

EconoFact Chats: Racial Hostility in Modern America

Eduardo Porter, New York Times

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Michael Klein ([00:12](#)):

Hello, everyone. Welcome to Econofact Chats. I'm Michael Klein, Executive Editor of Econofact, a nonpartisan web-based publication from the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At Econofact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein ([00:52](#)):

We're recording this in the second week of June, 2020. Over the last two weeks, the nation has been roiled by protests that at their core are about racism. So I'm very pleased to be speaking today with Eduardo Porter about his new book, *American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise*, which was just published. Eduardo writes about economics for The New York Times, where he was the economic scene columnist from 2012 to 2018. And he served on the Times Editorial Board from 2007 to 2012. Welcome, Eduardo.

Eduardo Porter ([01:28](#)):

Hi, Michael. Thanks for having me.

Michael Klein ([01:30](#)):

It's a pleasure to have you on the show. I began reading your book before the death of George Floyd. It's tempting to say that this topic has taken on renewed urgency in the wake of the events over the past days, but of course the urgency has always been there. You document in your book, some of the long history since the Civil War that kept black Americans as second class citizens.

Eduardo Porter ([01:56](#)):

Yeah. My argument is pretty straight forward. That kind of racial hostility, that's the kind that allows a cop to kill an unarmed black man in Minneapolis with a bored expression of a plumber fitting pipe, while his colleagues look on. Has pretty much warped the American experience since the birth of the nation. Straight, simple. But it's true. It's embedded in every institution, from the criminal justice system to the labor movement. It has stunted the American social contract. And it has allowed us to build a really weak society compared to other advanced countries.

Michael Klein ([02:37](#)):

Well, that's something that a lot of people know, but what really impressed me about your book was the breadth of knowledge that you brought to it from scholarly research. I thought that was really impressive. I think you cite something around 300 scholarly articles. And you make the research results really accessible and compelling, which as a board member of Econofact, you know is what we try to do as well. When you were reading through this research was there anything in particular that stood out, either about the approaches taken or the lessons learned?

Eduardo Porter ([03:11](#)):

This book wouldn't exist without all of this research and economics, sociology, history, psychology, political science that has been going on for decades now. I would say that one of the first pieces of research that caught my attention when I was thinking about this was some old work by Jim Poterba from MIT, who was looking at attitudes towards school funding by older Americans. So in communities where there were more older Americans, he detected a decline in the appetite for funding schools. What caught my eye on this was that if the ethnicity of the elderly was different from the ethnicity of the kids of school age, the distaste for funding of public education was actually worse. They were less likely to want to fund education if the kids were of a different ethnicity or race. And so, I mean, from then on, I just went through the literature and found just amazing stuff. I would point out that perhaps the guy, the scholar whose work I relied on most was probably Alberto Alesina from Harvard, who passed away just a few weeks ago.

Michael Klein ([04:39](#)):

That was a tragic loss for the profession.

Eduardo Porter ([04:42](#)):

Amazing. Yes. Father of political economy and an overall really great guy. But he and colleagues did a lot of work on how ethnic divisions affected public thinking about the social safety net, and about public goods in general, and implicitly about how we think a society should work. And he did a really interesting work comparing Europe in the United States to kind of look at how come Europe had more robust safety nets and so on than the US did. And he had some really compelling work suggesting that it was about America's racial diversity. These lines of race, racial hostility, racial mistrust, kind of stopped us from building the kind of institutions that would help our society navigate better as a collective.

Michael Klein ([05:38](#)):

Some of these things are... Once you tell people that it's like, they say, "Well, yeah. I guess that must be right." But what's really important is that it's well documented, which of course is what we try to do in Econofact as well. But you go beyond just the research. You also talk about the history of this. I found it very striking that in your discussion of the New Deal and what FDR needed to get it through. You cite a political scientist who calls the New Deal, affirmative action for whites.

Eduardo Porter ([06:13](#)):

Yeah. Because the New Deal was basically built for white America. To win support of Southern Democrats, Roosevelt basically ensured that major parts of the New Deal excluded non-whites. The Federal Housing Administration to take one New Deal creation, which expanded home ownership. Refused to back loans in predominantly black neighborhoods or for black people, period. The labor codes allowed businesses to offer whites a first crack at jobs and authorized lower pay scales for blacks. Social security and the Fair Labor of Standards Act excluded at first domestic and farm work, which employed two out of three black workers. So there's a whole... The evidence is pretty hefty that the New Deal was really welfare for whites.

Michael Klein ([07:09](#)):

Yeah. And this cast a very long shadow of course, to the present day, because these things have long lived effects.

Eduardo Porter ([07:18](#)):

Yeah. And not only that, there is a moment in history where Lyndon Johnson tries to extend... Under pressure from the civil rights movement, but there's this moment in the '60s in which kind of legislation

invites people of color to share the bounty of American citizenship. To share into this safety net, to share into the programs. And one of the arguments that I make, and I think it's pretty well supported by research and by history is once kind of blacks are invited in with the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act and so forth. That's when the attitude of the American population towards the safety net entirely collapses. Support for some sort of social democratic ideal, just collapses. And from then on the basic argument that welfare is unworthy. It rewards laziness, idleness, and some form of corruption becomes ever stronger in American politics. And our safety net becomes weaker as a result.

Michael Klein ([08:29](#)):

One of the things I found really interesting when you talk about the safety net, one of the most important parts of the safety net, especially for older Americans is social security. And as you point out, social security enjoys more widespread support than many other safety net items. But also social security benefits white Americans, more than members of minority, because of just actuarial things that white Americans tend to live longer.

Eduardo Porter ([09:00](#)):

Yeah, that's right. And that's probably what makes it so politically resilient. But all these other programs that have benefited minorities more generously are all very politically vulnerable. And so that's why you see social security is never touched. But the rest of the social safety net, from Medicaid, to the AFDC, to food stamps, those are constantly under political pressure.

Michael Klein ([09:33](#)):

And it's not just sort of grassroots political pressure, but it was used by politicians as well. You talk about Reagan's famous welfare queen example and the way in which that was a political talking point that was used.

Eduardo Porter ([09:51](#)):

Yeah. I think the inflection point is the presidency of Richard Nixon.

Michael Klein ([09:55](#)):

[inaudible 00:09:57].

Eduardo Porter ([09:55](#)):

Where he turns the argument... So we're moving from Lyndon Johnson where the main programs are around civil rights in the war on poverty. And we move into to the Nixon era where the emphasis becomes crime and the war on crime. And both the rhetoric and the newly empowered criminal justice system targets very specifically people of color. And from that moment on, well, then we have I think a continuum where criminal justice becomes kind of like the main tool of social management. And it is targeted squarely on African Americans and also Latinos. And welfare just becomes increasingly demonized. And one of the ways that it's demonizes with props like this, like the welfare queen. The welfare queen is corrupt, is a corrupt beneficiary of welfare. And this was a way of tarring welfare and welfare beneficiaries altogether. And of course, she's black.

Michael Klein ([11:08](#)):

So this obviously has resonance today, the issue the policing of minorities and money being spent for police forces rather than community outreach and things like that. So this continues to the present day, to literally today. One of the other things I thought was really important and interesting about the book is that efforts to exclude African Americans and Hispanics from the benefits of citizenship caused untold

damage to white Americans too. Could you just recount the experience that you had in Harlan County, in Kentucky in 2018?

Eduardo Porter ([11:51](#)):

Yeah.

Michael Klein ([11:52](#)):

You point out that 40% of the people live under the poverty line there. And government assistance adds up to more than half a family's income. But tell us a little bit about your experience at the town hall meeting there.

Eduardo Porter ([12:06](#)):

Yeah. It was quite surreal. Harlan is this kind of legendary place in Appalachia's coal country. The site of the year long strike by the United Mine Workers in the 1970s to improve wages and working conditions that made it into this movie called Harlan County USA, which is fantastic. But today, Harlan has always been a very poor place and a very white place. There's very few immigrants, very few people of color there at all. And I think that today about a third of Harlan's adults hold a job only. But, so I'm there, of course, in this place where the majority of the population rely on government aid in one form or another. And I'm at this town hall where the governor, governor Bevin, he was a tea party favorite, who was governor at the time. He was defeated in this last election by Beshear.

Eduardo Porter ([13:11](#)):

But I was there in 2018 when he was governor. And he takes the stage at the town hall in Harlan. And first he starts talking about local stuff. About bears rummaging through the trash and stuff like that. And everybody's like, "Yeah," grunting and whatnot. And suddenly he starts talking about the abuse of government welfare. Then he got a standing ovation. And about how these lazy bums were abusing the government. And these are guys that are all relying on government assistance. So it was to me a bit of a disconnect. Medicaid is immensely important for the population of this County. But when Bevin started talking about limiting access to Medicaid, by requiring every able-bodied adults that wanted Medicaid, to get a job. Which would have bumped thousands of people in Kentucky off of Medicaid. These guys all cheer.

Michael Klein ([14:17](#)):

So there's, you think, this clear racial undertone to this [crosstalk 00:14:22].

Eduardo Porter ([14:21](#)):

And that's what I find is really interesting. Because then when I went around and chatted with folks about their support for reducing access to Medicaid. And of course this was a County that Trump won handily in the 2016 election. The ideas that came bubbling up were a lot about outsiders taking advantage of the program. So I heard a lot about immigrants. "Well, we can't even help ourselves. How are we going to support immigrants? So we need to lock down on these programs because otherwise they're going to be abused." So there's this sense that there's some other outside a border that encloses my tribe that is going to abuse the system. And that other has been articulated by the political system as it's an other of race. But it's not the only other.

Eduardo Porter ([15:19](#)):

So for instance, in our current political system, immigrants have played the big role of other. And it's a role that mixes race, and ethnicity, and citizenship and language. The others in the campaign of 2016 were

Mexicans, who were streaming in across the Southern border, and then bringing crime to the United States. So this sense of protecting your own tribe from others, and that there's this other group, which in the political debate has been people of color, is a powerful motivator for this argument against welfare.

Michael Klein (16:00):

Yeah. In the book, you, I think do a very good job of mentioning that the American racial conflict is not just black versus white, but there's also the Latino and the Asian side to the story as well. And I like how you included personal touches, like the time you and your son, Mateo, were on the subway and he tells you, "Maybe we shouldn't be speaking Spanish." You also worry that your son, Mateo, and your daughter, Umah, won't be accepted into the American melting pot. What do you see as a future for your children and for children of color more broadly in this country?

Eduardo Porter (16:34):

Well, I'm a pessimist. So that's why I decided to take a job in journalism. So I find-

Michael Klein (16:43):

... You should have been an economist too in that way.

Eduardo Porter (16:46):

There you go. I could have gone that way too. But let me put it this way. I think there are some reasons for optimism out there. If we look at, for instance, at the demonstrations that have... The protests across American cities, we see that there's a lot of young white people there too. It's not just like in the demonstrations of the 1960s, which they were much more homogeneously black protesters against oppression by whites. The guys out there on the streets, there's a lot of whites, and Latinos, and Asians out there protesting alongside African Americans. And so that kind of-

Michael Klein (17:39):

... Polling seems to suggest that even if they're not out there in the protest, there's relatively broad public support compared to the late '60s and early '70s as well.

Eduardo Porter (17:49):

Absolutely. Absolutely. I was reading this morning that two-thirds of Americans support the cause of the people out in the streets today, these days. And urban America is much more diverse than it was 50 years ago. People have learned in American cities to live together, to understand each other, as individuals, as people, rather than as representatives of groups. So I think that this whole idea that some people call contact theory makes sense that we can build more of a sense of being one. So every time I get this kind of like, yeah, I want to feel optimistic, and warm and fuzzy. Then you look out the window and you look at what's determining our politics today. And our politics right now are actually being driven by what I would call white identity politics of older whites.

Eduardo Porter (18:41):

And so I kind of think they're being driven by fear. So just as in the 1960s, where whites seemed to me to react against the civil rights movement that invited blacks into the package of benefits of being an American implied. Right now, I see lots of whites that are super scared by the notion that 20 years from now, they are not going to be a majority of the population. And they are going to at some point lose a hold on political power that they've had forever. And so what I see now and what I see for the next two decades or more is a political conflict that's going to... In which older whites are going to be doing all they can to prevent this loss of power. And I think that this fear is what has given us our current president. And

I think that this fear is going to be a very damaging and very powerful force into the future. And so, that kind of tempers my optimism.

Michael Klein ([19:52](#)):

Well for a pessimist, there was some optimism there. So thank you for that. Eduardo, thank you very much for joining me today. And congratulations again on the publication of your very important book, *American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise*. I hope your book gets the attention it so well deserves.

Eduardo Porter ([20:14](#)):

Thank you, Michael. I do too, man. I'm here, we're hoping together.

Michael Klein ([20:19](#)):

Definitely.

Eduardo Porter ([20:20](#)):

Okay, man. Take care. This was good. Thank you.

Michael Klein ([20:31](#)):

Thanks for listening. This has been Econofact Chats. To learn more about Econofact and see the work on our site. You can log into www.econofact.org. Econofact is a publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. Have a good day.