gonna figure out how to pull this off. You've got an effective tactic. You know, what we're seeing right now is people are taking to the streets every time an unarmed black person is being killed by police. And that's probably what we're gonna need to continue to do for some years. Now, the question becomes, how does that turn into the institution building work of creating an alternative, right? Because we're not going to be without a public safety system in Minneapolis. There's got to be someone who's

responding to the domestic violence complaint whether it's an armed officer or whether it's a social worker. So now how do we go from the power of the movement, the sort of insurrection of this movement to building what will end up being a new institution in its place. And that's the really tricky piece of this, right? Like in almost every case, our alternatives to institutions are new and better institutions. And that's part of why we have to take their evolution so seriously.

- Well, it's so great that your book ends with the word imagine and demand and build, how can we need to need to imagine demand and build institutions that rebuild rebuild levies before they collapse using the metaphor and the reality of Katrina. I also though can't help, but know that about 10 years ago Ethan, you said the world isn't flat and globalization is only beginning, which means we have time to change what we're doing and get it right. Is it too late? Here we are. 10 years later.

- Yeah, that book... The Rewire book started with talking about SARS. It started by warning that global pandemics were possible and that you actually needed to have deep cosmopolitanism so that we would listen to each other and try to figure out how to react. Yeah. I wish that book had sold a little better. Look, I think this question of institutions how do they calcify and how do we build them to be more responsive? And here I'm looking at Aditya's question. I think that needs to be a question for every activist for anybody who's involved with social change whether you're an institutionalist or an insurrectionist, you know, if you are going into a powerful institution or if you're gonna try to knock down a powerful institution you're almost inevitably gonna be putting something else in its place. And it is a natural dynamic that institutions work to preserve themselves. They work to hold themselves sort of above questioning; people in power, like to remain in power. One of the things that I talk about very early on in the mistrust book is the debates that the founding fathers had about insurrection. The books starts with Shay's Rebellion which is armed rebellion in Springfield, Massachusetts and it's treated surprisingly loosely by the new American government. It's treated with a great deal of sympathy in part with Jefferson, essentially saying, you know "we should be aware of rebellion. We need rebellion to show us what we are doing wrong. We need rebellion to signal to us what are the hardships that people are... You know, so the answer to this is when you're creating institutions you need to be you aware that you're creating an institution because you're solving a problem that you're creating an institution at a particular moment in time at a particular moment in society that it works to the extent that it does based on those contingencies and that you need to think about how that changes and learns over time. And that if you're not building institutions that can evolve and learn, you are setting yourself up for revolution and perhaps violent revolution. And maybe that's part of what we have to start thinking about, you know, even around something like January 6th, American system feels rather brittle right now. And the hope for bridging some of these gaps between left and right at the point where we literally can't even seem to get a commission together to investigate what happened in January 6th. This feels like a place where there should be some red flags waving that these institutions are gonna need to find some ways to evolve and change. Otherwise they're capturing their decay. Maybe leading us into a very dangerous place.

- It's argues in part for multiplicity. It may be that the broken government cannot investigate the broken government and some other actors some combination of civil society can do it better. I remember the being so struck, seeing a Medieval Wall in Italy that had holes that were built for the expected period when the wall would have to be repaired where the scaffolding would be built. And that's in part, I think our challenge how do we build a new dimensions of existing institutions and new institutions that have those capacities to be reformed? Not so bad to actually start by reading this book which brings back the revolutionary spirit of the founders of this country who were themselves well aware that sometimes you have to tear it down in order to build it up. Ethan, you're a gift to all of us. Thank you so much for this book. Thank you for this event. Thank you everyone for joining us.

- Thank you so much, Martha. It really honors me that you took the time to read the book and thank you so much for this conversation and just love and thanks to all of my Berkman Klein Center friends. It's just wonderful to have the chance to share this with you and Martha. I wish you and everybody, a happy and restful summer as all of us are in this moment of maybe coming out of our shells and looking to see this next stage of transformation

- Here, here be well.

- Thanks everyone.

- Bye. Bye.