

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Welcome back to another week, everybody. I'm very pleased to have Professor Kevin Vallier back on the show. You'll remember he spoke with us sometime ago about his last book, *Must Politics Be War?* And now he'll join us again this week to talk about his latest volume on public trust. *Trust In A Polarized Age* is a really great book, especially if you're not very familiar with the fineries of the public trust and public justification literature. I know I wasn't. It's terribly well-reasoned and well-tempered, just like Professor Vallier himself. Kevin is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Bowling Green State University, where he studies PPE and the philosophy of religion while writing prolifically.

All right, so Kevin, thanks for coming back on. And it was great reading this book because it's particularly interesting that this is sort of a follow-up volume to the book we discussed the last time you were on the show, *Must Politics Be War?* And when you were on the show, you said that you would have a second volume out here fairly shortly, and by God you delivered. So that's great to see. Tell us how this book builds on that one?

Kevin Vallier ([01:33](#)):

All right, great. So thanks for having me on the show and it's great to be able to talk with you all again. Now, so here's the basic relationship between the two books. *Must Politics Be War?* is answering a sort of broad philosophical challenge that's common in the history of political thought, which says that politics is of necessity, really, really nasty business. And that is always a war between competing centers of power. Now, maybe you disagree about what those centers of power are, Mark's between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Augustine between the city of man and the city of God. I mean, you can give different stories, but it's an inherent... Or libertarianism and the state, it's an inherently... Free people and the state. There's an inherently conflictual view of politics.

And in *Must Politics Be War?*, I tried to provide a possibility proof, a feasibility proof really, that you could have a free and open society that wasn't at war on the condition that it was able to create and sustain high levels of social and political trust. With social trust being trust in society and political trust being trust in governing institutions. And I tried to explain the way in which different institutions, in virtue of their being able to be justified to multiple perspectives, could sustain trust between those perspectives in a feasible way.

But that was just a feasibility proof, to say politics doesn't have to be war, whereas in *Trust in a Polarized Age*, I'm focused much more on the American context and saying, look, actually there are many real-world liberal institutions that do sustain social and political trust and in the right way, the ways that we sort of expect, as respecting people's rights and justice. So I get into detail with a lot of empirical data about which institutions are caused by and cause different kinds of trust to form and survive. And then try to show that it's brought about in the right way with the confrontarian argument I give. So first book, possibility proof, second book, looking at the real world, particularly of democratic states in the United States in particular.

Anthony Comegna ([03:51](#)):

Yeah, and I've really loved this idea that you do toss out there at the end of the first chapter in this book that obviously comes out of *Must Politics Be War?* You said that the problem is not that we have to destroy one another through the war of politics, but that we choose to destroy one another through the war of politics. We like to do it, and that's why we do it. And I'm wondering if you can talk us through that point a bit more to set up the rest of the conversation, because I'm really... I'm not exactly quite sure where I fit on on that, but I know it's a really important insight.

A big part of me thinks that at least a lot of our political wars should be fought. They do have to be fought. And a lot of times, the bad side of any particular argument is really, really, really bad and should be buried, like the feudal order of ancient Europe or something. You know? Never to emerge from the ashes. So tell us, what do we do with this? How do you answer this question? And maybe expound on this insight that we really choose to battle each other this way.

Kevin Vallier ([05:10](#)):

Great. So that's a great question and it's something I've continued reflecting on since I finished the book. One purpose of this book, *Trust in a Polarized Age*, is to show that there are medium term reforms that we can take on that will restore trust and interrupt the cycle of increasing polarization. But if people don't want to take up these reforms, then they're not going to happen. And so one of the things I say is, look, let's stop lying to ourselves that we have to crush each other whenever we disagree. Sometimes disagreements are between people that are intent on being oppressive hegemony. I mean, sometimes that's true, I won't deny it. But I think it's a lot less often true than we think, particularly in the United States, where if the Democrats win or the Republican wins, it's an apocalypse. Right?

So the problem is that we're so polarized that we miss opportunities for trust and compromise and peace that we could otherwise see. So it isn't to say that we're never in a situation where we have to fight, but it's rather to say that we should be more open-minded to see opportunities to avoid fighting when they're there. And that's another point of going through the trust literature, is just to show that there are a lot of relatively free societies that are really high trust and we can just look at them. Right? So we don't have to sort of fall into despair. Maybe there's something unique about American society that makes this impossible, but we were doing a lot better job of it in decades past.

So I think we're too caught up in our current perspective. And so one point in the book is to sort of ask us to back up and say, well, maybe the problem is that not that it has to be this way, but that we want it to be this way. And that's the first thing I'd say, is that's how the book tries to reveal our hearts. Right? It tries to reveal, I think our true motives. And I think that I'm not thinking about folks like you who think, well, there are some views that are really, really unjust and have to be squashed. I'm really thinking more about people who just aren't open to themselves being wrong and that they might be being authoritarian or domineering with others. And I'm trying to communicate that what's lost in holding that attitude is our ability to cooperate and trust each other and that those costs are staggering, when you look at the data.

Anthony Comegna ([07:48](#)):

Well, let's talk about those authoritarian or domineering folks, because you do mention in the book and sort of some of your comparative analysis here, that monarchies and authoritarian regimes at least can be pretty high trust regimes. They're of course not necessarily are always, but they can be pretty high trust. So what do you think explains that and what kinds of corresponding programs then or corresponding problems do democratic regimes face?

Kevin Vallier ([08:20](#)):

Yeah, so the little bit I say about monarchy is really about toothless monarchs. So the sort of old constitutional monarchies, like England, if you look at their social trust levels versus... Or like the Netherlands, societies without a historic monarchy that are democratic like the United States, it looks like when you control for as many variables as you can, it looks like having a constitutional monarch helps social trust. Now, why would that be? We don't know, but some people speculate that it's because there's a high status non-partisan person or family that's at the heart of the society.

So in our society, we have almost no high status, non-partisan people. What do we have, like Dolly Parton? We have like nobody. And I know that many of the monarchs, people like the British Monarch seem to be getting more political, but the idea is at least there are some people who are above the fray. But authoritarian regimes, so this is the much more important case. So focusing both on social trust and on political trust, social trust being trust in most people, political trust being trust in government. Authoritarian governments can be high in political trust if they're really good producers of economic growth and that they produce them in a systematic, predictable way.

Now, most authoritarian regimes don't do that, but if they do that, then you can get more trust. As opposed to social trust is... This is actually pretty interesting. One reason authoritarian regimes can be high in social trust is that there's a small number of people who are in power. And most people have to figure out ways of interacting with each other outside of those centers of power or that one center of power, and so they can build up sort of trust through gray market networks of ordinary exchanges of goods and services that are prohibited. So in authoritarian societies, yes, sometimes you can get higher levels of social trust, but generally speaking, authoritarian societies are lower trust on the whole than liberal democratic societies.

China is an exception at the national level, but a lot of trust theorists think that they're just lying because they feel like they have to. So there's three countries where people think are lying to pollsters, Iran, Uzbekistan and China. There's none of the precise reasons for each of those countries.

Anthony Comegna ([11:03](#)):

Well you got me thinking of a couple things here. First, I'm reminded of the situation last year, where Boris Johnson was wanting to prorogue parliament in order to clear his path to Brexit. And then the backlash was that he misused the Queen by putting her in that position to illegally prorogue parliament and so he got taken to court and the proroguing was put to an end for his misuse of the monarch. And then you also have me thinking of Saudi Arabia, which probably the regime there continues to exist probably only because of its control over oil. And without being able to deliver on that, the whole thing is gone. Right?

Kevin Vallier ([11:47](#)):

Yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([11:48](#)):

But then again, what about regimes like somewhere in Norway, where again, it's dependent on this social democracy? Sorry for my dogs in the background there. They're clearly dependent on state oil revenues too.

Kevin Vallier ([12:02](#)):

Yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([12:03](#)):

[crosstalk 00:12:03] for their regime. So what exactly does social trust look like in practice? What does it really mean? And what are some of those countries that you think display it in a really good way for us to talk about here?

Kevin Vallier ([12:18](#)):

So, Norway is unique among the Scandinavian countries in being that reliant on a natural resource. And they have similarly high levels of trust to the other Scandinavian and generally North Atlantic democracies. So Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland are all really, really high trust. And we don't really know the reasons. It's actually a mystery. In fact, there's a lot of trust researchers that are Scandinavian precisely because they're interested in this question. I would say trust research and political scientists are actually disproportionately Scandinavian.

And so the issue with Saudi Arabia is that stability of the regime really does depend on oil. It's a very unstable regime. It's very precarious. Whereas Norway, it's not going to collapse. They're extraordinarily wealthy because they have these oil revenues that are shared, but just looking at countries with very similar political cultures, they're fine. And Sweden's not going to collapse anytime soon. Belgium's not going to collapse anytime soon.

What makes them high trust? Well, there's a couple of things that I think do produce higher social trust, but we don't know a lot of the causes. So one thing is they're able to maintain very low levels of corruption. And the problem is part of that is because they're so high trust, because corruption and social trust are in a causal feedback loop with one another. So it's hard to give an independent explanation of it. I think it also helps that they have very stable legal property rights. People know what they own and what they don't own and they know what to do when there's a property dispute. The institutions there are very, very stable.

The same thing is another thing is that the legal system is seen as very reliable and it isn't biased in favor of one particular group. So it tends to impartially enforce justice. And the police and the criminal justice system are just far less violent and inequitable. And so I think that's another thing that they have that we don't have. I think they have lots of market exchange like we do, I think that that's stress building. So basically they've got all the different things that we think build social trust and they probably have some other stuff that we can't yet show build social trust.

One of the things I've been thinking since the Joseph Henrich book, *The WEIRD People in the World* just came out, was his hypothesis is that the Catholic church in the middle ages decided to get rid of cousin marriage and things that were close to it. And so the way that most people handled trust historically, was that they trusted their clan or tribe and they were suspicious of other clans or tribes. But the Catholic church eliminated clans and tribes by creating more diffused cooperative networks because of their banning a cousin marriage. So I don't know if this story is true or not, and he provides quite a bit of evidence that it is true, but what happens is that in some of these societies, they have to come to rely on impartial institutions to coordinate because they can't rely on particularized trust because there just aren't the same social networks.

So it might be the case that there was a cultural evolution, where the societies that were high trust were more stable and more likely to survive than the societies that were lower in trust. And so the weird psychology societies just tended to do very well in terms of maintaining stability and having economic growth and stuff like that. But I don't know, I have some worries about that story. But that's one possible story you might tell about how they became a high social trust, is because they had to move away from particularized trust and so when they came up with ways to trust each other, they were able to do well at maintaining social cohesion and cooperation. But again, I don't... Ultimately, we do not know the whole explanation or even most of the explanation of why some countries are higher trust than others.

Anthony Comegna ([16:35](#)):

How do you think this sort of more macro phenomenon of social trust relates to very micro Seinfeld type things, like if you leave your coat sitting over a library seat, nobody will touch that chair all day

long. They just assume that somebody else has already gotten here first. And we just have these rules. If somebody is more than three paces away from you, you don't have to stand there and hold the door for them. You know? When you have little variations in very minor social norms like that, does it stack up to more or less social trust and how?

Kevin Vallier ([17:17](#)):

I think that when people interact with strangers, true strangers, people that they take to be representative of their society as a whole, and don't really know, that social trust can be built up through positive interactions and undermined through negative ones. The difficulty with sorting this out in the data is that it now looks like people's social trust attitudes harden with age. And that once they're past 30, they don't change very much at all. This might be through a Bayesian updating, where you just have a huge amount of interactions with others when you're young and you come to solidify in your probability that cooperating with a stranger is going to go well over quarrel.

One theory of social trust transmission is that children watch how their parents interact with strangers. And if they're cautious, then they may turn out to be more trusting, or less trusting if they're less cautious, and more open then they may turn out to be more trusting. So that means that positive micro-level interactions in the legal system and the economic system and the political system, in the home, could all be in associations like churches or social service organizations that are interacting with people outside of the group, right, by doing public charitable work or something like that.

Anywhere, I think, where younger people have positive interactions with people they don't know and they see other people abiding by shared social norms that they can basically be counted on to do the right thing, they're going to tend to have more social trust and that will tend to harden with age. So that's one story I think one could tell about how you get from the micro to the macro, is just lots and lots of observations of following social norms in different contexts.

Anthony Comegna ([19:06](#)):

Is public trust always a good thing to have in abundance in a society? I have a hard time imagining you saying yes here. Surely there are plenty of societies that are really not worthy of their public's trust. You know?

Kevin Vallier ([19:23](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([19:24](#)):

After all, we've all been pretty shocked and horrified, I think recently by how our institutions deserve such little public trust. So what are the proper limits of public trust?

Kevin Vallier ([19:37](#)):

Yeah. So we'll separate again between trust in institutions and trust in society. Trust in society is an almost unalloyed good. If most people are untrustworthy, of course, you're just going to be a sucker and get taken advantage of. But if you can sustain trustworthiness, then social trust is just an amazing thing to do in response to it, rather than remaining suspicious, if you can even control that. Trust in government is different because you want government to be trustworthy, but you also have some reasons to think that they often won't be.

So my view is that I want people to be able to trust the general branches of government, but to be suspicious about the particular occupants of it, because those people are inclined to be untrustworthy because they like power too much, they like approval too much. They have really complicated tasks set before them that there's no reason to think that they can do well or very little reason. So what I would say is that in general, don't trust when others are untrustworthy. It's not you'll make yourself a sucker then. But social trust when you can get it, is hugely beneficial. Political trust is a little bit more conditional in its value. So that's how I'd answer that.

Anthony Comegna ([20:51](#)):

Sure. Yeah, trust in institutions is pretty bottomed out at the moment. But even trust in society, I'm not so sure that right now people are very clearly demonstrating. Maybe it's because most of us don't have much of an opportunity anymore to be out there in society. But still, a lot of people who are, are not making very good representations of it.

Kevin Vallier ([21:16](#)):

Yeah. This is difficult. I've been thinking about this ever since the virus hit, because on my theory of... Social trust is maintained when people follow norms that they all think are binding. So things like don't mug people, right? Don't be a jerk on the road, right? Don't start physical fights, right? Don't burn other people's stuff or steal from them, right? But the problem with COVID is that we disagree on what the norms are or ought to be, in any case. And so our basis for trustworthiness are diverse. So for instance, someone on the left is much more likely to deem you a trustworthy person if you wear a mask, or an untrustworthy person if you don't than someone on the right. Indeed, some on the right are such that they may trust people wearing masks less than people who don't, which is just perverse.

But I think that we are polarized to some degree as to what counts as trustworthy behavior in most people. So for instance, there are many people I think, if your kids aren't wearing masks and you're walking around outside, they're going to think you're being irresponsible and that maybe you can't be counted on. Whereas if your kids are wearing masks, they'll have a different view. Whereas other people think, oh, the kids, they're not going to get it or it's not going to hurt them at all if they get it. The really nasty people are the ones who are bossing everyone around. So the difficulty right now is that we're having fewer observations of each other and the norms that are most salient are norms that we disagree about. And so our trust capacity is limited.

So I'm actually pessimistic about... Gen Z, from what we can tell from the data, is the lowest trust generation on record in the United States by a good measure. In fact, it's been gradually declining among generations since the World War II generation and we started measuring trust particularly in the late '50s, but in more detail in the '60s and '70s. So I think there are fewer bases that we have for trusting each other now, if you're a public basis and that that's probably going to generate more distrust over time.

Anthony Comegna ([23:41](#)):

Our greatest thanks again to Kevin Vallier for joining us back on the show. We'll finish up the interview next week, which should give you just enough time to put in a rush order for delivery for your own copy of *Trust in a Polarized Age*. Thanks so much to all of you for listening and as always, keep the progress coming.