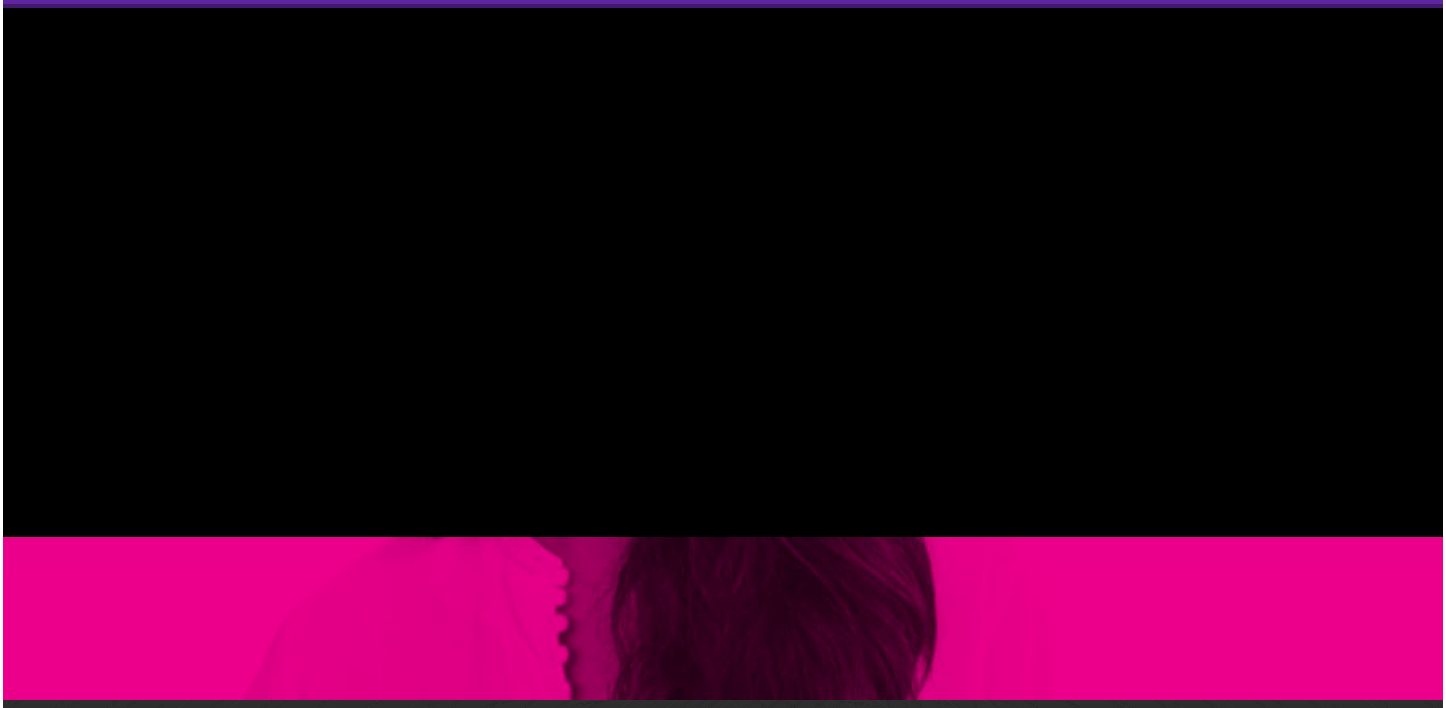
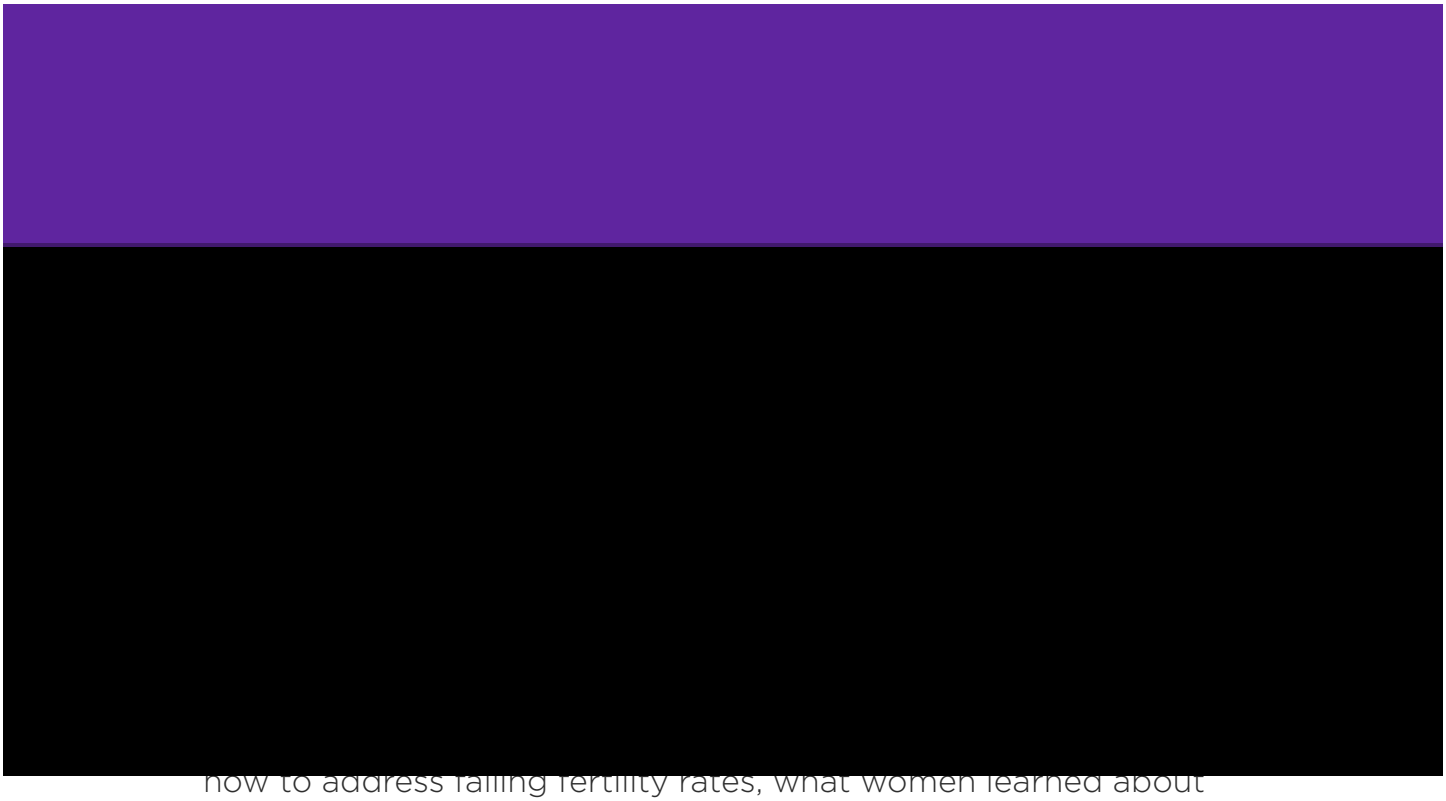


September 22, 2021

# Amia Srinivasan on Utopian Feminism (Ep. 132)

Does anyone have a right to sex?



how to address falling fertility rates, what women learned about egalitarianism during the pandemic, why progress requires regress, her thoughts on Susan Sontag, the stroke of fate that stopped her from pursuing a law degree, the "profound dialectic" in Walt Whitman's poetry, how Hinduism has shaped her metaphysics, how Bernard Williams and Derek Parfit influenced her, the anarchic strain in her philosophy, why she calls herself a socialist, her next book on genealogy, and more.

**Watch the full conversation**

would call compartmentalization? Just to give a simple example, if you look at, say, stand-up comedy, a lot of it is sexist or racist, or even if it's not, it's perceived as such. What happens to that in the utopia? Do we just compartmentalize and let it continue? Or how do you treat it?

**SRINIVASAN:** I'm not sure about room for compartmentalization. I do think there's a lot of room for context. For example, when you're thinking about the violence in rap lyrics, an obsession that began in the conservative pearl-clutching in the '80s, you've got to think about what those invocations of violence are doing performatively in a piece of art, that is, rap music. It's not the same thing as someone standing up in the middle of the town square, trying to deliberately incite violence against people.

Not even speaking about the utopia, just speaking about how we should think about performative utterances right now, I think we need to address them with a great deal of contextual sensitivity and think about, in general, what is happening in these particular cases. What seems to be problematic might not be. But then, let's be honest, if you've spent any time in a comedy club—and I recently did that when I was last in LA—there is just a lot of quite naked sexism there.

It's pretty shocking—despite the fact of this feminist revolution in

you're advocating for this thought—but the thought that you basically need structures of organized political oppression like racism to have humor. The Greeks had humor without having racism. They had other systems of domination, but they had a great and advanced sense of humor, often directed at intellectuals and philosophers, who, I think, are often very much a worthy target.

I think there can be this view on which ending forms of domination and oppression somehow drains life of all that is special and textured about it: humor, love, intimacy, friendship. I just don't think that's true. I think, in fact, what the end of domination would do is release us more fully into the specific things that make human life worth living, including humor.

**COWEN:** Now, there's an interview with you where you describe your own work and book—and I quote—as "discomfort, ambivalence, and truth-telling." I thought that was a good take, but my thought is this: If you're *always* carving out space for context and ambivalence, is there some path along which you end up in a social conservatism, admittedly a feminist social conservatism?

Let me ask, what parameter values would have to be different for you to end up as mostly a social conservative? You don't have to

think, within the American mainstream, very controversial—views about the decriminalization of sex work.

I think there's a very clear case grounded in basic political considerations for, and ethical considerations for, why we should decriminalize sex work totally. But I do think there are other cases where, for example, we're thinking about how to deal with sexually abusive men or the relationship between radical politics and state power, where we have to be more circumspect and ambivalent.

I don't want to say that my general political outlook is one of ambivalence. What's the closest path counterfactually—is that the question—between me and a conservative worldview? I can tell you the parts of conservatism that are most attractive—

**COWEN:** But to get you all the way there, someone might say, "Well, if the costs of single-parent families were *much* higher than I thought, I would be a social conservative." I'm not saying that has to be your answer, but that would be a kind of answer to the question.

**SRINIVASAN:** Yes. It's a really interesting question. I'm not sure I'm going to give a very good answer to it. I think there are interesting questions about the place of community, tradition, ritual, continuity in human life, and their relationship to value. I

of community.

I in no way endorse that, but I think that I have, and we on left, generally—I'm not including you—people who are on the left, generally, do have more time for that part of the conservative critique than just liberals who think that "Well, no, you can just have a basic pluralistic society in which everyone is, within certain constraints, able to live their vision of the good life so long as it doesn't impinge on anyone else's ability to do the same, and that's totally workable."

I think that vision has left us in a place of mass alienation, unhappiness, and a certain spiritual vacuity. You can have that starting point and go in very different ways, and you can go very right-wing from that starting point. That's just not the way *I* go.

## On whether differences between men and women will persist

**COWEN:** It seems to me that, as we move closer to what you call a feminist utopia or, just in general, make improvements of the world, that men and women will become *more* different. There's an empirical literature that suggests in more egalitarian societies, personalities of men and women are more different. The evidence

**SRINIVASAN:** Relatively low. In the Nordic countries, single mothers are still the worst-off demographic. You still have very entrenched gender stereotypes. You still have very high rates of sexual violence. When we're talking about gender equality, yes, they are better in some ways. But I don't think these differences are profound enough to be able to give us *any* deep sense of what it would look like to do something that many feminists like me would like to do, which is abolish gender as such.

I think it would be just as Mill thought. It was ridiculous to try and ascertain what women were innately oriented towards doing or what their capacities were under the conditions of 19th-century patriarchal England. I think it's pretty ridiculous to try and read it off of the differentials between Iran and the Nordic countries.

Suppose that in the world you're imagining . . . so, *I'm* imagining a world in which gender doesn't exist. You have people with varying different kinds of bodies, so as to restate your hypothetical is the question, how would I feel about a world in which people who are female-bodied gravitated towards certain things, and people who are male-bodied gravitated towards other things?

**COWEN:** Sure, like men seem to value women's looks more highly in gender-egalitarian societies also. There's a lot of independent bodies of literature with

demanded them, but they thought that they should be answerable very quickly.

Now, they were wrong about that. They were wrong about just how deeply entrenched the status quo was. They were also wrong about the rise of the new right in the US and the UK. But their sights have always been set on something far more demanding than what we see in the Nordic countries today.

**COWEN:** If we think of male subjection of women, or Mill's writings in general, he's really a master at using cross-sectional variation from what he observes to draw inferences. I'm worried that in your view, we don't really have access to evidence. You don't see enough variation in the data, period.

That strikes me as epistemologically nihilistic in a way, and that sooner or later, you're going to use cross-sectional evidence, such as comparing sex workers in New Zealand to sex workers in Germany, in ways that are inconsistent with your broader skepticism about cross-sectional evidence. No?

**SRINIVASAN:** No, because there is great variation in the legal regimes and how they treat sex work. You have a country like the US where sex work is almost entirely criminalized and very heavily criminalized as well. Laws against sex work are routinely enforced

drawn towards certain forms of activity and labor and self-expression.

> **“ I think we should also be intensely cautious about drawing precisely those conclusions that have been drawn over and over again in the history of thinking about women and men, and thinking about gender conclusions that would want to suggest that women are innately drawn towards certain forms of activity and labor and self-expression.**

Just to give you some examples here. Have you looked at the

end up being right in the end. I might end up being wrong.

**COWEN:** That would be a parameter value that might get you closer to social conservatism, maybe.

**SRINIVASAN:** No, it really wouldn't. Part of why I find this whole discourse problematic is because I think we should be suspicious when we find ourselves attracted to data—very, very thin and weak data—that seem to justify beliefs that have held great currency in lots of societies throughout history, in a way that is conducive to the oppression of large segments of the population, in this particular case women.

I also think one error that is consistently made in this discourse, in this kind of conversation about what's innate or what's natural, is to think about what's natural in terms of what's necessary. This is a point that Shulamith Firestone made a very long time ago, but that very few people register, which is that—and it was actually made again to me recently by a philosopher of biology, which is, "Look what's natural isn't what's necessary."

It's extraordinary. It's not even like what's natural offers a good equilibrium point. Think about how much time you and I spend sitting around. *Completely* unnatural for humans to sit around, yet we're in this equilibrium point where vast majority of humans just sit around all day.

right? Isn't it odd not to have a view on that?

**SRINIVASAN:** No, I don't think it's odd to not have a view on something about which there has been a great deal of ink spilled. There are philosophers and theorists of games and sports in general, who spend a lot of time thinking about how we should organize competitions, gaming competitions in particular. I don't know what it means to be opposed to segregation as such.

I'm opposed to *racial* segregation. That is true. I'm not opposed to other forms of "segregation," like age segregation. I think, for example, that it's okay that nightclubs shouldn't allow kids under 18 if you're in this country, or under 21. I think there are interesting questions here. I don't play chess, and I don't follow competitive chess, so I don't really have a view.

## On consent

**COWEN:** What's the role of self-ownership in your moral framework?

**SRINIVASAN:** On one hand, I have deep respect for a notion to which we might be gesturing when we talk about self-ownership in terms of the sovereignty of the body, and maybe a certain set

though not sufficient, condition on ethically permissible sexual activity. Probably not one with oneself. I don't think that one really asks and gives consent to sex with oneself, but with other people.

A necessary condition but, I think, not sufficient because I think there are cases of ethically problematic sex that are consensual. One example I talk about in the book is professor-student sex. Obviously, sometimes, professor-student sex, like sex between adults in general, can be nonconsensual. But I think there are plenty of cases of professor-student sex which are uncontroversially—or should be uncontroversially—understood to be consensual, but nonetheless are problematic.

There's a deeper feminist critique of the role of consent in sex, which objects to the preconditions that make the ritual of consent-asking and consent-giving necessary in the first place. When you say to someone, "Well, imagine sexual interaction without the ritual of consent-giving and consent-asking," they just imagine sexual violation.

But think about all of the times you interact with—I don't know—a really old friend. Your old high school or college buddy loses a child, and you put your arm around them, and you console them—something we haven't done a huge amount of under the pandemic. You don't ask for that consent. You don't ask for

want, in some sense, to give, where there is a misalliance. There isn't that same level of attunement.

To put it really crudely, lots of people are turned on by the fact that another person, in some sense, doesn't really want to have that sex, so then the ritual of consent becomes necessary.

It's not the *only* reason consent matters. The other reason consent might matter—and you see this very clearly in BDSM practices—is that sometimes we just don't know what the other person wants because sex is really complex, and people can perform in different ways. So sometimes, it's really important to just ask someone straight up.

## On sex vouchers

**COWEN:** As you know, disabled individuals in the Netherlands often receive a sex voucher to transact with sex workers. Is this a good idea or a bad idea? They're a kind of incel, not the way the word is usually used, but they are, at least in some cases, involuntarily celibate.

**SRINIVASAN:** I don't think it's helpful to call them incels.

**COWEN:** Well, that's the literal meaning of the word, right?

romantically and sexually lonely in various kinds of ways, who fall under the descriptor "involuntary celibate" but wouldn't describe themselves as incels, and certainly wouldn't subscribe to incel ideology. I think it's extraordinary political importance *not* to use the word incel to simply mean involuntary celibate.

**COWEN:** But good idea or bad idea? I see why you don't want to use the word because you're already seeing ahead to the reductio, right?

**SRINIVASAN:** Well, no—I'm just going to answer the question. Do I think it's a good idea or a bad idea? I think it's a really difficult idea. I think we have to start with the perspective of sex workers. Why is it that most women engage in sex work? Well, most women who engage in sex work typically do it because they need the money. They can't get better forms of work, often because of their status as trans women or a lack of documentation or a disability. The rates of women with disabilities are really high in sex work.

When you take a population of women who are doing sex work because of those reasons, and then you create a voucher system of the kind you're describing, I think you're in problematic territory. Which isn't to say—

**COWEN:** Let's raise the price, right? You could have the voucher

more generally about the redistribution of sex, or thinking about sex as a thing to be potentially redistributed, is that we're working against a background, a patriarchal backdrop on which men routinely think that they are sexually entitled to women's bodies.

When *that's* the real social backdrop, it becomes, I think, very difficult to have these further questions about things like sexual surrogacy in a way that doesn't problematically feed into the reinscription of women as having a role to play in the sexual servicing of men. This is the view you get from sex workers.

Radical sex workers like Juno Mac and Molly Smith, who are the authors of *Revolting Prostitutes*, are very uninterested in answering the question of should we, in an ideal or even in the real world, have sex workers being subsidized by the state to have sex with disabled people, because they think it's a massive distraction from the reality of sex work for the *vast* majority of sex workers, which is true.

**COWEN:** It seems there's a simple David Braybrooke-like basic-needs argument that disabled individuals in the Netherlands—there's something very good we could do for them that also lowers the stigma from them having this kind of fulfillment or enjoyment. Then to cite this big external ideological debate and say, "Well, we're not going to do this for you because we don't like

**SRINIVASAN:** What are the biological drivers of these intrinsic differences between male and female attitudes towards sex, in your view?

**COWEN:** Probably, ultimately, Darwinian—the fact that there's a different investment in child creating and child raising with men than with women, so we've evolved to be somewhat different.

**SRINIVASAN:** You think for men sex is a basic need, but for women it's not?

**COWEN:** No, that's not my view at all. I'm not always sure what "basic need" means, but I certainly think if there's a voucher system, it should be available to men, women, other genders—however one wishes to talk about it, and not just men.

**SRINIVASAN:** Let me just say, you were asking—when we're thinking about this policy question—why should we bring in a whole, completely orthogonal ideological question? It's like, no, that's what it is to do politics. What it is to do politics, and also to do policymaking, is to think about the real-world consequences of policies that you put into place.

So, what I want to know—and I don't know enough about—is, what are the effects on the actual women who engage in sex

sex workers. And you know who else they aren't interested in having sex with? They're not interested in having sex with nonwhite women, with women who are not stereotypically attractive—women who are fat, women who are shy, women who are on the autistic spectrum, women who are socially awkward.

Why? Because they claim that what they're upset about is the deprivation of this basic need, which is sex, but what they're *actually* upset about is their perceived low status in that sexual hierarchy, a hierarchy that rewards men who supposedly have or who get to have sex or are attractive to high-status women. So yes, I do think that you cannot have these conversations about sex work and how to legislate it without centrally engaging with questions about patriarchy.

## On declining population growth

**COWEN:** Now, I'm a utopian of a sort myself, though maybe different than the way you're a utopian. And I worry about a world where every generation—or a country—there might just be fewer people, including fewer women. This is already happening in Japan and Italy. Fertility rates are falling in many different places. If we have a world where this population keeps on falling, number of people living is smaller, smaller, smaller—that's a

I was just pointing out that if a country like the US is worried about its population issue, it should be thinking about its immigration policies. This is actually a point that's made by a very right-wing Catholic like Adrian Vermeule. It's one of the things that I think he's right about. Of course, he only wants to allow Catholics in.

But in any case, look, the anxiety in so many of these countries about dwindling population is about demographic threat. It's not about population as such. It's not about having more workers. It's not about having—

**COWEN:** But address the anxiety about population as such, because I would gladly triple immigration. But I understand full well, the world as a whole cannot rely on immigration to replenish population, and more and more countries are moving into the zone. You're addressing some other criticism that bugs you politically, but just for the world as a whole, as fertility rates fall, what do you think we should do about it?

**SRINIVASAN:** Tyler, the reason I was addressing this question is because I think that some of the ways you frame debates—and I'm a very much an admirer of yours—but they unthinkingly just replicate profoundly misogynistic and racist ways of thinking that

onto the question of what you do, as such, on the question of the correlation between development and dropping fertility rates. I'll get there in one second. I do have thoughts.

But I just wanted to say—because so many people listen to your podcast—that the first thing we should do when we're talking about dropping fertility rates is think about immigration policy. I'm delighted to hear that you are an open-borders person. Let's go on to the next question.

**COWEN:** But what do you want to do as the world moves into utopian territory—

**SRINIVASAN:** Hold on, I'm about to answer the question.

**COWEN:** Yes, what do you do to boost fertility rates?

**SRINIVASAN:** Yes, okay. Feminists, for so long, but at least in the country in which you live, since the late 1960s, have been writing at great length about the extraordinary difficulty of child-rearing and social reproduction and childbirth in the US. There are similar things that you find, by the way, in the Italian feminist tradition, if Italy wants to think about this in the British tradition.

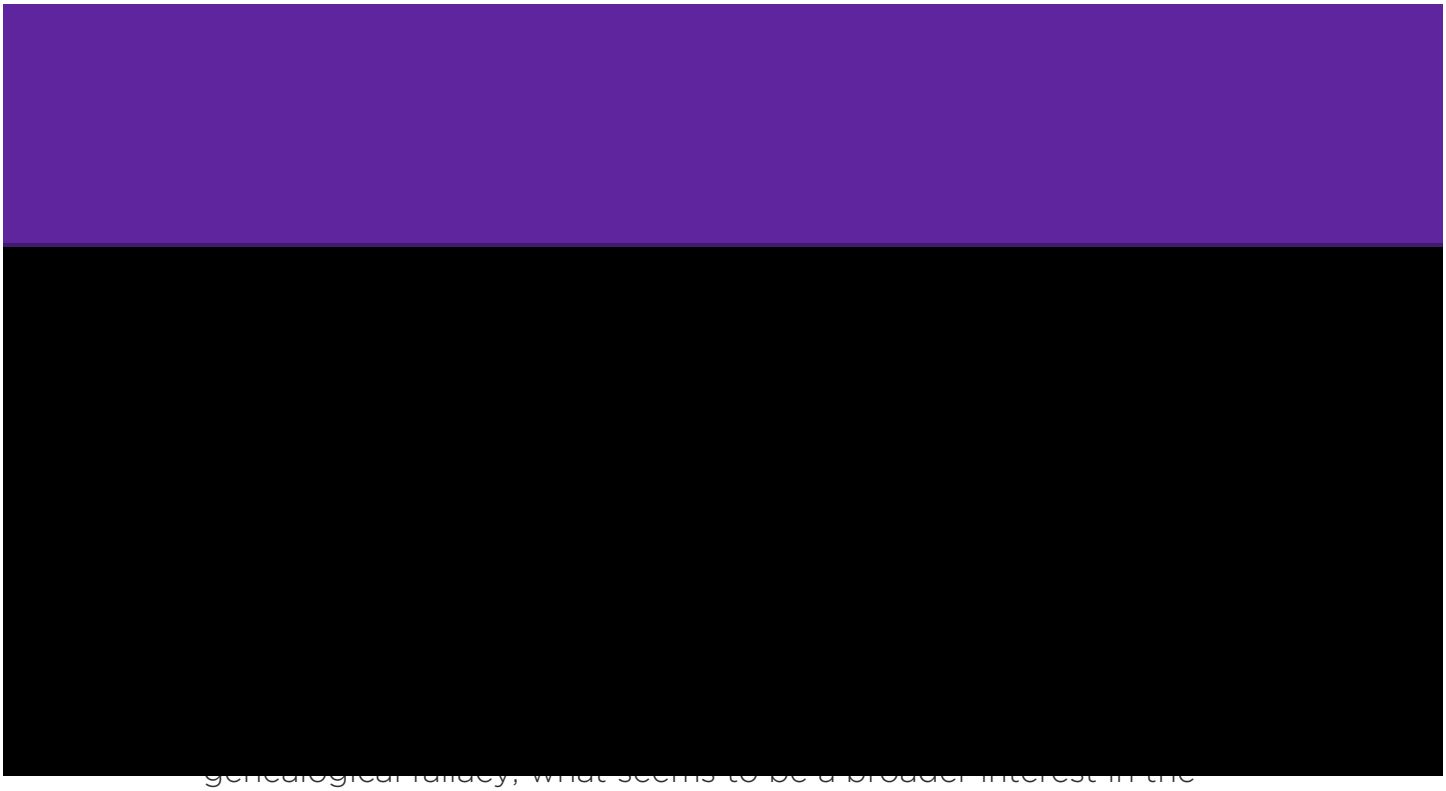
Someone like Adrienne Rich wants to distinguish between the potentiality of human reproduction from the actual political

wages that don't presuppose two full-time workers. You want better maternal healthcare. You want free universal healthcare—all of these basic social provisions. Now, you might think, "Okay, but Scandinavian countries, which have some of this stuff, don't . . ." Well, they have *some* of this stuff.

Again, the question is, I think you're already anticipating a settlement, so you're reading off the data and saying, "Oh, it doesn't matter if we did all of that. Even if we did all of that, we would have dwindling fertility rates." I want to say, "Try it and see."

I think you have to rethink also the nuclear family. I think you have to rethink patterns of family-making. Look at what happened during the pandemic. Every woman who thought she was in an egalitarian relationship with a man—almost every woman found out that she wasn't. Why? Because she still did all of her employment work, and then also had to take the *vast* majority of social reproduction and childcare. That work is systematically undervalued.

It's also systematically undervalued when it's privatized in the form of healthcare and nursing. A lot would need to change. You might want to just hold out and say, "It's only under conditions of intense coercion and desperation that women are willing to have children." If that turns out to be right, I'll bite the bullet and just



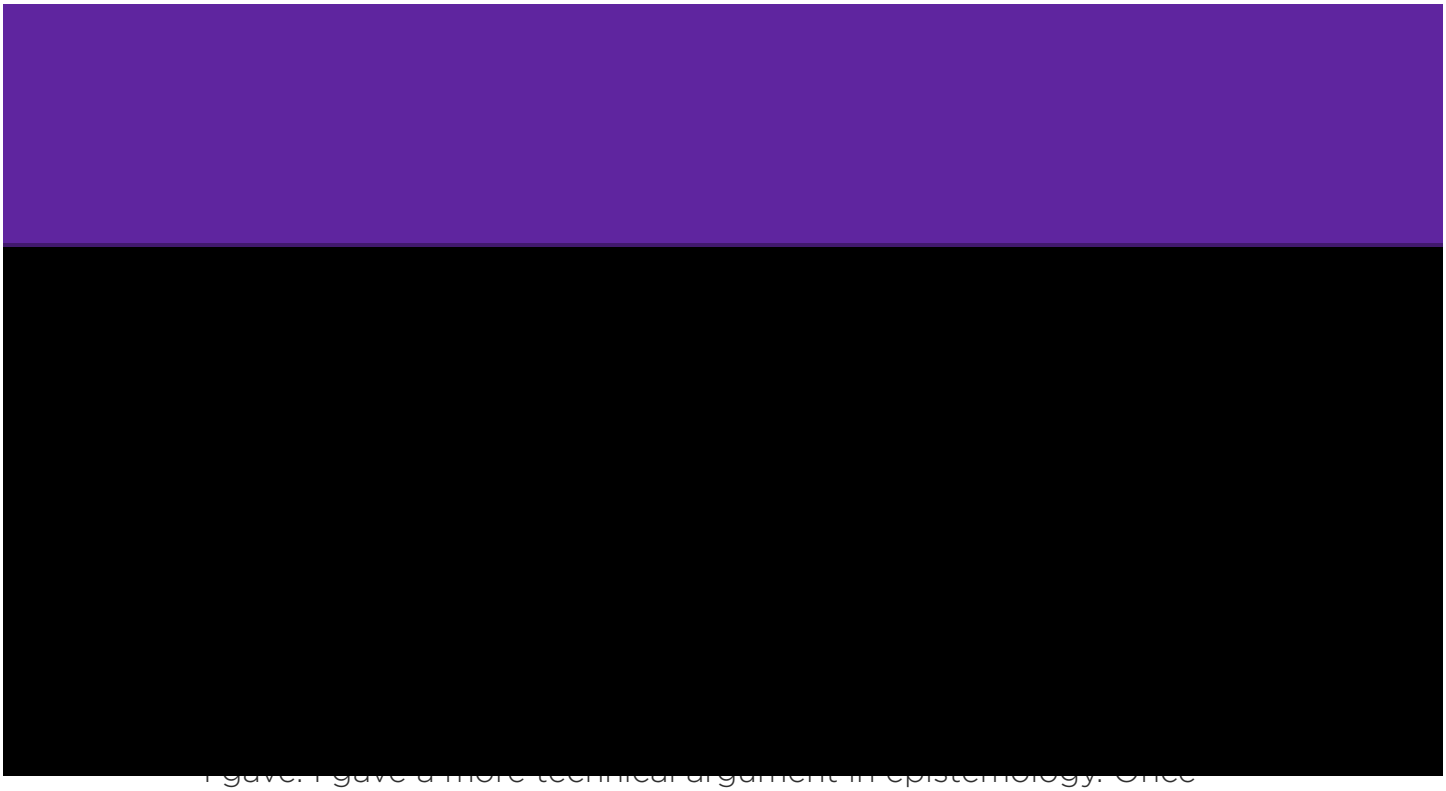
genealogical fallacy, what seems to be a broader interest in the biographical origins of ideas, as evidenced by your love for Dan Chiasson's poetry book; or your interest in our own mental states not being transparently known to us; your new book called *The Right to Sex*—what's your best account of the bigger picture of how all that fits together?

Is it you as prophet and world maker, and these are different parts of the bigger picture? Just tell me. Let it make sense for me because I see there's something there, and you haven't spelled it out yet. You get the question?

**SRINIVASAN:** Yes, I'm neither a prophet nor a world maker. I was really hoping you were going to tell me, because that's where it felt like this was leading up, was like a grand theory of how these things are united. I share with you the feeling that there is something that unites these different parts of my work, and not just the trivial fact that they're all produced by me.

I don't think I have a great account of what that is. I think—and this speaks in part to one of my preoccupations which you identified, which is the nontransparency of ourselves *to* ourselves, the extent to which we cannot know ourselves.

In some cases, I think that can lead to what I've called a tragic worldview, but it also implies the necessity of social relations for



I gave. I gave a more technical argument in epistemology. Once one has that picture, for a reason I won't totally go into here, it implies that agents can do as best they can, by their own lights, and still get things very wrong, whatever the normative system is.

No matter how much you try to index normative truths to how things seem from the internal perspective, it's still going to be the case that our normative performance is hostage to these external forces. It gives you this kind of tragic worldview, where how we do in the world depends radically on where we find ourselves in the world, how we're positioned with relation to the world.

I think that same spirit of tragedy is built into my feminist outlook. You called me a utopian. I think, in some sense, that's right, but I also have a view on which there's really no progress without regress.

For example, take decriminalization of sex work. I told you I'm adamantly in favor of it, but I think there's an interesting question about whether decriminalizing sex work would have the hoped-for utopian effect of transforming the basic relations, the wage relation, the relation women have to work, would allow sex workers to refuse sex work.

Whether decriminalization has this kind of transformative ability, or whether all it would do would be to make sex workers better

There's also the interest in genealogy as a method, and world-making as a method, which I have a kind of epistemological interest in. But then, I'm also drawn to the history of feminist thought because I think of lots of the theorists in the feminist tradition as being those kinds of prophets and world makers, trying to do something where they were engaged in forms of conceptual innovation, which were supposed to actually restructure materiality in some sense.

I think when, for example, prostitutes started calling sex work "work," calling it "sex work," they weren't simply trying to give a new name to something. They were trying to do something, reorient our relationship to this practice, and have lots of downstream material facts in how we relate to that practice. The history of feminism is full of these attempts at prophecy and world-making. That's another thing.

**COWEN:** Let me give you my answer to my own question. Just to be clear, I am not at all a canonical source here. I'm just making this up. This is not you, but I guess I read you as a consilience theorist. There are all these complexities and ambivalences in your own work, which you're well aware of. To be sure of what you're doing, the point is to change the world in a Marxian sense. You want consilience from a lot of different directions.

**SRINIVASAN:** [laughs] That makes some sense. I think I'm not sure about the word consilience in particular, just because it suggests a perfect coherence. Whereas I think I see myself as sometimes just embracing fundamental tensions without trying to offer a perfect synthesis.

What you describe is also just very recognizable from lots of feminist theorists, who, as you say, found Marx either too objective or too obsessed with "material," insufficiently interested in the psyche and the psychoanalytic. So then you bring in Freud, but then Freud and Marx both have their problems, either an unwillingness to read the family, or an overreading and misreading.

I think that general desire to pick up these various kinds of intellectual strains, which often come out of mass male traditions or traditions founded by men, and then creatively appropriate them and put them in conversation with each other and do something new is very much a feminist tradition of its own.

**COWEN:** What's the best Brian Eno album?

**SRINIVASAN:** [laughs] What do *you* think is the best Brian Eno album?

Can version, not the original release. Those would be my two picks.

**SRINIVASAN:** Oh, those seem good. I think *Another Green World* is up there, definitely.

**COWEN:** What do you think of Susan Sontag?

**SRINIVASAN:** I haven't read Sontag since I was an early graduate student. She made a very strong impression on me as a stylist. I loved reading the whole volume that is *Against Interpretation*, but I think she's due for a revisiting from me. Certainly, there's much about her life that was, I think, very cool and enviable. There's an extraordinary essay, though, if you have an interest in Sontag, by Terry Castle in the *LRB* about Sontag, which offers quite an extraordinary and very humorous perspective.

**COWEN:** How does your work as a playwright feed into your work as a philosopher?

**SRINIVASAN:** I haven't written plays since I was an undergrad.

**COWEN:** But you've written them. It's a lot of work, right? So it matters to you.

**SRINIVASAN:** It certainly mattered to me a great deal, and I loved

**COWEN:** Could you have become a lawyer, as you once suggested might have been the case? Or was that just a mistaken view that never could have happened?

**SRINIVASAN:** You're asking my view on modality, in general?

**COWEN:** Not on philosophical, but your view on you.

**SRINIVASAN:** Oh, my view on me? Yes, I did.

**COWEN:** Maybe when I was eight, I thought I could have been a fireman, but I couldn't have actually been a fireman. Your view, as an undergrad, that you might have been a lawyer—is it like me thinking about being a fireman, or is there a coherent version of you that's now a lawyer?

**SRINIVASAN:** I think there's a very coherent, though less happy, version of me that's a lawyer, in part just because it's such a common trajectory for American undergraduate students who especially major in philosophy, which I did. You go to law school if you don't really know what else you were going to do, and I very nearly did that. That was my plan, and then what happened was, I won a scholarship to Oxford, and so ended up doing graduate school in philosophy. That's basically what stopped me from going to law school.

the Enlightenment or liberal understanding of desire, and that it actually leads to untenable places. Or are we reading too much into him?

**SRINIVASAN:** No, I think that's an interesting reading. I'm not very preoccupied by the question of what his intentions were. I think if it's useful dramatization of that important observation, then it's useful, but I would have to reread some Sade to be able to comment any further.

**COWEN:** Why does Walt Whitman interest you?

**SRINIVASAN:** You have done a deep dive.

**COWEN:** This gets us back to the autobiographical side of your writings, which, to me, is always under the surface.

**SRINIVASAN:** It is.

**COWEN:** Never quite comes out, but people, over time, will bug you enough that in one way or another, it will probably come out, right? And thus, you love Whitman.

**SRINIVASAN:** Yes, I do love Whitman. I read Whitman deeply as an undergraduate. I didn't know when I read him first. I took a class with Harold Bloom, and Bloom was an enormous fan and

this class was because—I don't remember exactly how the professor started—but very soon into the class, there was a description of the common sense that everyone had.

Everyone in the class surely believes that there are middle-sized objects. There are tables and chairs here. There are people. Maybe the people are somehow special and different from the tables and chairs. We live in this material universe, and this is reality. Maybe there's a higher reality as well, but this is the common-sense view.

I was just shocked because that wasn't my view at all. It wasn't the view I had been raised to have. I quite literally believed that material reality was Maya, was illusion, and that the separateness of persons was also an important illusion. I believe in some sort of metaphysical monism, and this is why I've never really done analytic metaphysics, even though I've done a huge amount of epistemology. The metaphysics has always seemed to me a starting point that I just find very difficult to get behind.

What are my metaphysics now? I don't have a worked-out metaphysics. I think I'm more inclined now—I've been bedded into what Peter van Inwagen called the common Western metaphysics, the kind of common sense—there are middle-sized dry goods. There are chairs and tables. I'm sitting on one.

influence on so many people he's come into contact with, right?

**SRINIVASAN:** Yes. I never came into contact with him, but let me just say something about the writing style, and then I'll say something about the substantive thing because I don't think they're actually that separate. I think he really does practice philosophy—or he did—as a humanistic discipline. If you look at his essays in, for example, the *London Review of Books*, they are very different from what goes under the name public philosophy today.

They are *real* works of philosophy. What they aren't is a philosopher coming down from his Olympian heights and wheeling out a couple of philosophical distinctions which are supposed to help the masses get clear on things. It's rather Williams just doing philosophy in a way that's respectful of an audience, that expects them to do some work but that also does some work on his own part. I think that's very important as a model of how to write about philosophy and how to write for a wider philosophical audience.

Substantively, there are lots of things that Williams was interested in that I'm interested in. Just to take one enduring preoccupation, Williams is very interested in the question of perspective and of points of view. He's very interested in the aspiration to a perfectly

value and perspective. I'm very much interested in that locus of problems.

**COWEN:** What's the biggest influence of Derek Parfit on you?

**SRINIVASAN:** I'm worried because I feel like you want me to offer an example of a substantive philosophical view that had—

**COWEN:** No, method.

**SRINIVASAN:** Oh, method.

**COWEN:** The way in which he was philosophical, I think is the greatest influence of his on most people. But your answer may be different.

**SRINIVASAN:** No, that's absolutely right. The truth be told, I think his greatest influence on me was just his quite indiscriminate kindness and generosity, philosophically speaking. He just wanted to know what everyone thought philosophically, and treated each and every person he encountered—whether a philosopher or not—as someone who could contribute to his own endeavor of making sense of the world. It was *profoundly* democratic, almost Whitmanian, and very startling to encounter.

I knew him well, as much as anyone knew him. I knew Derek

shocking—represent something that is new and breaking down a hierarchy.

That trans is fundamental to your notion of how to undo previous hierarchies, which are anything but emancipatory, and to rebuild the foundations of some noncapitalistic libertarianism on this idea of ambivalence, complexity, and context, and the sense of novelty, difference, diversity, even shock, from the trans movement, and those are your new foundations.

Again, I'm not the canonical source here, but how would you respond to that?

**SRINIVASAN:** I think that's interesting. I think you've absolutely identified a strain in my thinking, which I'd be tempted to call anarchic more than libertarian.

**COWEN:** That's fine, yes.

**SRINIVASAN:** I see also why you call it libertarian. Libertarians typically have a very particular understanding of the state.

**COWEN:** Forget about them. We know what they are, right?

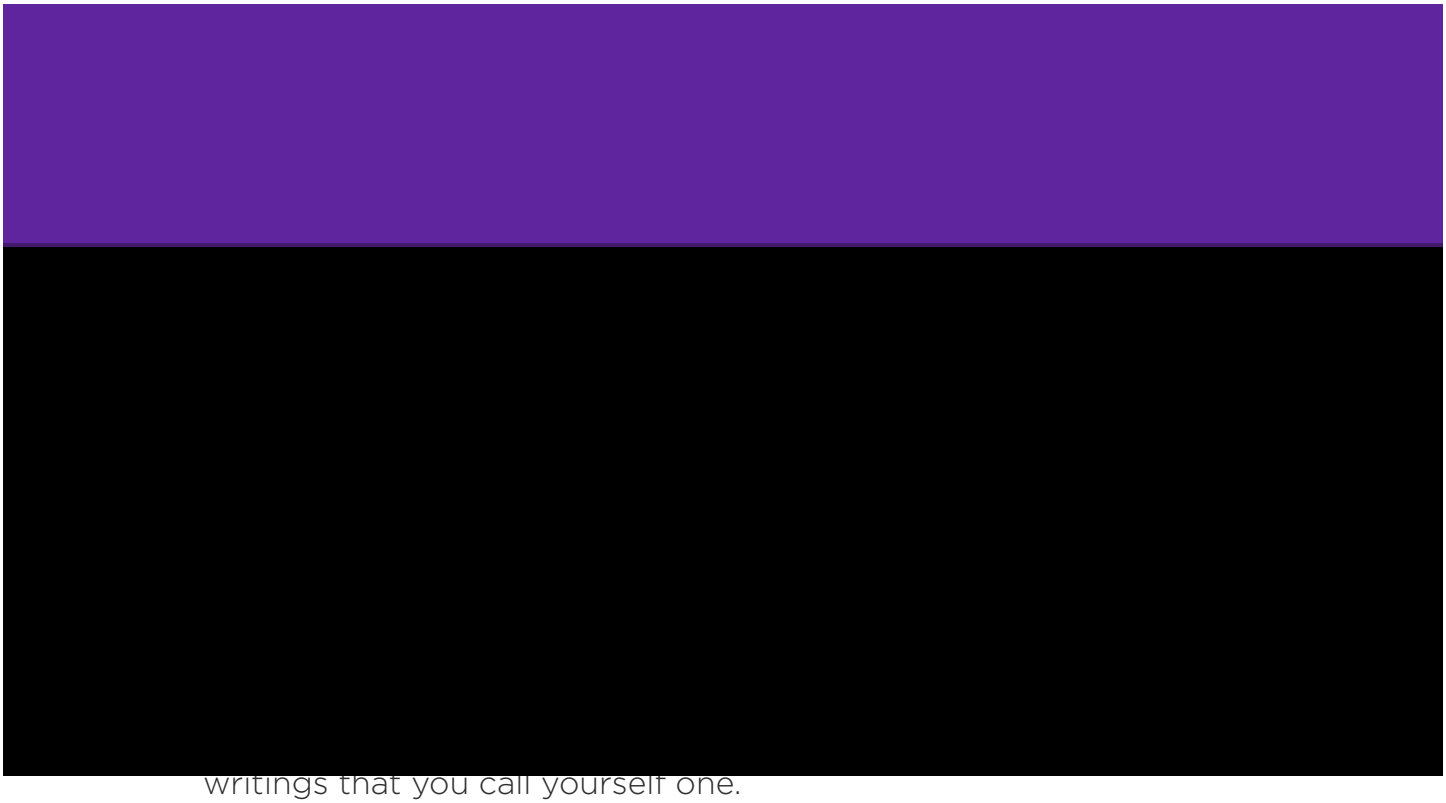
**SRINIVASAN:** No, no, I was talking about the state in particular. I think the thing you're observing is that I have a *huge* amount of

queer politics and queer theory—Judith Butler is one of them—are interested in articulating the way in which trans lives and queer lives can be seen and read as a form of dissidence against gender, but also against class, against racial domination, and so on.

But I think there's another part of me—and this gets back to your earlier question about what's the closest version of Amia that's a social conservative—who isn't totally ready to just embrace a picture that's fully founded on dissidence and breaking down of hierarchies and norms and boundaries and that's just about the pursuit of novelty and playfulness.

I'm also interested—and I think this is a certain kind of philosophical foundationalism in me that is attracted to the idea of certain human universals and universal forms of human flourishing. I think, when we try and articulate what the conditions of human flourishing are, beyond the most basic necessities like food and water and safety and shelter, we start getting ourselves into certain forms of political trouble.

This has historically been a problem for Marxists, where the theory can seem to rest on a particular vision of species-being, a particular humanistic picture of what it is to be human and to live a human life well, but I'm attracted to that thought as well. There is that strong part of me, as well, that thinks that there is some



writings that you call yourself one.

**SRINIVASAN:** I don't know if I've ever called myself one in writing, but I certainly do identify as a socialist. I broadly identify as a democratic socialist. I'm not particularly impressed, I've got to say, by the fact that the last 30 Nobel prize–winning economists haven't been in favor of socialism. You'd be hard-pressed to find many socialists in the academy broadly. We're always hearing about the way in which the university has been overtaken by Marxists, but look at philosophy. You almost get none. Why is this?

Because universities—for all I love them and admire them and think they play, or can play, an important social function—are pretty class selecting. It's no surprise to me that they skew very liberal and very centrist on the whole.

I suppose the question is, look, what do you do about 21st-century capitalism? I think it's uncontroversial, or should be uncontroversial, that capitalism—understood not just as an economic system that embraces markets because, at least on how I would use the notion, you can have market socialism—but an economic and a social system that is founded critically on a class distinction. We can also talk about racialized and gendered forms of capitalism. We won't go into that, though, here, or we

most potent crisis humanity has ever faced, which is climate change.

So, my question is, what's next? What do you think? Do you think capitalism is going to solve all of those problems?

**COWEN:** I think scientific innovation—supported by government, to be clear—is our best chance of solving climate change as a problem. But I would put it this way. I'm a little worried that you're resorting to a kind of genealogical fallacy in dismissing the 30 Nobel laureates as from a particular class background.

I would agree they are. But they're also really very, very smart people who've looked at the evidence, and they think it's about tradeoffs, and it's comparative. They think that true socialist economies perform worse on all, or at least most, of the metrics you cite. What is it, empirically, that *you* know that they don't or I don't? That's where I see a big gap between us.

**SRINIVASAN:** What I know, and, in fact, I think they know and you know, is that we are in an extraordinary state of crisis. The other thing I haven't even mentioned is the profound deficit of democracy that capitalism entails. The idea that the US is a democratic system is just a complete joke. The idea that what you're going to have is just some campaign finance reform to fix

of the institutions that shape political and social and family life. You're very, very far away from that in the US.

What I'm fundamentally interested in is power of people to make decisions directly—not indirectly, through a rigged voting system, which allows them to cast a symbolic vote every four years for one of basically two identical candidates. That's not what we mean by democracy. I would hope you would agree as well.

My question is, how do we have people exercising more direct control over the institutions that shape their lives, including corporate institutions?

**COWEN:** Very last question. After all the fervor surrounding your book dies down, what do you hope to be doing next?

**SRINIVASAN:** I hope to be getting back to my book on genealogy, which we've spoken about a little bit, the project on genealogy. I've been working on it for many years now. I set it aside for a little bit to complete this feminism book. It's a book that begins by thinking about the history of genealogical thinking, and then dwells in some of the epistemological problems that we were discussing, and finally tries to think about the politics of genealogical arguments.

**COWEN:** Amia Srinivasan, thank you very much. Again, listeners