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[00:00:00] Hello, everybody, this is Marshall Powell. I'm the editor of the NBN. You're listening to a special podcast we're doing in conjunction with our friends at Princeton University Press. We call it the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast. In the podcast, we'll be publishing two interviews with Princeton authors every month. If you're interested in following along, you can subscribe to the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast on the NBN or on your favorite podcast app. The podcast includes not only interviews in the series, but all the interviews we've ever done with Princeton authors, hundreds of them. We hope you enjoy the series and we hope you visit our friends at Princeton University Press on the Web.

[00:00:41] Welcome to the New Books Network.

**Marshall Poe** [00:00:45] Hello, everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the New Books Network, and I'd like to welcome you to the Princeton Ideas podcast. Today, we have the pleasure of talking to Edmund Fawcett about his book, *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition*. I very much enjoyed this book, and I think you should run out and buy it and read it. Let me say to Edmund, welcome to the show.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:01:10] Very glad to be with you.

**Marshall Poe** [00:01:11] So perhaps you could begin the interview by just saying a few words about yourself and who you are.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:01:16] I am a political author. I was for 30 years a political journalist. I worked in many countries, eight years as the chief correspondent for *The Economist* magazine in Washington, but also for the same magazine in Paris, in Berlin, as well as Brussels. I was the European and the literary editor on the same magazine. So I've been a political journalist most of my career. But later on, I took to writing political books, and this is my second one.

**Marshall Poe** [00:01:53] Yes. We'll talk about the first one in just a second. As I said in the pre-interview, the traditional first question on the new books network is why did you write *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition*?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:02:06] I wrote this book because I'm bewildered by the predicament we are in. Speaking as somebody who is, I'd put it, on the liberal left, and speaking for all of us in that position, I think we often don't listen hard enough to the opposition. So I thought to myself, I really must understand the strength of conservatism, why it is so enduring, why it is so dominant, and what it has to say for itself.

[00:02:40] I wrote it for everybody concerned with politics on either side of the aisle who, like me, are bewildered and who wanted some sort of a political map. It follows a book of similar kinds, similar shapes, that I wrote six years ago ... on liberalism, which I thought again was for different reasons, not very well understood. Liberalism is so much part of the air we breathe, so much is taken for granted about it, I thought, again, that would be worth telling the history of. So both books start in the 19th century and run through until now. And both of them take in party political history, politicians, government, and the story of political ideas, neither of which, I sense, really make sense without the other.

**Marshall Poe** [00:03:38] I was a little bit envious as an author myself that you got to write these two books because you spent a lot of time on liberalism and then you got to shift over to conservatism, which must have given you great perspective.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:03:49] Well, I had to do a lot of reading. But, you know, having been in as a reporter in politics, I'd seen, as it were, politicians up front. And I'd seen government as an outsider on the inside, if you will. I'd always been interested in political philosophy and political thought, but somehow I wanted to try to put the two together. I'm not an academic. I'm not doctored, but I think I have a perspective that is really quite valuable. Somebody who's seen it from the inside but is also aware of how important ideas are, how important the way we talk about politics, how we fight about politics in the public domain. You know, the words we choose, the ideas we use. I've been fascinated always by that and sensitive to it. And I tried in both books to get something of that across, that combination.

**Marshall Poe** [00:04:48] That's great. Well, let's jump right into it. You begin the book by talking about conservatisms forerunners, and I note the word forerunners you mention [Edmund] Burke. Every conservative and perhaps every ollege graduate knows about Burke. So let me ask you this. It's full of ironies because one of the things you point out is that there was no conservatism in Burke's time. There was such a thing. So is this sort of nascent period of conservatism a response to liberalism and the French Revolution? That's kind of a cliché itself. Is that true?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:05:23] Well, I think Burke and those other forerunners were very, very important in that they gave later political conservatives a kind of arsenal of arguments and ideas. Burke himself is indeed a kind of intellectual godfather of modern conservatism. But in historical terms, Burke intellectually is really quite a late invention in the late 19th century. Why do I say he was before conservatism? Well, conservatism, like liberalism, didn't exist until the 1820s and 1830s because both of them were responses to a condition of society that Burke didn't even glimpse. What am I talking about? I'm talking really about the onset of modern capitalism at its fullest, and Burke was writing in the 1780s and 1790s. None of the forerunners really could see this. They couldn't see what they were facing.

[00:06:35] Burke's criticism of the French Revolution really amounted to two things. He said that the French state shouldn't have bought up and shouldn't have sold religious ecclesiastical land. And the second point was that political intellectuals were mischievous and shouldn't be trusted. They caused trouble. The first point really was of no interest to conservatives at all. The second point went into the conservative canon and has become one of their strongest points against the opposition that the conservatives were ... the sensible ones. "We respect tradition. We understand human nature. We don't make unnecessary changes." It's always these mischievous intellectuals who think they can see better, who believe foolishly in human progress and equality, who cause trouble and disturb things that don't need disturbing. And that message, in which is distilled from an enormous canon of books, speeches, and writings, is really what Burke the conservative amounts to. It did indeed have a small following in the United States in the 1830s. There was an American conservative, a lawyer called Rufus Choate, who always included Burke in his variable canons of worthys: Milton, Plato, Shakespeare, Burke. But this was really a sport. It was an exception. Burke in the United States was revived by Russell Kirk in the 1940s or '50s, and it's never really been an important influence in American politics. It's much too hothouse and rarefied a tradition. In Britain, Burke was revived in the late 19th century, as late as 1880s. The first sort of academic history of the Tory Party mentioned

Burke only in the first chapter and then more or less in passing. So Burke is often cited and he's up there. He's a sort of wonderful figure to appeal to, but actually, when you scratch there isn't a lot of conservatism there.

**Marshall Poe** [00:09:19] I liked the part of the book where you said that the people that constructed the conservative Burke had to go back into his writings and cherry-pick them aggressively, which is always the case. Is it fair to say that if Burke were transported somehow magically into our own age, he would be horrified by conservatism? And the reason I ask this question is the things which he really loved -- monarchy, aristocracy, established religion -- they're all gone.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:09:47] Absolutely. Possibly, he wouldn't be surprised, but he would be horrified. I think he'd be horrified by what he hadn't experienced, namely this great engine of change and material prosperity, modern capitalism, which at the same time turns traditions, society, expectations, and ethics upside down all the time. And I think Burke would have been bewildered by that.

**Marshall Poe** [00:10:24] This is one of the great ironies of the book, and the history of conservatism in general, is that Burke's conservatism is not our conservatism at all except in its reverence for traditions. That is modern conservatives, if I read you correctly, except capitalism and sometimes even love it, and they like democracy, which for Burke these were foreign things.

**Marshall Poe** [00:10:46] Yeah, that's right. I don't think one should exaggerate the difficulty here. Wise conservatives managed to keep two things in balance, namely that the defense of property, order, and capitalism. On the other hand, some sense of social community, some sense of tradition and ethical stability. These are these are the two voices of modern conservatism. When conservatism is successful, as in party terms, they have tended to keep those two in balance. I think they've got out of balance recently.

**Marshall Poe** [00:11:36] So let me ask this question. So you just differentiate between a conservative outlook and conservative ideas. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:11:45] I think what I was aiming at was to make clear that conservatism is like a practice of politics. The fact that it's an -ism is misleading because that makes us think that it's somehow a body of doctrine or a body of ideas, even a philosophy. But actually, conservatism, like liberalism, is a practice, a historical practice of politics. It has a beginning, hasn't yet had an end, but it's got a dateable beginning early in the 19th century. It responded to a particular condition of society. It has followers, politicians, voters, thinkers and so on. It has ideas. It has lots of them. It has an outlook. It has programs. But it isn't a philosophy. Philosophy sort of exists at a different level. I mean, this may seem a sort of unduly pointy-headed distinction, but I think it's very important because it's much too easy, I think, in looking at the political right, particularly today, to try and hunt out an outlook, a theory, and a philosophy. You have to do both. You have to get some sense of how the political right and the various thinkers justify what it is the political right is up to and how they set out its ideals and so forth. But at the same time, you have to see what actually the political right is doing. So you need to keep the two together. I think the way I put it in my book was that conservatism is a practice that has an outlook but is not itself an outlook.

**Marshall Poe** [00:13:36] Well, one of the things you point out in the book is that the ideas that conservatives in any given time affiliate themselves with and associate themselves

with have changed dramatically. The outlook that is that the conservative, you might call it, reflex has remained relatively the same. But, you know, as we just said with Burke, I mean, if he came and he saw the modern welfare state and if he saw capitalism, especially neo-liberalism, he'd be shocked.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:14:03] I think that's right. The character of what conservatives resisted in the early 19th century and what were trying to preserve hasn't greatly changed, but the content has. I mean, let's just take two examples.

[00:14:25] Property. Conservatives started out in defensive property, but what was property when conservatives got started? In the 1820s and '30s, certainly for conservatives, property was property in land. It was sort of invisible. Now, what is property? Property is virtual. It's invisible. It's utterly changed and it comes in so many forms one can't begin to enumerate them. This was a point that was noted by Marx. It was noted by Schumpeter that the nature of property was changing. So if you start out this beginning of conservatism and look now, when conservatives then defended property, in one sense, they're defending something very different from what conservatives defend now. In another sense, they're defending the same thing. Also, who owns property has hugely changed. Then, very, very few people own property. Now, many, many, many people own property. Rich, poor, all sorts of people. So, again, what property is and who owns it has vastly changed. But you can understand, we're still talking about property.

[00:15:42] Another example is the state. A political outlook has to have a view of the state. But when Conservatives in the 1820s and '30s were thinking about the state, it was an utterly different thing in one way from what we talk about today, just in a matter of size. The state then was tiny. Taxation was ... less than 10 percent. Now the state occupies 40 to 50 percent of a country's economy. Are these the same thing or not? Well, one can get very pedantic about that. But clearly, in one way, the scale and the reach of the modern state is vastly greater than the scale or reach of the state that early conservatives were talking about it. In another way, they're talking about the same thing. I mean, they're talking about a political authority which as liberals wanted, ought to be very constrained. And as conservatives wanted, they should be trusted and given full of full authority.

**Marshall Poe** [00:17:02] Regarding property, you reminded me of one of my favorite Tocqueville anecdotes. He comes to the United States. He's a French noble, obviously, and he wanders around the United States and he writes back to his correspondents astounded. He says Americans will buy a house just to sell it. [laughs] He was just gobsmacked by this.

[00:17:34] So let's move into the historical narrative. You describe four phases of conservatism, and the first one is from 1830 to 1880. You call that "Resisting Liberalism." I might have entitled it "Losing to Liberalism," but could you talk a little bit about that period?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:17:55] That would have been an equally good title. The first conservatives were the children and grandchildren of people who had been used to ruling. There's a German political historian who had a very nice phrase for this, which was that their attitude to government was "is not ought." They did what they ought to be doing. They knew what they should be doing. Why is because their parents and grandparents had done it. They were used to ruling. Conservatives by the 1820s and 1830s, they were the political outs. The liberals became the political ins. It took conservatives not very long to learn the new rules of the new game and to become equals to the liberals at the electoral game and indeed to beat them. And that roughly was the political story from the 1830s to

the 1880s. It was the smoothest in Britain where you had a parliamentary system that had some history and you had two parties, the Tories and the Whigs. The Tories became the Conservatives. The Whigs became the Liberals. The Tories eventually learned enough about electoral politics to prevail over the Liberals.

[00:19:35] The story was more complicated than the United States because the party labels don't quite fit. You had know Whigs and Jacksonians who morphed into Democrats and Republicans. The story is even more complicated and in interesting ways in Germany and France, because there the conservative forces took much longer to accept that the past had gone and that the old regime was never coming back. In France, the conservatives, as you could divide them into the compromises and those resisting the resistance, fought into the 1870s to try somehow and preserve the old regime to bring back the monarchy against the republic. In Germany, the story was even more troubling, of course. There wasn't really in Germany anything we would recognize as liberal democracy until 1918. Part of that reason for that was indeed the resistance of the German right to anything resembling liberal democracy. Although there were after 1871, the unification of Germany, that there were conservative parties that fought the electoral game and indeed were for the majority and compromises who had accepted that you would have a liberal Democratic political game.

**Marshall Poe** [00:21:22] I think one of the things that comes out in this chapter is how revolutionary political parties themselves were in this era. I mean, I'm a historian of Russia myself and in Russia in the 19th century Burke would have felt very at home because political parties were, by their very definition, subversive. That couldn't be allowed.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:21:45] That's quite right. I don't go into that particular aspect in my book, but I do mention the importance of some exemplary political leaders or their agents made modern political parties. To stand out, McKinley in the United States, with his agent, Mark Hanna, who helped create the modern Republican Party. And in Britain, Lord Salisbury, who started out as a fierce opponent of Democratic government but ended up realizing that the conservative cause was best served by developing a really successful modern party. And they had all kinds of things like political agents, local clubs, and so forth. That was really thanks to Salisbury and his agents. So the creation of political parties was extremely important.

**Marshall Poe** [00:22:51] As you point out, there were some excellent leadership on the conservative side that convinced Burkeans that actually political parties were a legitimate thing, that they weren't necessarily subversive, that they could play the electoral game and actually win. That's a kind of adaptability that you see in conservatism time and again. They managed to adapt themselves to something that in Burke's era that they hated, which is essentially liberal democracy with parties, but by the 1880s, you see them everywhere. Well, not in Russia, but in Western Europe at least.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:23:25] That's quite right. I think you have to go back to Burke and the critics of the French Revolution. You have to remember that at that time, although we talk about political parties and there were political parties in Britain -- Whigs and Tories in the Parliament -- but you're talking about political context in which a very small number of people participated. Many, many people still couldn't read or write. The political game was transformed in the next half century in ways I think that people like Burke and fellow critics of the French Revolution couldn't imagine. The first Conservative Party politicians were operating in a quite different context, and they learn in this period, in the first part of my book, from 1830 to 1880, they learned the lessons very quickly.

**Marshall Poe** [00:24:27] Yes, they really did. This shows true dynamism among conservatives, and they really do go onto electoral politics and foreign parties that are reasonably successful at the ballot box. I mean, even with a limited franchise. It's a remarkable period.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:24:49] They're very canny and clear about what they do. One of the great tricks, if you can call it that, of the conservative is to convince their opponents that they somehow stick in the muds, but that they're actually very fly and quick. They adapt themselves to modern circumstances.

**Marshall Poe** [00:25:03] That's a tremendous compromise with accepting political parties and they do very well in that sphere. Let's move on to the next period. You talk about 1880 to 1945, and you call this "Adaptation and Compromise." You talk about the creation of something that makes the mind sort of spin a little bit: liberal conservatives and they're center-right parties. Can you talk about the birth of the liberal conservative?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:25:30] It sounds like a red green. It sounds like a contradiction. In my defense, liberal conservatives, and I think I have a citation and forgive me, but it has slipped my mind which far-right German writer and lawyer actually said it, but I think from the 1830s there is a German writer observing the phenomenon of the liberal conservative. It's quite a good description. I think what I'm getting at is that over the course of the 19th century, as they adapted to modern liberal capitalism, conservatives had a choice. Either they remained resistant and recalcitrant, trying to bring back the past or hold up the future, or they became, in effect, right-wing liberals. What I mean by that is liberals who are keen on defending business, finance, and property, but who understand that they can't control all aspects of human life. They can't tell people what to think or do or how to behave. In other words, they have to be socially quite liberal. And I think conservatives, when they were successful in the second period, got that message and became what I call right-wing liberals or liberal conservatives. Who do I mean? Centrist figures like Baldwin in the United States or to push on a little further in the United States, I'm thinking of the tradition of Eisenhower or even Nixon. These were people who were liberal conservatives. In France, you see it in the Gaullists and the liberal Republicans. It's a very familiar compromise.

**Marshall Poe** [00:27:48] Would it be correct to say that in this period, 1880 to 1945, that you see a kind of conservative intellectual, a florescence, a kind of blooming of a recognizable conservative? I want to call it an ideology. I don't think people like Schumpeter or Hayek, people that come to defend ... free market capitalism. Can you talk a little bit about them?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:28:23] Sure. Can I go back a step? I think I kind of jumped the rails and leapt from 1880 into a later period. I think from 1880 to '45 conservative intellectuals are very interesting. They too faced a similar difficulty or a similar challenge to the one that party politicians had faced. Party politicians were facing the challenge with varying degrees of success, namely, how do we buy into liberal capitalism? How do we compromise with liberal modernity? If you look at this period, 1880 to 1945, conservative intellectuals actually have much more trouble in accepting what you could call the liberal Democratic status quo. They come in two forms. Either they stay in politics, in which case they become, as it were, extreme troublemakers on the right, particularly in France and Germany. I'm thinking of figures like ... Carl Schmitt in Germany, who keep up a fearsome and quite strong intellectual barrage against liberal democracy. Or they leave party politics and daily politics of any kind, and they become, in effect, cultural critics. They say liberal

modernity and liberal capitalism is a wrong or ugly way to live. Examples there are T.S. Eliot and jumping forward Roger Scruton or jumping backwards Coleridge and Carlyle. So you have really in this period, 1880 to 1945, you have two possibilities for people who don't get into the liberal Democratic game on the right. You can either go to the hard right and try to reject the system or step out of politics and become a cultural critic. Cultural criticism of this kind has always been, ever since, a very, very strong voice among conservative intellectuals.

**Marshall Poe** [00:31:14] Roger Scruton recently passed. He's very worth reading. In staying within this period, 1880 to 1945., and this is an age-old question, how are we to understand fascism within the framework which you've set up? What is it, and how does it relate to the conservative tradition?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:31:40] It's very good to try to get this clear. I mean, there are no knockdown facts of the matter. It's a little bit about what labels we use. But the labels I want to try and use, which I use in the book, exclude fascism from conservatism. How do I explain that? Fascism is off the liberal Democratic playing field. Conservatism is on the liberal Democratic playing field. It's on the right, een authoritarian. In other words, liberal conservatism is still just on the playing field. It's sort of at the edge. Fascism is off the edge. Why? Because fascism for two reasons. One is fascism and Nazis were historically quite specific. They arose after a particular historical time, after a ruinous and unexpected world war in which Germany certainly was defeated. They arose in the 1920s, but particularly the 30s at a time, again, of unexpected economic slump. And they were abetted by weakness in the political structure. Weakness in the support for democracy of conservative parties. But they were nevertheless, particularly Naziism, was quite specific. It involved the cult of the charismatic hero. It involved popular mobilization. It ruled to a large extent by fear and terror. Its enemy was a liberal society which it tried to totalize and control. Its enemy was not really democratic mobilization. It tried to use Democratic mobilization in its own defense. Anyway, I could go on about exactly what fascism was, but it is very distinct from conservatism.

**Marshall Poe** [00:33:55] I find this convincing, and one of the things I will remind people, and I used to remind my students, is that Hitler in the 1930s or the 1920s, he ran on a platform of eliminating political parties. He gave speeches about it. That was the point, to get rid of parties. This is not something any conservative would want to do.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:34:22] Not at all, particularly not a liberal conservative. Just to throw in an extra pointon fascism and conservatism, and it's often said rather loosely on the left as it were, politically when getting angry, which doesn't take much in politics. Somebody on the left says of a conservative, you're a fascist. This is nonsense. Another kind of counterpart mistake is to say, oh, liberal democracy: lots of trouble at the moment, terrible kind of partisan conflict, and many, many economic, social difficulties, et cetera, et cetera, all of which are true. However, we're not fascist, as if, you know, you can sigh with relief and say, good, at least we're not fascist, which is a counterpart, terrible argument to make. I suppose all of which, just finish this one up, is to say, let's remember that fascism is on the right. It's related in some way to conservatism, but it's historically specific, and let's hope it's over and done with.

**Marshall Poe** [00:35:36] Yes, let's do. So let's move on to the third phase you talk about, which is 1945 to 1980, and you call this "Political Command and Intellectual Recovery." Could you talk a little bit about it? it seems to me, at this point, conservatives embrace the

welfare state, at least they do in Western Europe, and then the money runs out. And then you have the Reagan and Thatcher revolution. Could you talk us through that period?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:36:03] Yes. I think conservatives in the United States also embraced what you have there of the welfare state. You don't have the universal health systems that are common across Western Europe. But that aside, you have very much a welfare state. On that, not all conservatives agree with that. In 1952, I think it was, when Eisenhower surprisingly won the Republican nomination against a great conservative, Taft, one tough supporter said, well, I guess this will be eight years of socialism. So I think you have what a hard-right Republican would call socialism. You have that in your country, too. So, roughly speaking, you're right. I mean, the thumbnail is you had 20 to 30 good years, despite all the difficulties in France from roughly the 1940s to the 1970s. And then, as you say, the money runs out. Not quite. There was a terrible inflation in the 1970s, coupled with unemployment, which was a great surprise to everybody, including, above all, economists. Government was overstretched and the free-market economists seized the moment and made of this crisis of the 1970s something that really needs addressing. You then had, first in Britain and then in the United States, followed actually not long after in France and Germany, with what you could call a free-market turn. I think a tiny bit of skepticism is needed here to distinguish between what the free marketeers advertised and what actually they delivered. The money didn't actually run out. By the 1990s, let's not forget, economies had stabilized. Inflation had gone. It was, again, a glorious period for liberal capitalism. Deficits were run down, and the welfare was increased, if anything. The free market advertize this great sort of slash and burn of government. But just to take the British example, when Thatcher came into office in 1979, I think government spending as a share of GDP was roughly 40 percent. When she left, it was roughly 40 percent. So looking at some growth numbers, this great revolution wasn't really as big as it looked. That said, I think for reasons that had less to do with the free market politicians than with social changes and economic changes that were going on anyway, the end of the happy period of the 1990s has left economically a large number of unsolved problems which, you know, the Reagan and Thatcher period handed on without answers to their successors. I think into that gap and of unanswered challenges, what I call the hard right has now plunged. And what am I talking about? I'm talking about the Republican Party as it became in the 2010s and now or the Tory party in Britain that became anti-European, the one we have now. And these are parties that conservatives will tell you that they're not conservative at all. They're not the true conservatism.

**Marshall Poe** [00:40:12] Yeah, I was going to say that brings us right to phase four, which is 1980 to the present. You introduced two terms. You've talked about one of them. But let's deal with both of them. One is hyper-liberalism and the other is the hard right. What is hyper-liberalism?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:40:26] Well, I suppose hyper liberalism is, and I'm losing my temper here and, you know, using slogan terms to get attention. I think what I mean ... the economic liberal who doesn't accept that there are limits to the idea that markets solve everything and the government is always the problem.

**Marshall Poe** [00:40:56] This would be, for example, the libertarians.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:40:59] Libertarians in the United States. Paul Rand would be an example. They have counterparts in Britain and the rest of Europe. I think I say hyper because you can accept that the market needs to flourish and not be interfered with so it fails to deliver or it fails to pay the bills and put food in the shops. You can accept that. And



yet, you can accept a strong role for government both in helping those who need help and by supporting the economy of the market when, as it regularly does, it gets into trouble that it can't solve itself. I think most moderate, liberal-minded conservatives would accept what I've just said. However, I think hyper-liberals don't accept that. I think they want to drive the idea that markets solve everything and that government ought to get out of our lives as much as possible. I think they drive that too far. They forget that there is a need for guardrails and safety nets, and they have, to a large extent, become very strong on the right, thanks in part to extremely well-financed think tanks and indeed very, very clever people who have articulated the libertarian gospel. But they're only one part of this strange creature that I call the hard right. The other part of it is a one nation kind of conservatism that talks in populist vein in the name of the people. So you have libertarians who are very globalist in their outlook. They're quite happy for international trade to go on without let or hindrance. On the other hand, they're in alliance with these people who are almost mercantilist in their economics and who talk very much about the defense of the nation. They're all for their own for welfare, so long as it goes the right people, not, for example, to foreigners. You see this in the Republican Party now to a large extent, and you see it in the British Conservative Party. You see these two elements, what I call hyper-liberalism in the economics and a one-nation, populist right on the other. It seems intellectually and politically even incoherent, but it's been extremely successful to most people's surprise in 2016 and 2017.

**Marshall Poe** [00:43:55] I was interested in the use of the word populism. I was interested when I hear it because as a historian, I keep thinking this isn't populism. This is nationalism. Am I wrong in thinking that?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:44:05] No, I think you're right. I think both terms, populism and nationalism, are tricky. I leaned heavily in the book and I think it's a wonderful short book written by a Princeton scholar, Jan-Werner Muller, on populism, and his very essential point is that using populism's own contested terms. Populism is an elite phenomenon. It's not as populists present themselves, populists defending the people against the elites; it's actually two elites fighting each other. The populists are the outs who want to replace the ins, and they claim to be speaking in the name of that imaginary being, the people. Let me think let me think of a recent example. A very, very good one would be Patrick Buchanan, who is the herald of Trumpism, if you will. He was a brilliant speechwriter for Nixon and Reagan. He spoke very well in the name of the people, this mysterious imaginary beast. But what really was he doing? He was speaking for one group of politicians who wanted to replace another. Similarly, in Britain, you have the the anti-Europeans. They claim to be speaking for the British people, whereas ,in fact, what they were doing wa they were a minority in the Tory party that wanted to become the majority of the Tory party. And indeed, if you're a European, you would say, alas, that's exactly what they did. Populism in the United States, historically, of course, is something quite different. It was rather like fascism and Naziism. Populism was something historically quite specific. It was the more working class or a farming element of a reform tradition and reform movements in the 1890s.

**Marshall Poe** [00:46:22] I was going to say this comes out wonderfully in the rhetoric of Donald Trump himself, who paints himself constantly as an underdog. You know, the multi-million dollar underdog, the guy who has everything who speaks for the people. He's masterful at it.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:46:41] And populists are. You put your finger there on something that's interesting about the hard right, because populism can be misleading. You put your

finger on something that's very interesting about the hard right is they have a very brilliant and and appealing set of rhetorical appeals. And one of them is the victim. We are victims. We have been victims of liberal elites. We are the victims of foreigners. A related theme is the true nation. The true people have been captured. Who have they been captured by? They've been captured by liberal elites, or they've been captured by foreigners. These are very, very appealing. But when you look at them, they're really quite empty. As indeed, you know, Trump the billionaire hasn't been captured by anybody.

**Marshall Poe** [00:47:43] No. I think that just right below the surface of this, and I speak as somebody who's from the Midwest, there's just a lot of resentment and it's resentment stoked by people like Trump against this putatively powerful East Coast or maybe Silicon Valley elite. But, you know, again, if you look at the numbers how like The New York Times is somehow an evil entity, do you know how many people read The New York Times? It's not that many. They're hardly controlling the national agenda when, you know, several hundred thousand people read them on a daily basis. It's a country of over 300 million people. They're not reading The New York Times.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:48:35] If we had more time, we could go back and find that that trope on the right from the beginning of how those actually with money and power and institutional placement and connections and network, they play the victim. It's a brilliant one.

**Marshall Poe** [00:48:57] Yeah, it really is. They get a lot of mileage out of it.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:49:03] The idea of the Eastern establishment or the Silicon establishment and resentment, I think it is delicate here because speaking as a sort of left-wing liberal who might be typed as a member of an elite, one has to tread delicately here and sensitively. However, I think the resentment against what's going on is palpable. There are a lot of folk who are in trouble and they shouldn't be. However, it's much too easy to blame an East Coast establishment or the Silicon Valley. That's one point. The second point is that actually when you look at who is doing the complaining, they're not actually in that much trouble. I'm not thinking of Trump, but I'm thinking more of the Trump vote or the Brexit vote, the anti-European vote for the new Tory party in Britain. When you actually look at the vote, it's quite a classic right wing vote. It's suburban. It's conservative. It's very familiar. So what's going on here? There is undoubtedly a lot of anger and resentment about, but what are these voters angry and resentful for? I think much the best thing I've read on this was written thirty or forty years ago by one of the best neo-conservatives, Daniel Bell, and he thought that it was to do ... with the resentment of local elites who feel that they have lost authority locally to much more national elites, whether in the universities or whether in the government. And I think there's something much more telling there in what is actually going on than this idea of distressed working class people who are revolting against liberal elites. That, to me, is crude, whereas I think Daniel Bell's very brilliant essay was in 1962, I think, with far more far-sighted and to the point.

**Marshall Poe** [00:51:34] I think you're right about that. I remember seeing a chart I taught for a while at Harvard University. In one of the hallways, they had a chart of a percentage of Harvard undergraduates who were from Massachusetts. In 1940, it was about 80 percent, and today it's about three percent. So you have seen the formation of a kind of national, I don't know what to call it... elite probably isn't the right word, but American culture has been nationalized so that the localities, I think, feel somewhat neglected. I speak as somebody who is from the localities in this formation of meritocratic ... national elite.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:52:29] I think that's absolutely right. When people look back, I think what you can call the political geography of what has gone on over the last 40 to 50 years is going to become a much bigger part of the story than many of the things we can see in front of our eyes now. The same kind of difficulty in France, where localities feel isolated by a growth in national trends that don't feel to be in their control, that's very true and very important.

**Marshall Poe** [00:53:12] I get the sense from my people in the provinces in Kansas that they feel neglected somehow by the formation of this national culture, that they weren't really part of it.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:53:26] Universities are a very good example.

**Marshall Poe** [00:53:27] The university system is definitely part of it. The other thing you hear about universities is [that] they've become a kind of whipping boy for the right.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:53:39] Absolutely. If you look at them, I don't know exactly when the switch happened, but among Republicans universities always used to be very highly esteemed, whereas in the 2016 election, I think it was, if you look among Trump voters, universities, as you say, have had become the whipping boy.

**Marshall Poe** [00:54:09] I wanted to ask you one more question, and it has to do with something on the last couple of pages of the book. You write a sentence that goes like this. "We are living in an era of the right." And then a paragraph follows... "The left is everywhere in retreat." Can you talk about that?

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:54:31] Yes. I think what I meant by that was that the left as either alternative government or an alternative vision of society with aims and ideals, I think is in retreat as are the traditional post-1945 parties of the left. This may seem surprising, particularly since it is quite possible that if we were having this conversation in two weeks time I would look quite out of date because the Democrats had won the White House and possibly even the Senate, but I think here by the left, we need to mean something rather more specific than the Democratic Party today, which, after all, has very, very few left-wing policies when you look at it hard. And don't forget that Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who had a more left-wing agenda, they're nothing socialist in the historic sense, they were badly bested in the primaries by Democratic voters.

[00:55:47] So the left I'm talking about is much more the strongly social democratic or even socialist left that was still quite a force, certainly, in Europe in the post-1945 period but now it really is in serious decline in France, Germany, and in Britain. That element is in France and Germany and even the classic social democratic parties are now less than 20 percent of the vote in Britain. Jeremy Corbyn, who tried to run a more "make the Labor Party into more of a left wing vehicle" got badly beaten in the election last December. So I think the left in party terms is in decline. I think intellectually it's in decline. The neo-Marxist tradition is very alive in the universities, mainly in the humanities department and not in the economics departments. So intellectually, I think the left is in decline. I think it's in decline in party terms. Finally, the rise of identity politics has indeed, important as it is and important as its campaigns are, they do not add up together as a governing philosophy. I think the left has much of its energy now is distracted into those campaigns, valuable and important as they are. I think those three reasons were behind that pay-off line where I say the left is everywhere in retreat.

**Marshall Poe** [00:57:34] Well, Edmund Fawcett, I want to thank you very much for talking with us today.

**Edmund Fawcett** [00:57:38] I'm very, very pleased to have done this and much enjoyed the conversation.

**Marshall Poe** [00:57:43] Thank you very much. Let me tell our listeners that we've been talking to Edmund Fawcett about his book, *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition*. This is Marshall Poe. I'm The editor of the New Books Network, and you've been listening to the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast. I hope you turn in next time.