

003PUIdeasmuirhead-rosenblum.mp3

Marshall Poe [00:00:01] Welcome to the New Books Network.

Marshall Poe [00:00:05] Hello, everybody, this is Marshall Poe. 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.

Marshall Poe [00:00:45] Hello, everybody, and welcome back to the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast. I'm Marshall Poe, the host of the podcast. And today I'm very happy to say we have Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum on the show and we'll be talking about their terrific book, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Russell and Nancy, welcome to the show.

Russell Muirhead [00:01:06] Thank you.

Marshall Poe [00:01:07] Absolutely. My pleasure. Perhaps you could begin by telling us a little bit about yourself. Nancy, why don't you start?

Nancy Rosenblum [00:01:14] I'm the Senator Joseph Clark Professor of Ethics in Politics and Government at Harvard emerita and my field is political theory and the history of political thought. The book before this, which was probably most relevant to your listeners, is a book on political parties called *On the Side of the Angels*.

Marshall Poe [00:01:35] Thank you very much. Russ, would you like to say a few words?

Russell Muirhead [00:01:38] Also, like Nancy, I teach political theory, and I teach it at Dartmouth College. And also, like Nancy, I've worked on parties and in place of parties and partisanship in Democratic theory. Nancy and I have worked together on that topic and lots of different pieces. It is probably that that got us into thinking about conspiracies because now we just take for granted that there will be parties and democratic politics and they will contest openly with each other for office. But prior to the modern age of democracy, parties were thought of as conspiracies and they were thought of as seditious. When their actions were uncovered, their leaders were usually killed.

Marshall Poe [00:02:24] [laughs] It's pretty rough. I know this very well. I'm actually a historian by training, and I did my research and writing on the early modern period before there were any parties.

Russell Muirhead [00:02:34] You know about it.

Marshall Poe [00:02:36] I do know about it. So, as I told you in the pre-interview, I begin with the same question. And that is, why did you write *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Russ, why don't you go first since we let Nancy go first last time?

Russell Muirhead [00:02:52] As I was just saying, we got into it from thinking about parties. That's how we got to thinking about conspiracies, conspiracy theories, and conspiracism in contemporary politics. Of course, we immediately saw that there was a tendency to recategorized parties as conspiracies to convert the legitimate opposition into an illegitimate opposition, to take opponents and describe them as enemies and even suggests that the right thing to do with an opponent after you win an election is to lock her up. And obviously, this development is alarming for anyone who thinks that there's something to be said for liberal democracy. We hope that by describing it, by describing the development, by naming it, we could maybe help arrest it.

Marshall Poe [00:03:50] Nancy, would you like to add anything to that?

Nancy Rosenblum [00:03:52] Yeah, I'll make it a little more specific and circumstantially-oriented, which is that it became very clear in the 2015 campaign leading up to the election that Donald Trump had a conspiracist mindset, that he saw things in terms of him being the victim of covert sources, that this was his almost automatic response to political events, and what really drove me into wanting to do, not just the Dissent piece, as we wrote a few short pieces, but a book on this was what happened right after the inauguration.

[00:04:32] Russ will remember this. During the campaign and after the inauguration, Trump said that it was the biggest inaugural crowd in history, one of the greatest ever. Nothing comparable. And when the National Park Service launched the photographs of Inauguration Day days afterwards that show that the crowd was modest in comparison to what the president had claimed, he said that the photographs were doctored, that the National Park Service had this conspiracy to make him a liar or to depress the size of his crowd. This was, I think, the earliest notion of a deep state. The fact that it would cover everything from the petty to the most fundamental to the operation of government.

Marshall Poe [00:05:22] Yeah, actually I remember that. Russ, you were going to say something.

Russell Muirhead [00:05:25] It's just this extraordinary moment. I mean, it's preposterous. But it wasn't said in an ironic way. I really thought the pictures were doctored. It also came within 24 hours of the inauguration. It's like he couldn't enjoy being president.

Marshall Poe [00:05:43] You would think becoming president, that's a pretty big deal. You think he'd be pretty happy for at least a weekend.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:05:53] One more thing about this particular event. One of the arguments we make about why this is such an assault on democracy, and the first argument we made, was that it's disorienting. I mean, the National Park Service doctoring these photographs. It was an assault on common sense and everyone's sense of reality. Like, what did it mean? Ultimately, as we began to work this out, we thought about, first of all, what are the perils of a population this disoriented and doesn't know what to think because common sense had been assaulted. But also the fact that it was leading to something we saw developing amazingly quickly and that is what we call epistemic divide or epistemic polarization about what it means to know something. It's not just the administration was lying or misinformed or exaggerating or whatever. It was making claims about events that were happening that had no basis in the kinds of evidence and argument that we think of as reasoning rather than politics or anything else. There is this divide deep within the partisan divide we think about what it means to say you know something.

Marshall Poe [00:07:10] Now, one of the most interesting parts of the book and the part that I really enjoyed, and this perhaps has to do with my background as a historian, is this distinction you make between classic conspiracism or conspiracy theories -- I shouldn't use the word conspiracy theories, as I'll explain in a second -- classic conspiracism and a new conspiracism. Can you tell us the distinction between that. Why don't we begin with you, Nancy?

Nancy Rosenblum [00:07:35] Well, a classic conspiracy theory is what any theory is: it's an explanation. It tells you about what underlies an event and what can explain what's happening. What makes it a conspiracy theory is that it says that things are not as they seem. You have to look at the covert forces and the nefarious and malignant forces that are undercover, and they have to be revealed. But other than that, conspiracy theory works the way any theory does. It produces evidence and arguments. There are dots and the dots have patterns and with the patterns you can discern what the intent of the actions really was. And it's a theory, too, because if you expose it, the consequences of the conspiracy can be reduced or unknown. And you have to know what the goal of revealing conspiracy theory is. Is it justice or is it independence or better sense of law? So there's usually some sort of ounce of utopianism behind conspiracy theory, that if you can reveal it and if you can eliminate it, then the world will be better.

Marshall Poe [00:08:48] And then the new conspiracism, what is that exactly?

Russell Muirhead [00:08:53] If classic conspiracy theory starts with a real event or something that we're trying to understand -- why Britain would put Massachusetts under martial law in 1775 or how nineteen people plotting from the sands of Afghanistan could possibly successfully attack the United States of America at the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon -- if classic conspiracy theories are trying to explain an event that everyone can see, the new conspiracism doesn't try to explain an event. There's no event in Pizzagate. What is Pizzagate, the narrative in which Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman, John Podesta, are engaged in this child sex trafficking ring centered in the basement of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C.. What does that explain? It doesn't it doesn't start from an event. It doesn't adduce any kind of evidence. There's no effort like mimicking investigative journalism to gather facts, to find patterns in those facts. And it doesn't, in the end, hold the powerful to account. It doesn't make the world more understandable or more controlable. It makes the world more strange, more mysterious, more magic, and more uncontrollable.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:10:19] In a phrase, what's happened is that conspiracy and theory have become decoupled. We have conspiracy without the theory. And, as Russ said, it dispenses with any kind of evidence and argument, and it works by bare assertion. The election is rigged. Period. Climate change is a hoax. Period. The deep state is planning a coup. Period. No evidence. No argument. There's nowhere to go. There's nothing new.

Russell Muirhead [00:10:48] In each of those cases, it's almost like one word substitutes for theory. Coup. Hoax. Rigged. And that word hoax, by the way, is used over and over and over again in all kinds of different contexts to induce a conspiracy that's never explain. It's never described in any detail because it is just bare assertion without even a narrative.

Marshall Poe [00:11:15] Yeah, I would almost call it a gesture, and I'll come back to that in a second. But before we move on, not to belabor the point, the JFK assassination and the idea that, let's say, the mob was behind it. That's an empirical assertion you can go find

out. Actually, I interviewed a person, a very serious professor, a historian who actually went down this rabbit hole and really looked into it. I can't remember exactly what he said, but he definitely used the tools of our trade, that as academics or scholars or even scientists, and he tried to find out whether it was true. So that is a classic conspiracy theory, right?

Nancy Rosenblum [00:11:54] That is an important point. Conspiracy theorists are like social scientists or like investigative journalists, and what they're claiming and the explanation that they're offering takes books and volumes.

Marshall Poe [00:12:08] Oh, yeah. This guy spent a lot of time.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:12:12] Just think about the assassination of JFK. How many books have been written about this, or the World Trade Center discussion from the left and the right. We like to use the example of Architects and Engineers For 9/11 Truth, and if you go to their website, it's all about the temperature and so on and so on. Somebody once said, and I think it's worth repeating, real conspiracy theory just is social science and that social science, to reverse it, is conspiracy theory. You're trying to find out the hidden paths of power.

Russell Muirhead [00:12:50] If the world was really easy to understand, we wouldn't need social science.

Marshall Poe [00:12:53] We'd all be out of a job.

Russell Muirhead [00:12:58] It's hard to understand, how does the most protected person in the world get assassinated by a lone gunman? The cause is so puny, the effect so massive, and the whole event so unlikely that it really defies understanding. And I think, you know, conspiracy theorists want to see causes that are in proportion to effects. And so they often induce a cause, whether it's the mob in that case or the U.S. government is in on the planning, that at least puts a cause in that balances the equation and that's on par with the effect that the killing of a United States president.

Marshall Poe [00:13:35] Yeah. If we were philosophers of science, we'd say that the assertion was empirically rich. There's actual data.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:13:44] This is the point in which I have to insist that some conspiracy theories are true. They're correct. And some conspiracy theories aren't even progressive. In fact, the progressive era of politics in America, which is where investigative journalists and others uncovered smoke-filled rooms in which candidates for elections were chosen in corporate boardrooms in which monopolies maintained. They called it muckraking, and what we would call it is investigative journalism or social science. And out of those conspiracy theories, which turned out to be too true, all kinds of democratic reforms that made the country more directly democratic and reforms that are still with us.

Marshall Poe [00:14:26] Yes, I was going to say I was just listening to the confirmation hearings for Amy Barrett and one of the senators went on a long and really quite detailed explanation of the really Super PAC money and the Bradley Foundation that was behind the appointment of conservative judges to the judiciary. Believe me, it was full of facts and links. I was listening to it on the radio, but you could easily see a board with lots of things trace between this person and that person in that foundation and that person. I didn't know about any of this. I don't doubt it's true.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:15:06] Jane Mayer wrote a book called Dark Money, which is an investigation into a conspiracy theory about the course of money. Naomi Oreskes wrote a book on how climate change deniers work and how they operate. The conspiracy among them to deny climate change for industrial gain. There are true conspiracy theories and they operate in a certain way.

Marshall Poe [00:15:32] Yeah, this is one of the things, just to editorialize for a second, that I really liked about your book is that you do take the time to say that a conspiracy theory is really just a theory and they can be correct. I remember I was interviewing a guy who wrote a book about conspiracy theories, and I brought up the Catholic Church and the abuse of children. For a long time, that was a fringe conspiracy theory, right? That was true. We know that now. So sometimes they're right. I think it's an important point to make, and they serve an important function.

Russell Muirhead [00:16:04] Absolutely. They can be very liberating.

Marshall Poe [00:16:08] Yeah, I think that's exactly right.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:16:11] That's a very good example, because sometimes conspiracy theories are not so much about the event itself as about the cover-up.

Marshall Poe [00:16:20] That's exactly right. But a lot of people, you know, made the assertion that the Catholic Church was involved in this cover-up and they were thought to be lunatics. But they weren't going to fix it all. It's an interesting and good point. So I gave the example of the JFK assassination as a classic conspiracy theory. But let's take another one that you use, and that is the notion that Barack Obama was not born on the territory of the United States. This is called the birther conspiracy. Can you explain how that fits into the model of the new conspiracism? Nancy, do you want to begin?

Nancy Rosenblum [00:17:01] Well, first of all, it's alive with Trump, as you know. He was one of the principal people behind it. It's a very good example of the new conspiracism, because it's a claim. It's a bare assertion that he was not born in the United States. When people produce the birth certificate, they said that the birth certificate was forged and so on and so forth. There's no evidence. There's no argument. I can remember vividly going on TV and saying he sent these investigators to Hawaii and you won't believe what they're finding. Of course, there were no investigators who found anything. The point is that what makes these things work is not evidence and argument. The power behind new conspiracism is precisely the sheer assumption. The one word, the two words, or a lot of people are saying it. What makes it operate, and what gives it validity, is repetition and the number of people who are repeating it. The question behind this new conspiracism is then who repeat these things and why and what political function is it serving and why does it operate.

Marshall Poe [00:18:10] Russ, did you have anything to add to that?

Russell Muirhead [00:18:12] That's just a key thing I want to underline, as Nancy said, which is what gives these assertions authority is not a process of validation that we kind of trust someone has gone through involving investigation and facts. It's repetition. And when enough people start saying it, it starts to seem true or rather seems something other than true. Just seems true enough. True enough to be repeated one more time, retweeted, forwarded, liked, and the new conspiracism invites you to lower the bar for deciding what's

worthy of repeating and invites them to think that the truth is kind of irrelevant. It's just whether it's true enough. Repetition makes things seem true enough. And of course, the effect of something like the birther conspiracy is not to make the world more understandable, to explain a vexing event. The effect of it, the function of it, in the world is to delegitimize the political opposition, to take somebody like Barack Obama who for Republicans would be an opponent and convert him from somebody who might be mistaken or have prioritized the wrong values from their perspective and convert him from that sort of person who can be argued with and disagreed with into a person who is illegitimate. He is not qualified to hold office. Therefore, he is someone we don't really have to argue with or contest with according to the rules of constitutional democracy. He's an illegitimate force and needs somehow to be arrested or eliminated.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:19:58] If I can add to this. We're getting some crucial points here. When Pizzagate is put online and people like it and retweeted, what is it that they believe? Do they believe that there is a pizza parlor in which Hillary Clinton is cutting the faces of children and wearing them as masks? Well, one person did believe that because Edgar Welch went with a shotgun to the pizza parlor and began to shoot up the place. He was arrested and in jail he said, I guess the intel wasn't 100 percent. But for most people, it's not the objective facts of it are not what matters. What matters is that it conforms to their hostilities, to their sense of performative aggression. That Hillary Clinton is so evil that you can circulate a story that she was the head of a child sex trafficking ring, and that when these things are circulating you are creating a kind of we, a collective that's bound together, not by the facts of Pizzagate but by the ferocious animosities. And I think this is what links into social media, too. I mean, many people have written about the Internet and the importance of it behind conspiracism and many other kinds of misinformation. And that's true. But we emphasize something else, which is that social media has a special congruence with conspiracism. Why? First of all, because you can actually see and measure that a lot of people are saying it. And second of all, you really do create these social networks, in which people people are joining into a common we, that if they were out there dispersing conspiracy theories they wouldn't have. They are joined together in what they think of this as political participation.

Russell Muirhead [00:22:05] The ferocious animosity that you just referred to, the collectivity that's animated by ferocious animosity, is a group that becomes very difficult to make politics with and that's very reluctant to make politics with other groups or with other people. In general, there's sort of a baseline choice: we can either make politics with other people or make war with them. If you're not going to make war, if you're not going to take up violence and try to dominate and protect yourself against others who are dominant, then you have to make politics. You have to learn how to talk and argue and compete with each other without getting violent. Making politics requires an ability to disagree. How do you disagree with somebody who is a concentration of pure evil with somebody who had sexually trafficking children? How do you maintain an argument with someone like that? How do you argue with somebody who's constitutionally ineligible to hold office and and who's loyal to some set of foreign powers, the other allegation about Obama? So this ferocious animosity makes democratic politics very, very difficult.

Marshall Poe [00:23:16] Yeah, I wondered if you could make a distinction for me between a slur and a slander and the new conspiracism. Where's the line between a slur and a slander, just something that you say that denigrates somebody else and the new conspiracism?

Nancy Rosenblum [00:23:38] You see around us all kinds of slurs and slanders and lies and misinformation and disinformation. But none of them are the same as the conspiracies we're describing because what's essential, the element of a conspiracy plot, is precisely that there is malignant intent to undo something. "A coup against the president." I mean, you can slur Nancy Pelosi all you want, but you're not saying that Nancy Pelosi is necessarily involved in the plot, in a cabal, to perform a coup against Trump. So it's not the lying of it. It's not the misinformation of it. It's not just the aggressiveness of it. It's the fact that behind it is this sort of assumption of a narrative of a conspiracy in America. Let me give you one more illustration of the importance of the fact that it's true enough, that whatever you believe about the objective evidence of the thing there's a deeper truth behind it that you're going to assent to and organize around. And the example I like to give is Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who was Trump's first press secretary, as you know. They were circulating a video that showed a Muslim immigrant attacking an American citizen, and it turns out that the video really was a false video and that was established. At the press conference, people asked Sarah Huckabee Sanders about this video and her answer was really quite extraordinary. Her answer was, even if the video is false, the threat is real. And that's what's important right here. It was true enough because the threat of Mueller performing a coup is true.

Marshall Poe [00:25:27] In your way of understanding, these things are really an expression of hostility. They are kind of an elaborate expression of political hostility.

Russell Muirhead [00:25:36] You know, I really want to go further than that, I think that democratic politics is full of hostility. The stakes in politics are always high, and it's hard not to feel some hostility toward one's opponents if you're activated or if you're attuned to what at stake. You mentioned slanders and slurs. I think, for supporters and campaigners in the midst of a campaign, a special national election, there'll be plenty of slanders and slurs and hyperboles about the opposition candidate. But we haven't generally heard candidates for national office, for the presidency, routinely slander the other side. Maybe their supporters do, but they usually try to stay at arm's length from that. Democratic politics requires an ability to regard the other side as legitimate, even though you're quite hostile to everything that it stands for and wants to accomplish if we're going to rule. Legitimate such that if it won an election according to the constitutional rules of the game, it would get to rule.

[00:26:55] And, I think of McCain and Obama in 2008. I'm sure there's a great deal of hostility between the two campaigns and the two sides and the activists and partisans on each side. But, you know, when McCain was presented with a birther conspiracy by a voter in a town hall in 2008 who said, I can't trust Obama, I've read about him and he's an Arab. McCain cut her off and said, you know, no, ma'am, he's a decent person. He's a family man, a citizen. I just happen to have disagreements with him on fundamental issues, and that's what the campaign's about. This was John McCain insisting that he was running against an opponent, not an enemy, someone he had fundamental disagreements with, but not someone that was an enemy of the state, as it were, or a threat to the country.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:27:51] So Russell used the word that's key to our analysis that there are two consequences of this new conspiracism, and one is the disorientation we spoke about earlier. But the other is the delegitimation of all kinds of political institutions. The delegitimation of the opposition party is the most evident, and we spend a lot of time on it. It's not saying that the opposition that the Democrats are wrong. It's saying that they should be locked up. It's saying that they are treasonous. And I could roll out for you 20

times in which Trump and others in the administration had talked about Democrats, per se, as being treasonous or controlled by people you've never heard of. People in the dark shadows and so on and so forth. And this delegitimation of political opposition declaring that are enemies, not a loyal opposition, really strikes at the heart of representative democracy, which requires a political competition. You can want to win the election. You can want to win a majority. You can even want to see to it that the opposition doesn't win for several election cycles. But you don't say that they're treasonous. What allows you to say that they're treasonous, what justifies it, is the notion that they are a conspiracy to undo the nation. They're a conspiracy to undo Trump, or they're a conspiracy to undo the fact that we are a Christian nation or a white nation, that they are doing something that's wholly malevolent, covert, and abominable.

Marshall Poe [00:29:29] Yeah, I was about to say that this reminds me of the Amy Berrett nomination again, because as I was listening to it, it's always rather bracing to hear, or comforting, how decorous the senators are to one another, how everybody is so incredibly polite, because that's not what you hear in the Twittersphere or any place else. They really go out of their way to be nice to one another, and that goes right to your point about delegitimation. The other thing that you touched on in the book is the delegitimation of science or fact. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Russell Muirhead [00:30:06] Yeah, the second, along with the delegitimation of the political opposition, which is the party candidates, there's also the delegitimation of almost every source of expert knowledge, but especially the governmental sources of expertise that reside in executive agencies. These executive agencies that are staffed with highly trained, almost nerdy types that focus on excavating elemental facts, like the economists at the Bureau of Labor Statistics who come up with the unemployment rate. And when Trump was running, he insisted that these economists had conspired to make the unemployment rate look artificially low so as to benefit Barack Obama, the incumbent. I guess the really shocking thing is that even as president, of course, he has been running against his own executive agencies and his own bureaucracies and the FBI and the CIA in the State Department and really all over. He suspects that there is a deep state, or he alleges that there's a deep state, that's out to defeat him. The consequence of that is that this teaches Americans to regard elemental facts that come from certain agencies, say about the average temperature of the surface of the earth as fundamentally fraudulent. Once we don't have access to these kinds of facts, once we think that they're completely unreliable, that they're the consequence of a conspiracy and therefore completely untrustworthy, it gets to be very difficult to make effective decisions. It's hard to calibrate a policy, to have good results, if you don't know anything about the state of the world. This is going to ultimately hobble both conservatives in power and progressives in power. It's going to be hard for anybody to make an effective decision if they don't have access to elemental facts. The delegitimation of experts really ends up making democracy not function very well and has this consequence of delegitimizing democracy itself, by compromising its performance and making it look unworthy. Right.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:32:38] I think it's worth saying what delegitimation means, because sometimes it's used synonymously with mistrust, and I think that sort of dilutes the significance of delegitimation, Americans are mistrustful of institutions and politicians and one another. It's democratic to be skeptical and mistrustful, but not too deeply, not everywhere. Trust that's lost can be regained. delegitimation is something much more dramatic. I think it means that this person or knowledge-producing institutions has no meaning, has no value, and has no authority. It doesn't have any authority to command

our consent or our compliance. This is dramatic because we don't know how you would re-legitimize an institution that has been distressed and characterize in this way.

[00:33:39] I'd like to say one more thing, if I could, about these knowledge-producing institutions and their delegitimation. It's been possible not just by making conspiracy claims, but also by installing loyalists. There are actions here, not just words. There's a German phrase about how the Nazis kept the agencies. The institutions were there, but they put in people who would obey the unlawful commands. And this is true of autocratic and authoritarian regimes. I'm not making a comparison to the Nazis, but it says that you can derail institutions and hijack institutions and put them to other purposes and circumvent them and invent institutions. Although they look like what they were or what they ought to be they're not because they're operating as if the actual occupants of these offices, the civil servants and the knowledge producers and so on, are conspirators.

Marshall Poe [00:34:43] So let me ask you a question, and it involves a crystal ball, so you can feel free not to answer. So in terms of delegitimation, parties and science or knowledge-producing institutions, is this a lasting phenomenon? Or has the ground really shifted underneath our feet or is this just a passing phase? Once Trump is gone and so on and so forth, we will revert back to the norm, whatever that was prior to the advent of Trump.

Russell Muirhead [00:35:22] When we were finishing the manuscript, we were hopeful that by the time the book came out, a lot of what we were describing would have disappeared. It turns out that in that time politics became just completely enveloped by conspiracies. When Trump leaves office, our politics won't be so enveloped by it. But I think it will continue to be profoundly affected by it. And part of the reason is that the cause of it independent of Trump, we have a new communications technology that allows anybody to say anything to everybody in the world for free, which allows these bare assertions that have so much political salience and can be so attractive to certain committees to be disseminated. In the old communications technology, you had to get past an editor or a producer in order to get something on the air into the paper and to get past it you had to show that there was some evidence in support. Now a tweet can go viral and anybody can communicate with hundreds of millions of people for free. So we're still going to see it. It may be, and I hope it is, somewhat less disorienting than it's been over the past several years, but it will still be here.

Nancy Rosenblum [00:36:46] Clearly, I think that Russ is right about this. I don't think it will go away, and I don't think it will be pushed into the margins and the fringes from which it came. I think it's a weapon that's been proved to be quite effective if you're willing to pursue it sort of exhaustively and everywhere. It's going to be made available, and some of it will continue out there in the political culture. But again, to emphasize, that if you don't have a conspiracy-minded president who has a compromise sense of reality and the capacity to impose it on the nation, conspiracies won't be as influential as it has been. And I see a sign of hope in COVID-19, I think that reality bites. I think that this disease and the disinformation about the disease and the attacks on the doctors and the CDC and so on and so forth has had a powerful effect because it's allowed those people who aren't themselves dedicated conspirators, it's given them backbone and it's given them a very powerful reason to push back against this. Death anxiety works, and it has a lot of push to it. I think we're seeing a push back here.

Russell Muirhead [00:38:01] And, you know, by the way, the first response to the virus in February 2020 by the Trump administration was to insinuate that was a Democratic hoax.

The reason that didn't work, the reason that it didn't have any sticking powers, because of the reality of it and the reality of its lethal threat. What we're seeing is that the antidote ultimately to conspiracism is common sense and access to a shared world. The facts and events supplied to us by our senses, by our actual experience of reality and ultimately what will contain and defeat conspiracism is common sense. If a democratic citizen citizenry loses that access to a shared world, the facts and events, it's fair to say that democracy is impossible.

Marshall Poe [00:38:58] I have a friend who has, in the age of Trump, taken to using the phrase "the reality of reality."

Russell Muirhead [00:39:09] That's good.

Marshall Poe [00:39:10] I thought so too. Yes, I know there is reality because I keep running into it.

Russell Muirhead [00:39:16] Sounds like a good philosophy seminar.

Marshall Poe [00:39:21] Well, I want to thank you both for talking to us today. We have a traditional final question on the New Nooks Network. I want to ask you both, and it is this. What are you working on now? Nancy, do you want to begin? Do you have a project you'd like to talk about?

Nancy Rosenblum [00:39:34] I just finished a project that's just being published for Daedalus magazine. I edited an issue called Witnessing Climate Change. And it's actually related to this because it's about professionals in all aspects of climate change, not just scientists, but also journalists and others. And when it is that they decide that they have to speak out and become witnesses. Isay it's related to what's happening now, because the same thing is becoming true about doctors around COVID-19. People who would never think of sort of entering in politics and becoming advocates speak out.

Marshall Poe [00:40:10] Russ, would you like to talk about your current project?

Russell Muirhead [00:40:12] I'm working on a little book called Can the Constitution Work?

Marshall Poe [00:40:18] That's a small topic.

Russell Muirhead [00:40:21] I'll answer it in several pages.

Marshall Poe [00:40:28] We'd love to have you both back on. Let me tell our audience who we've been talking to. Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenbloom about their terrific book, A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy. Russ and Nancy, thanks very much for being on the show.

Russell Muirhead [00:40:42] What a pleasure. You're welcome.

Marshall Poe [00:40:46] Thank you very much for listening. You've been listening to the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast on the New BooksNetwork. I hope everybody has a great week.