Anthony Comegna (00:20):

All right, everyone. We're going to keep it short and sweet this week because philosopher, Kevin Vallier, is back with us for the second portion of our interview about his book, Trust in a Polarized Age. We pick up right where we left off last time, my own skepticism about the whole trust project. I'm just ... Well, you'll hear it. My doubts are more about trustworthiness than the value of trust itself. But all right, let's get to part two with Kevin Vallier.

Anthony Comegna (00:48):

All right. Now we were just talking about this when we left off with last week's show, but I guess I'm still ... I mean, you said that you're pessimistic in the long run here because Gen Z is the lowest trust generation on record. And I guess maybe I'm with them, because I'm still not sold on this idea that we should trust each other because it's mutually beneficial and helps society work easier and all of that. Mainly because, like I was saying before, I'm just not so sure my fellow man, especially right now, is really worthy of that trust. I mean, that's an important thing to commit to each other.

Anthony Comegna (01:27):

So then I suppose my question to you to start off for this week is, is this one of those things where I should treat it as an exercise of faith, almost. That I'm extending my genuine good faith trust to the public, to the average random person out on the street, to my institutions and everything else that I encounter throughout my life. I should extend that trust as a matter of faith, that it will sort of contribute to overall wellbeing in redound back to me in all sorts of other ways and we'll all be better off. Even though they might not deserve it now, given what I know I should do it anyways?

Kevin Vallier (02:08):

So I'd say two things in response to it. The first is, I think people over ... Sorry, underestimate how trustworthy people are. And particularly in polarized societies where we think other people who have different political views are monsters. Like, we just have false beliefs. And so we trust each other less than we should, rationally speaking. People are more trustworthy than people often give others credit for. So that is, to trust, is to be more rational because you're portioning your trust, actual trustworthiness better rather than just saying, oh, they're another gender or another race or another party and so they must be bad or they must be untrustworthy.

Kevin Vallier (02:53):

But there is such a thing in the philosophical literature called therapeutic trust. When you decide to trust someone in a way, in order to give them the opportunity to reform and to encourage them to do so. And I do think there are instances of that, where like if your evidence is ambiguous as to how trustworthy people are, you might think, look, I'm going to put myself out there and just sort of see how people behave and react. I'm not quite sure.

Kevin Vallier (03:20):

So let me give you an example of that. A therapeutic trust is deciding to get the vaccine, the COVID-19 vaccine when it comes out or when one of them comes out. And that's because if we go first, I think we're demonstrating that we have concern and care for the community. That we trust that other people will come along and get it if we do and things go all right. So we're putting ourselves out there, we're

taking a leap in a certain kind of way, and we're signaling that we care about others to them. And hoping that they'll respond in kind.

Kevin Vallier ([03:53](#)):

Now, maybe we don't know if they'll respond in kind. Maybe we take the risk of the vaccine and they don't get it, and so we took the risk for nothing. But I think there are ways of stepping out and taking a leap to establish trust that can work. And that's one reason I think I'll try to be one of the first adopters of the vaccine.

Anthony Comegna ([04:11](#)):

But this is not the sort of, neoconservative, maybe Straussian position that we tell the public a sort of overall mythology, because it's more important that they believe in something, right?

Kevin Vallier ([04:26](#)):

Yeah. I'd want to avoid that, if at all possible. I mean, you want trust to ultimately be based on the right kind of reasons. If it's based in a lie and people discover the lie, then trust will collapse. You want trust to be based on institutions that are open and there's no secrecy and lying, or not any more than there needs to be. Because otherwise, your trust is precarious. I mean, one example I think where this came up was just that one of the things that destroys social trust is communism. And one reason for this is probably because of the institution of secret beliefs.

Kevin Vallier ([05:02](#)):

So by the time the Berlin Wall fell, about one out of every 20 East German adults were in the secret police. And so if you meet people on the street and one out of every 20 of them could do a secret report and get you sent to jail or worse, it's going to be hard for you to trust people. So if they had had everyone believing some kind of a noble lie to keep the society going, like that there was worker equality or something, when people actually had their real experiences in society, it would be trust reducing. And then when the full range of the corruption was finally revealed, there may be even lower trust.

Kevin Vallier ([05:46](#)):

So telling this lie can require oppressive institutions, propaganda, and things that undermine trust in themselves. That's why you want trust to be based in publicly recognizable trustworthiness.

Anthony Comegna ([06:02](#)):

Now back to your comparison of different types of regimes. Could you tell us, what do you mean when you discuss property owning democracies versus what seems to be your preferred set of institutional orders, a democratic constitutionalism?

Kevin Vallier ([06:20](#)):

So to understand a property owning democracy, imagine a robust welfare state that not only provides people with a large amount of income and income and benefits, but then provides people with certain kinds of investments or assets. And then add on top of that, that there's a capital ceiling. That is no one person's allowed to accumulate too much capital, both as a business owner or as an investor. A property

owning democracy has markets, but it's a society with a capital ceiling and a capital floor. And that's to make sure everyone has assets, but that no one has too many assets.

Kevin Vallier (07:05):

Now, I think there are a number of problems with such a regime, just economically speaking. The obvious issue, but which I think can be addressed to some degree, is that when you redistribute from the productive to the less productive, you'll get less production. And that means that society will grow more slowly and be poorer over time. Moreover, such a society has a lot more violence because you have a lot more coercion in order to do the redistribution. And because the state is going to be so big, you invite a lot of corruption in redistribution.

Kevin Vallier (07:39):

So for those reasons, I think a very large welfare state is going to be corrupting, but a property owning democracy is even worse. It's worse for two reasons. One, by imposing a capital ceiling the ways in which the market signals to different parts to others to invest is taken away. As you'd say, oh, look, I have all this capital for my investment. And other people say, hey, maybe that's a good investment, I'll go over there. If you have a capital ceiling, that way of signaling to have growth is undermined in a particularly catastrophic way.

Kevin Vallier (08:12):

Another problem with redistributing capital assets too much in the hands of workers, is that workers tend to be more conservative than entrepreneurs. And so may engage in fewer risks, taking fewer risks. And so there could be less innovation in that regard as well. And a third issue is how exactly the state is going to monitor the capital stock. And I think it's going to require a lot more policing than people think. So for those reasons, I don't think a property owning democracy economic regime is going to be very good for social or political trust, because it's going to have things like corruption and lower wealth.

Kevin Vallier (08:52):

My alternative is a kind of modest welfare state, that is part of what I call democratic constitutionalism. But the moderate welfare state basically says, look, we can have redistribution when we can demonstrate to multiple reasonable perspectives that the evidence favors the benefits of the program, right? That it passes at least a basic cost benefit analysis test. So if you look with the two programs I talk about, Headstart, which is for young preschool aged kids to get things like meals and other kinds of benefits. Or Bolsa Familia in Brazil, but that spread to other countries where mothers get a transfer payment if they bring their kids to public school and get them vaccinated.

Kevin Vallier (09:42):

So I think there's a lot of evidence that these two programs are successful and they can meet reasonable burdens of evidence as a result. But it has to be a really careful evidence-based welfare state. And then if the redistribution can provide benefits to people that are very, very poor and to which almost no one but solid libertarians have any objection to, if you start to do more redistribution on a weaker evidential basis, then that becomes really hard to justify. So what I'm imagining is a modest data-based welfare state in addition to markets.

Anthony Comegna (10:24):

Now, of course, we are recording here on October 12th. The confirmation hearings for Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court have just begun. I was watching them a little bit live earlier today. And I managed to watch like 40 minutes of it straight, and didn't hear her speak once. It was just senators going back and forth. And so, not too surprising though.

Anthony Comegna (10:51):

You take some time in the book to talk about different types of constitutional reforms, and you were just sort of indicating some a little bit there with the examples you brought up. But talk to us a little bit about some constitutional reforms that you think could really increase public trust right now, when we seem to need it pretty dramatically.

Kevin Vallier (11:11):

Well, one thing I've been looking at is this For the People Act that the Congress passed in 2019, H.R. 1, if I'm getting the name right. It has a whole bunch of things to try to like, make democracy sort of more equal in certain ways and less corrupt. but it's a pretty long bill with a lot of stuff, so things like automatic voter registration.

Kevin Vallier (11:35):

But title eight of it has some really interesting features that do things like try to end or discourage revolving door policy when it comes to high political office or officials. Like limitations on when you can to work for a private firm after you've been in office. Automatic disclosure, like of taxation kind of requirements. So a lot of the corruption that Trump's introduced, this bill would just make impossible.

Kevin Vallier (12:05):

So ways of reducing public corruption, particularly certain kinds of manifest or obvious rent seeking, where people are using the state to give themselves benefits at the expense of the general public. Or if they're engaged in just more manifest kinds of corruption, in terms of just breaking laws that everyone else has to follow. Enforcing those kinds of laws, reducing the public perception of corruption is really, really important, for restoring both social trust and political trust.

Kevin Vallier (12:40):

Another thing is reforming the legal system. I think that right now, trust in the police is probably falling. And oftentimes people take the police to be kind of proxies for how good their community is as a whole. And I think that can hurt social trust, when people sort of see the police is corrupt. So you really want police reform, not fewer police, but less violent police. Many more police on the beat, but with fewer violent means at their disposal.

Kevin Vallier (13:05):

Another thing is you want to restore some economic equality and economic growth, and you'd like to do so at the same time to increase trust in government. And there are policies that can do this. The main one I like is just making it easier to build housing in cities. So that increases economic equality because the sort of NIMBY folks, their housing values will fall, but it also increased economic growth by allowing the division of labor in large cities to expand quickly.

Kevin Vallier (13:32):

And Stephen Teles and Brink Lindsey, in their book, The Captured Economy, estimate that the economic benefits of land reform of this kind are very, very large. And that we're paying a really steep social cost. And Tyler Collin's has been talking about periodically that the problems with the sort of NIMBY regulations. So those are some things that I think we could change policy wise in order to restore trust.

Anthony Comegna (14:01):

Well, let the record show everybody, Kevin Vallier refuses to say whether he will pack the court.

Kevin Vallier (14:07):

No, no, no. I'm very clear, do not pack it. That is serious norm erosion. And if we start playing political football over how many seats there are, I think that's going to make Congress look more corrupt. Even though it's trusted so little now, maybe it can't get much worse. But it will make the Supreme Court look a lot more like it's just an extension of whatever Congress wants. And I think that it's higher level of trust will suffer relative to Congress, because it will be seen as an appendage of Congress more than [inaudible 00:14:41].

Anthony Comegna (14:43):

Yeah. I mean, speaking of Congress, the Senate, for whatever reason ... It's left my mind by now. But for some reason, it used to be called the world's greatest deliberative body. And you put a lot of emphasis, throughout the book really, on this process of deliberation. I really love this because something ... I used to be the kid in high school who was probably very annoying and loved to win arguments and debate with people and argue with my family, on and on and on. And somewhere along the line, I just decided, oh, this is way too frustrating. And I'm going to stop.

Anthony Comegna (15:22):

And since then, I've really come to hate that debate process. The idea that that arguments are something that you should win as opposed to a process of discovery, where you're never quite done. And you just, when you deliberate, you try to ask better and better questions and sort of shave away wrong ideas until you have a better picture of the truth. But it's not about winning and losing. I really hate ... I'm on the libertarian wing of classical liberalism. I hate what I've been calling logic LARPing lately, where people just seem to bring up issues so that they can play at making arguments and winning arguments.

Anthony Comegna (16:06):

And they don't even seem to really care very much what they're arguing about or why, or how they're spending their time. It's just, the fun is in the competition. It's this self puffery that I just can't stand. But tell us about why deliberation is so different and why it's so important.

Kevin Vallier (16:27):

So first I just want to say about libertarians, I mean, I do think libertarians care more about being correct and being smart than actually changing anything. It's really disappointing. But maybe libertarians aren't exceptions to how much people think about politics, except that we're less groupish in some ways. But you know, we're too focused on just winning an argument and that doesn't really convince people.

Kevin Vallier (16:52):

But focusing on deliberation, I mean, what I'm focused on here is trying to improve the decision-making about legislation, such that the legislation passed is seen as both more fairly produced, and more close to what people actually want, and actually to be based on good information. So what I propose is in addition to the sort of standard political bodies, that we form deliberative mini-publics, which are random samplings of the population. Bringing people together to deliberate, kind of like a jury, but with less coercion and more pay. But where you'd preserve some anonymity.

Kevin Vallier ([17:35](#)):

On top of that ... So they would deliberate about issues. They'd debate some, but they would mostly just try to get on the same page about what each other actually thinks, get all the arguments on the table. They'd also be able to source prediction markets in order to be able to get good information about the probabilities of different kinds of events and effects. And then, once they have good information, then they can sort of talk together about what would be best, make a recommendation to Congress. And list the arguments that they found the most compelling, without necessarily there being agreement on that.

Kevin Vallier ([18:13](#)):

So these deliberative mini-publics with prediction market inputs, I think would be ... There's evidence, I think reason to think that they would be effective in improving the quality of policy-making. Now people say, you say this will work as [inaudible 00:18:27] ideal theory, but this sounds pretty vaunted, pretty optimistic. And I mean, in one way, it is. But in another way, there have been deliberative bodies that have been formed already in the very real world that have made recommendations of this kind about voting systems.

Kevin Vallier ([18:43](#)):

So I don't think it's that unrealistic. It's not any more unrealistic than any of the main ideal theories that have been proposed historically. Like socialism or even libertarianism. It's something I think we could try to push for in some ways. So that's a kind of deliberation I'm imagining where the politicians are sourcing, well-structured deliberation with good information among the public as a whole, in order to get a sort of real time sample of what the informed public actually wants.

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

My deepest thanks to Kevin Vallier once again, for taking his time to come back on Ideas in Progress. He's one of many excellent and productive liberal scholars out there doing the kind of work that it seems we need most right now. And not just right now either, because these problems are probably not disappearing anytime soon.

Anthony Comegna ([19:39](#)):

So three cheers for Kevin Vallier for taking on the thorny topic of trust in a polarized age, for making interesting and bold interventions into the search for solutions, and for displaying the kind of professional demeanor which might just get us there. And cheers for everyone else out there doing the same level of work. We need as much as we can get, because there's no guarantee that progress keeps on coming.