

Scene on Radio

REBROADCAST: The Second Redemption (Season 4, Episode 8)

Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e8-the-second-redemption/>

John Biewen: I mean, I know we Americans don't agree on things. But we all—well, most of us—agree we should settle our differences through democratic means, right? Yeah, well.

Hey everybody, it's John Biewen. So, it's the middle of January, 2021 – a week after the right-wing, white supremacist, reactionary assault on the U.S. capitol – an attempt, incited by the sitting president, to reverse the results of an election that he lost by force. January 6 was disastrous but came close to being much worse. It's probably not over – there no telling how much more violence there might be in the coming days, months, years. Those of us who want to defend the very partial democracy that we have in this country, and to remake it into something more robust and healthy and just, we've got work to do.

Chenjerai and I have talked over the last few days about doing a bonus episode. We agreed that the most important things we have to say about this moment, well, we've already said them. In Season 4, from 2020, especially. Our previous seasons on this show, Seasons 2 and 3, on white supremacy, Seeing White, and patriarchy, the MEN series, with Celeste Headlee, they have a lot of insights, too, I think, for people trying to make sense of what's happening.

So if you haven't, or maybe even if you have, Listen to Season 4 in our feed, *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*. It's an exploration of U.S. history and this country's relationship to democracy. It's not the history most of us got in our textbooks or from our mainstream culture. And one unmistakable lesson is that the blatant rejection of democracy in American politics did not start with Donald Trump.

We think there are two episodes in that 12-part series that offer the most powerful context for what happened on January 6th: this violent assault on democracy, backed by lots of powerful people including many members of Congress. The first is Episode 4, titled *The Second Revolution*, which looks at the decades after the Civil War: the Reconstruction era and the destruction of Reconstruction. In our conversation in that episode, Chenjerai talked about what ultimately became a national consensus in the 1870s among the people in charge, you know, white people South and North, an agreement to let bygones be bygones.

Chenjerai: So you have the Civil War, and it's kinda like, Okay, well we had a spat. 600,000 people lost their lives. But now it's time to get back to business. Reconciliation for white folks, lynching and Jim Crow for Black folks.

John Biewen: Sound familiar? Something to keep in mind when you see people now – especially the very people who enabled and encouraged this wannabe dictator president and this attempted coup – when they say “let's move on” and call for “national unity.” We've been there before and we need to be clear about what those people mean by national unity.

The crushing of Reconstruction was called Redemption. Which leads to the episode that we think is even more immediately relevant right now: Episode 8, The Second Redemption. We're in it, it's been going on for forty or fifty years, and, like the first Redemption, hostility to multiracial democracy is at the heart of it. You could say January 6th was a violent crescendo of the Second Redemption. With more crescendos to come, I'm afraid.

[Music]

That's why we're dropping this episode back into the feed. It's actually a favorite episode of ours from Season 4, anyway. Enjoy, if that's the right word ... and be safe out there, people. Safe, and wide awake.

John Biewen: So Chenjerai, our story this time starts in the 1950s, before we kind of move forward from there. So if I say to you, think of 1950s America, what comes to mind?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: The 1950s. Is that when America was great? Or was it the 1850s.

John Biewen: I think some people would say so, yes.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I keep trying to figure out when America was great. I can't remember. But what do I think of.... I definitely picture it in black and white.

I mean, there was definitely some sh** going on, I mean, you had McCarthyism. There was a lot of civil rights organizing in the mid to late 1950s, and that's because, you know, Jim Crow segregation and racism across the country. There's lynching happening, but you know, I think the sort of paradox of the 50s is that the dominant image that even I grew up with is cool diners and father knows best on TV and just suburbs, you know?

John Biewen: A woman's place is in the home. Leave it to Beaver. That white suburban conformity is a really important part at least of the image that most of us have now. Eisenhower in the White House. So I think, mostly, we kind of think of it as an uptight, conservative time in most ways, especially if you think of kind of white American culture. But check this out, this is Nancy MacLean. She's a history professor here at Duke University.

Nancy MacLean: We tend to think of, you know, the Red Scare and the development of the Cold War and think of conservatism as being ascendant. But actually, if you go back to the sources, people on the right, at least, you know, who consider themselves people of the right and conservatives, were very dissatisfied, particularly with the Eisenhower administration. They finally had a Republican in office, and they saw him as not backing up from the New Deal, you know, accepting Social Security, workers' rights, et cetera, as a fait accompli. He then sent federal troops into Little Rock to

protect Black students who were trying to go to Central High School in Little Rock. So for all those reasons, people on the right were very angry and very disappointed with Eisenhower as well as with the Democrats. And so they really wanted to challenge all that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. So even though I'm thinking of the fifties as this time that white folks love, what you're telling me is even the fifties was too radical for white folks.

John Biewen: That's right, I guess for a lot of white folks. And really, it shouldn't be surprising to us or our listeners at this point, what Nancy is saying. That some people on the right were frustrated in those decades after World War II. I mean, think about the ground that we covered in episodes 6 and 7 of this series.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. 'Cause in the fifties, you're still in the aftermath of the New Deal, and a lot of those progressive reforms are still in place. Nancy MacLean mentioned Social Security, which expanded in the fifties to cover everybody. So Eisenhower didn't just support Social Security, he actually expanded it so it could include some of those domestic and farmworkers who were disproportionately Black and brown.

John Biewen: Right, who'd been excluded. The 1950s were also the peak

decade for labor union membership in the U.S. The top marginal tax rates on the rich were higher than ever, up to 90-percent under Eisenhower. And because of policies like those, the income gap between the richest and the poorest Americans was narrower than it had ever been.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And I mean, it still wasn't like some progressive utopia, right? White supremacy is entrenched, there's racial complications with some of the unions. But the Civil Rights Movement is ramping up, and it's now getting help from a liberal majority on the Supreme Court, right? So in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* comes down, and that's this landmark decision that sort of, at least officially, ends the segregation of schools. But then Nancy MacLean mentioned that they actually enforced it in certain ways too, right? It was in 1957 when Eisenhower sent troops to protect the Little Rock Nine, the Black students who were integration Central High School in Arkansas. Yeah, it's interesting to me, why didn't he send like, a racial dialogue team down there, you know?

John Biewen: Yeah, you have federal government sending troops into the South, shades of reconstruction. So yeah we tend to think of the 50s as a conservative period - but as Nancy MacLean said, millions of conservative Americans were unhappy with this picture and they wanted to move the country to the right. Most of those people would have wanted to do that through small-d

democratic politics. You go out and campaign, you win hearts and minds, you elect the candidates you want. But at the same time, Nancy says, there was a smaller group of people, on the far right, who had even deeper grievances.

Nancy MacLean: There were others who were in this teeny tiny libertarian movement at the time, who really went back to what was called the American Liberty League of the 1930s, that fought Roosevelt and the New Deal and described it all as communism and socialism, and said the workers occupying, you know, plants like GM in Flint, Michigan should be shot if they didn't leave the premises. I mean, really hard right stuff. And so that, I discovered in this research, was actually kind of the seeds of what we're now seeing in the billionaire radical right that's been convened by Charles Koch.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's like you always gotta go back further than we think to get to the root of this stuff. And I know a lot of people have probably heard things about the Koch brothers, but I bet most of us don't think about their origins going back quite that far.

John Biewen: We're gonna connect those dots. Nancy MacLean and some other scholars make the case that some of those libertarians back in the Fifties, and the people who followed in their footsteps, adopted strategies that went

beyond politics as usual. They didn't just want to persuade voters based on this or that policy, you know, hey it's best if government doesn't do this or that thing. They wanted to delegitimize government itself for all but a few narrow purposes. And they wanted to take power away from the people who wanted government to do things for the public good.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So in other words, these libertarian true believers realized that in order to get the policies they wanted, they were actually gonna have to restrain democracy. But then they were gonna go even further than that, they were gonna create a whole new way of thinking, a new culture, a new kind of society. In fact, they even saw the idea of society as the problem.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 4, Episode 8 in our series exploring democracy in the U.S. We call the series, The Land That Never Has Been Yet. And by the way, if you're just finding us, I recommend you go back and listen from the start of the season – these episodes do build on one another and tell a bigger story. I'm John Biewen, producer and host of the show. You were just hearing from Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika, my collaborating conversationalist for the series. He's a professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University, a podcaster,

artist, and organizer. He'll be back later in the episode to talk things through. This time: The latest reaction in the face of expanding democracy in America. Some call it the Second Redemption. Remember, "Redemption" is the term southern white supremacists used for their reactionary movement to crush Reconstruction after the Civil War—to end federal support for multiracial democracy. So, if we're living through a Second Redemption, how did it take shape? And how did these antidemocratic ideologues and their political representatives bring us to where we are in the 2020s?

[Music]

John Biewen: Nancy MacLean wrote the book, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*, published in 2017. To MacLean's surprise, much of her story wound up centering on a man named James Buchanan. Not the pre-Civil War president, but a fairly obscure 20th century academic.

Nancy MacLean: So, James McGill Buchanan. And if listeners haven't heard of him, don't feel bad. I never had when I started and most people have not. He was quite content to be in the shadows...

John Biewen: Buchanan was born in Tennessee in 1919. His grandfather was a

populist governor of Tennessee in the 1890s, and James called himself a socialist as a young man. His time as a grad student at the University of Chicago converted him to pro-market economics.

Nancy MacLean: Um, interesting personal history. But he went on to become the first U.S. southerner to win the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, which he was awarded in the Reagan era, in 1986. And I came across him because of his intervention in this Virginia schools fight....

John Biewen: It was a schools fight that came in the wake of the Brown decision. Remember, in that case, the NAACP, led by attorney Thurgood Marshall, argued that segregated schooling was inherently unequal and did grave damage to Black children. Attorneys for the southern states claimed their school systems were “separate but equal,” and they made a states’ rights argument: Education should be left to the states and the feds should butt out. Chief Justice Earl Warren had been appointed to the Supreme Court just months before by the Republican Eisenhower—this would become another reason for conservatives to be mad at Ike. On May 17th, 1954, Warren delivered the unanimous landmark decision.

Voiceover [Brown opinion]: We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate

educational facilities are inherently unequal.

John Biewen: The court said segregation deprived Black children of their right to equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. With this decision, the Warren Court revived one of the major constitutional amendments passed during Reconstruction almost ninety years before.

[Music]

John Biewen: In Virginia, the white elite is outraged. In early 1956, the state's all-white leadership launches what it calls "massive resistance" against school integration. The state legislature passes a law allowing the governor to simply close any schools that try to desegregate in response to federal orders.

Gov. Thomas B. Stanley: ...that no public elementary or secondary schools in which white and colored children are mixed and taught shall be entitled to, or receive, any funds from the state treasury for their operation.

John Biewen: That's Virginia Governor Thomas Stanley. His successor follows through and uses that law. In 1958, Governor J. Lindsey Almond shuts down schools in Norfolk, Charlottesville, and Front Royal, kicking thousands of white children out of school rather than see them share their classrooms with Black

students. In 1959, federal and state courts find the Virginia law unconstitutional. The courts order the schools to open and desegregate. By this time, most white Virginians are ready to relent. Many business leaders and moderate white parents now support plans for gradual desegregation. But, enter James McGill Buchanan – his friends called him Jim. A few years earlier, Jim Buchanan had opened a center at the University of Virginia, named for Thomas Jefferson and devoted to libertarian economics. Historian Nancy MacLean.

Nancy MacLean: At this moment, this crucial moment in 1959, he and his colleague at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville issued a report that basically tried to refute the moderates and to push for, effectively, privatization of Virginia's public schools as a way of evading the federal courts, but also using the economist's language that this would create competition and end monopoly and supposedly bring better schools....

John Biewen: The report suggested a way out of the dilemma: The state government could just stop running schools. For good. Buchanan and his colleague said government should fund education for all children, through vouchers given to families, but schools should be run as competing private businesses. Being private, they could choose which students to admit with regard to race or anything else. The report did not discuss race, except to say the authors objected to, quote, “involuntary (or coercive) segregation, and involuntary

integration.” Today, Buchanan’s defenders insist he was not a racist. In any case, Nancy MacLean says Buchanan’s argument for school privatization in that charged environment, Virginia 1959, shows a special kind of anti-government zeal.

Nancy MacLean: It was such an odd thing to do, after the federal courts had ruled, after schools have been shut down in three Virginia counties in the fall, 13,000 white kids locked out of their schools by these massive resisters, this movement of, you know, again, very moderate whites, they intervened. And I just thought, who would do that? (Laughs) You know, I was really quite taken aback by it and stunned. So it got me paying attention to him and he became part of my project, but it was some years actually before I realized he was a key figure in his own right who needed pursuing.

[Music]

John Biewen: MacLean came to see Jim Buchanan as a key figure when she found that he’d later joined forces with Charles Koch. The Koch Brothers, Charles and his brother David, are among the world’s richest people, oil billionaires from Kansas and huge donors to right-wing political causes for the last half-century. Their father, Fred Koch, was an early funder of the John Birch

Society, the far-right group founded in the late Fifties. Nancy says in 1969 or '70, Charles Koch came across Buchanan's antigovernment writings, and reached out. The two men shared a deep frustration that their extreme libertarian views were so unpopular. They saw what they considered a pernicious trust in government among most politicians, academics, and journalists. In the early Seventies, Jim Buchanan wrote about the need to, quote, "create, support, and activate an effective counter-intelligentsia."

Nancy MacLean: And he was also quite plain spoken about how to do it. He said they needed to create a gravy train. That's his language, a gravy train for kind of the care and feeding of this libertarian counterintelligentsia. Which is, of course, what Charles Koch then began to do.

John Biewen: Koch brought a virtually unlimited source of funding. Buchanan and a few other academics brought the intellectual firepower. Together they began building an array of think tanks and advocacy groups, and populating them with like-minded recruits.

Mark Levin, Fox News: ...the Director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute....

Bill Hemmer, Fox News: ...Manager of the Heritage Foundation's Mees

Legal Center. Nice to see you, sir....

John Biewen: Today, those organizations provide an unending stream of opeds, cable news commentary, and legal and scholarly ammunition for the political right.

Nancy MacLean: The Cato Institute, of course, which started as the Charles Koch Foundation. The Heritage Society. Charles Koch boasts that he provided seed money to the Federalist Society that's been so much in the news with the Brett Kavanaugh seating on the Supreme Court. We now have a Federalist Society Supreme Court majority....

John Biewen: The list goes on: Americans for Prosperity, which provided the supposedly grassroots Tea Party Movement with policy talking points and financial and organizational muscle. The Mercatus Center, which advocates for government deregulation. And ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council. Its members pass hundreds of state laws every year, cutting taxes and environmental regulations, disempowering unions....

Nancy MacLean: It's really a stunning infrastructure. I at one point tried to keep track of it, and we're talking about literally hundreds of organizations.

[Music]

John Biewen: What is the ultimate goal of this movement? MacLean says Jim Buchanan – who died in 2013 – essentially wanted to undo the 20th century, and said so.

Nancy MacLean: This notion that in the 20th century, as citizens started to organize, as we rethought the obligations of the government to its people with things like the Wagner Act that empowered workers, the Social Security Act, unemployment compensation, anti-discrimination, so forth and so on. In his view, those were all errors.

John Biewen: Errors. Meaning not just policy that Buchanan and other hardcore libertarians didn't like. But illegitimate uses of government.

Nancy MacLean: And I think actually for people to grasp how radical this libertarian cause is, it's helpful to know that they see only three legitimate functions for government. So that is, providing for the national defense, ensuring the rule of law, and guaranteeing social order. In shorthand, armies, courts, and police. Beyond that, they do not think government should be going.

James McGill Buchanan: Uh, but then we got this sort of progressive movement around the turn of the century, and then that was finally put in play in the debacle that we went through in the New Deal, where they were just searching around for everything. And as Jonathan Hughes, an economic historian, once said, the main thing the New Deal did was invent new ways to spend money. And we've been living with that ever since.

John Biewen: That's Jim Buchanan in a 1993 interview. Fifteen years earlier, in 1978, he was the interviewer, on the right-wing Free to Choose Network, talking with the iconic Austrian libertarian thinker, Friedrich von Hayek. This is Hayek talking political strategy.

Friedrich Hayek: You can never expect the majority of the people to regain their belief in the market as such, but I think you can expect that they'll come to dislike government interference.

John Biewen: A bit later in their conversation, Jim Buchanan floats the extraordinary idea that people who collect a government paycheck, or receive any kind of government help, should not be allowed to vote.

Jim Buchanan: Again, it goes back to the delusion of democracy, in a way. But we've got ourselves into a situation where people who are direct

recipients of government largesse, government transfers, are given the franchise. People who work directly for government are given the franchise, and we wouldn't question them not having it. And yet to me there's no more overt conflict of interest than the franchise to those groups.

[Music]

John Biewen: That suspicion of democracy was and is shared by some others in the hardcore libertarian movement. In a few minutes, we'll tell more of the story of that movement's rise to power. But first let's step back and get some help describing this ideology that has mounted such a sweeping takeover—of the Republican party and, really, of American society.

[BREAK]

Wendy Brown: I'm Wendy Brown. I am a professor of political science, with a specialization in political theory, at the University of California, Berkeley. My new book is called *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of anti-Democratic Politics in the West*.

John Biewen: There's a lot going on in that book title – in fact, let's hear it again.

Wendy Brown: In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of anti-Democratic Politics in the West.

John Biewen: And there's that word, neoliberalism. Among other reactions, it can cause some eyes to glaze over. But stay with me. Wendy Brown says, to start with, in trying to grasp where we are, it helps to understand the kind of democracy that took hold a couple hundred years ago in the United States and in western Europe.

Wendy Brown: It's a very specific form. It's a form we usually call constitutional or parliamentary democracy. It's often sometimes called, from the left, bourgeois democracy, because of its rootedness in property rights, and in a fairly thin notion of popular sovereignty. We also need to note it has from its origins in modernity been bound up with capitalism. So it's very hard for us to be able to figure out what we mean by democracy apart from markets, apart from property rights, apart from what the Europeans call liberalism. In our own understanding, liberalism has a very particular meaning, it means liberal versus conservative. But the classic meaning of it is an emphasis on individual rights, individual liberties, and maximizing that.

John Biewen: Sound familiar? Think of the framers of the Constitution and their emphasis on private property, and the individual freedoms they enshrined in the Bill of Rights. And, on the other hand, their open suspicion of what Wendy calls popular sovereignty, the idea that the majority should rule. That's why the architects of the Constitution included all those levers that gave an elite minority veto power over the working-class majority—the Senate, the presidential veto, the courts, the Electoral College. Americans grow up learning that our system is just what democracy looks like. But, never mind the collectivist self-governance practiced by some Native Americans or many other traditional societies all over the world. Wendy Brown says democracy American style would look strange to the Greeks, too.

Wendy Brown: Even in school, even in college level courses, ancient Athens, the so-called birthplace of democracy in the West, is usually held out as a place that cared most about freedom and especially free speech. But the fact is, the ancient Athenians understood that the basic pillars of democracy consisted of three kinds of equality. The equal right to speak and be heard, the equal right to participate in political deliberation, and the equal right to hold office. Political equality, that is, the ability of every human being to equally share in power, however power is shared in a democracy, is the fundamental, the fundamental basis of democracy.

John Biewen: The most powerful people in American life have consistently rejected that vision, as we've seen. But, Brown says, if you believe that democracy is about equality, U.S. society has grown far less democratic in the last few decades.

Wendy Brown: Equality has become a dirty word. Inequality, not only economic inequality, which we all know has reached new extremes. But also every other form of inequality has just been normalized and even sanctified. Whether how we board an airplane or where we sit in a baseball game. Everything is organized according to tiers of access and inegalitarianism, and that's just become naturalized and normalized. And that, I want to suggest, in turn, has also become normalized in our political culture. We accept unequal access to the basic sharing of power that is at the heart of democracy.

[Music]

John Biewen: When Brown talks about this trend, of attaching a price tag to everything, she's evoking neoliberalism. People debate its definition, but almost everybody agrees on this much: Neoliberalism means an embrace of market economics. And it holds individual liberty, the right to not be told what to do, as infinitely more important than equality or collective well-being. But Wendy Brown,

who is one of the leading thinkers on neoliberalism, has changed her mind about another key aspect of that movement: what she calls traditional morality. Religion, patriotism, the family and its traditional structures, including patriarchy....

Wendy Brown: I think the mistake that's often made is that the usual kind of progressive account of this is, ugh, you know, these are the demagogues hoodwinking the people. Whether the demagogues are in the pulpit or whether they're in the White House. Hoodwinking the people and, you know, handing them God and nation and family as values while, you know, stealing their property, their wages, their everything else and allowing the fat cats to kind of make off with the goods, and....

John Biewen: In other words, Wendy says, critics on the left often assume the real neoliberal agenda is purely economic and political. And that the elites who will benefit most from that agenda may spout values like religion and the traditional family just to attract votes from people who care about those things.

Wendy Brown: And of course, you know, there's something to that. But that's not a very interesting story. It always has a kind of Wizard of Oz quality that I think is not a good explanation for deep political formations.

John Biewen: For her new book, Wendy dove into the work of the most formative neoliberal thinkers, especially men like Friedrich Hayek and the economist Milton Friedman.

Wendy Brown: And it's important to remember that somebody like Margaret Thatcher carried Hayek's [The] Constitution of Liberty around and said, this is my bible. This is the society I'm trying to build. So, what do you find when you dig deep into these bibles?

John Biewen: Brown was surprised to find that for these thinkers, and especially Hayek, a good society is organized around two major forces: free markets and traditional morality.

Wendy Brown: And you need them both. You need traditional morality to organize our customs, our conduct, our ways of being. And you need markets to organize our modes of production and exchange. And they understand them as working, importantly, together.

John Biewen: For Hayek, markets and traditional morality have an important thing in common: He claims they both arise, or evolve, naturally in human culture. Spontaneously.

William F. Buckley: Our second guest is the senior libertarian economist in the world, Friedrich von Hayek...

John Biewen: Hayek explained this theory to William F. Buckley on the TV show, Firing Line, in 1977.

Friedrich Hayek: Social institutions have never been designed, and do much more than we know. They have grown up by a process of selection of the successful, without people frequently knowing why it was successful. That applies to the market. The market is a – I was going to say most ingenious, but ingenious without being designed, instrument....

John Biewen: Wendy Brown says in Hayek's theory, it's because of this spontaneous quality that markets and traditional morality produce the "freest" possible society.

Wendy Brown: Because nobody imposes it! It's not about laws. It's about the natural unfolding of these two kinds of spheres of organizing human life. You just do the thing that you are born into, voluntarily. You're not conscripted or pounded by traditional morality. You just emerge into it and adopt, and possibly even adapt it a little.

John Biewen: Hmm, wow. So the enemy is the social engineer.

Wendy Brown: The enemy is the social justice warrior. So, the reason that the social engineers, and so-called social justice warriors, as the right calls them today, are demonized, is they're trying to fashion and fabricate what actually has to happen through this more spontaneous, evolved, traditional unfolding.

[Music]

John Biewen: We'll talk later about whether Hayek's theory makes any sense – whether it's true that markets or social hierarchies evolve spontaneously. But, Brown says, this is the ideological underpinning for the neoliberal or libertarian who says: Back off, you people who think you can use reason to construct a just society. You can't succeed and you're wrong to try. Your schemes will strip citizens of their freedoms, and will lead inevitably to coercive, tyrannical systems, such as ... socialism. And: You must not be allowed to do this. Wendy says this fierce belief that the social engineers must not get their hands on power explains why some leading neoliberals also have a problem with democracy.

Wendy Brown: You have somebody like Friedrich Hayek very clear that as soon as you have representative democracy, you have right before you

the danger of socialism. Why, in his view? Because what you have right before you is the demand from the largest class to redistribute according to their needs or desires, and that there is no way on earth that democracy can keep secure the privileges and the position of an elite class.

[Music]

John Biewen: There's no way on earth because under capitalism, economic elites are always gonna be outnumbered by the people who earn wages working for them. Alexander Hamilton made the same point in the 1780s. This hostility to democracy among the wealthiest Americans is as old as the country. But in the postwar years, into the 1970s, the neoliberals felt lost in the wilderness, shunned not just by the left but by most of the establishment. Eventually, though, after much effort and investment by movement conservatives....

[Rousing brass music] Announcer: Decision, '80. NBC News reports the results of our national election.

Tom Brokaw: NBC News projecting Ronald Reagan the next president of the United States, the fortieth president, at sixty-nine years of age

John Biewen: Ronald Reagan had launched himself to national prominence by

giving a fiery speech at the 1964 Republican Convention, on behalf of Barry Goldwater. Most Americans thought Goldwater was an extremist and he got crushed that November. But now, in Reagan, the right wing that had waited on the sidelines since the 1930s had its president.

Ronald Reagan: In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem. (Applause)

John Biewen: Led by Reagan, Congress cut taxes and many social programs. But in fact, he and his allies liked some things government does. With the Cold War as justification, they dramatically increased military spending. And they intensified the “war on drugs” and other measures to lock up more people for doing crime.

Nancy MacLean: And I think this is really important to pay attention to. It would not be small government.

John Biewen: Historian Nancy MacLean.

Nancy MacLean: And that, for all of us the world over, should be a lesson, since these ideas began to become so dominant after the 1980s, is that government has not really shrunk. What's happened is it's been

reconfigured. So the parts that did good things for people, that helped create opportunity and security and, you know, enable human potential, those parts have been cut back. But the parts that wage war, the parts that create mass incarceration, and that kind of punitive side of the state, has really grown.

John Biewen: Armies, courts, and police. And for poor and middle-class people: austerity. Reagan had also run on patriotism...

Reagan: ...we'll restore hope and we'll welcome them into a great national crusade to make America great again. (Applause)

John Biewen: And on what his supporters called traditional family values: opposition to legal abortion and gay rights, support for prayer in schools. Here's Reagan giving his first inaugural address.

Ronald Reagan: We are a nation under God. And I believe God intended for us to be free. It would be fitting and good, I think, if on each inaugural day in future years, it should be declared a day of prayer.

[Music]

John Biewen: Reagan also had what you could call a traditional white American's take on race. In arguing for cuts to antipoverty programs, he talked about, quote, "welfare queens" and "strapping bucks" taking advantage of those programs. During the 1980 campaign, Reagan made a key speech in Neshoba County, Mississippi, the very place where those three civil rights workers were murdered during Freedom Summer sixteen years earlier. Reagan didn't go there to honor those young men. He didn't mention them, or civil rights. He did make an appeal to 'states' rights,' a loaded phrase evoking the pro-segregation, anticivil rights south – even though Reagan was from California.

Rhon Manigault-Bryant: I am Rhon Manigault-Bryant—LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant. I am associate professor of Africana Studies at Williams College. My specialty, though, is religious studies.

John Biewen: I asked Rhon Manigault-Bryant how she sees the period that started with Reaganism, up to the Trump era – and the role that both religion and race have played in the country's move to the right. First of all, she said, religion is so important in American life that you can find its impact in all social movements, across the political spectrum. A Christian movement called the Social Gospel, starting in the 19th century, called for action on poverty and inequality and helped lead to the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century.

Rhon Manigault-Bryant: You also have something like the New Deal. I mean, there are all of these things that have these explicit and implicit religious ideals, morals, underpinnings. And then you have people who are like, we don't like this, we don't like it. And I think that, you know, history has shown that people don't like it because it calls into a type of accountability one's choices, but more than that, it asks people to give something up. Power. Access to resources. And people don't want to give up, you know, what they fought to get and what they feel like their families have fought, you know, for generations to get.

John Biewen: And, she says, people couch those conservative arguments in religion, too. Rhon says it's tempting to talk about a shift to the political right as a "backlash."

Rhon Manigault-Bryant: People think of that as retrograde, right? That we're stepping back into a time....

John Biewen: But, she says, that language implies that the changes progressives like are natural and expected, or that they reflect the real America ... and that it's strange or unnatural, like time going in reverse, when conservatives take power.

Rhon Manigault-Bryant: But if you pay any attention to history, this is exactly what happens every single time. Every single time there are advancements in civil rights, in equity, in diversity and just-- all of these things that we think of as being so instrumental to what it means to be an American. We think of these things as being fundamental. And yet there's always this cycling, where there are people who feel left out by those progressive moves, who then say, hey, I need to reclaim something. And I think of that as quintessentially American. It's as, you know, American as apple pie. (Laughs)

[Music]

John Biewen: It is American, and let's face it, entirely human, for people to try to claim or reclaim what they want. And to vote for leaders who share their priorities. But as we've seen here in Season 4, it's also thoroughly American for people with power to use undemocratic means to hold onto power, to lock in minority rule. Going back decades, some important people on the right have talked bluntly about their hostility to democracy. Paul Weyrich was another key founder of the modern conservative movement. With the Koch Brothers, he helped to create the Heritage Foundation, and ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council. He coined the term "moral majority." This is Weyrich at a gathering of the religious right in Dallas, in 1980.

Paul Weyrich: How many of our Christians have what I call the “goo-goo” syndrome? Good government. They want everybody to vote. I don’t want everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of people. They never have been from the beginning of our country, and they are not now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.

John Biewen: Even then, people like Weyrich knew that they, and the Republican Party, represented a shrinking segment of the U.S. population: Corporate leaders, and the majority of white Americans who supported the party’s pro-industry, anti-social welfare, conservative values agenda. Since 1980, immigration and demographic shifts have made that constituency smaller yet. Here in the 21st century, Stephen Moore sat down for an interview with the filmmaker Michael Moore. Stephen Moore is a product of the neoliberal thinktank complex created by people like Paul Weyrich, Charles Koch, and Jim Buchanan. Moore spent years doing fellowships at the Heritage Foundation and the libertarian Cato Institute, and he founded the anti-tax Club for Growth in 1999. A decade later, he was on the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal when he said this to Michael Moore:

Stephen Moore: Capitalism is a lot more important than democracy. I’m

not even a big believer in democracy. I always say that democracy can be two wolves and a sheep deciding on what to have for dinner.

John Biewen: In 2019, President Trump nominated Stephen Moore to the Federal Reserve Board. Moore withdrew when his history of offensive remarks about women came to light. The U.S. is increasingly a country in which one political party wants as many Americans as possible to help choose our representatives, and the other party quite openly does not. In January 2019, the Democrats took control of the U.S. House and passed their first bill, H.R. 1. They called it the For the People Act. Over in the Senate, the Republican Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, steps to the podium.

Mitch McConnell: I spoke for the first time yesterday on the subject that House Democrats have crowned their signature effort for this Congress: H.R. 1, also known as the Democratic politician protection act. Speaker Pelosi and her colleagues are advertising it as a package of urgent measures to save American democracy.

John Biewen: H.R. 1 would establish automatic voter registration, make election day a national holiday, require at least fifteen days of early voting, restore voting rights to felons after they leave prison, and among other features aimed at

controlling money in politics, it would use public funding to match smaller donations to candidates. Needless to say, Mitch McConnell refused to take up the bill in the Senate, To him, the proposal added up to this:

Mitch McConnell: A power grab.

[Music]

John Biewen: So, Chenjerai, there it is. The Senate Majority Leader calls a bill that would make it easier for all Americans to vote ... a power grab by the other party.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You know, but in a way, McConnell is right, right? He's calling it a power grab, and it's really people grabbing back power from an elite minority that's failing them.

John Biewen: Communists. But you know, it is surprising, maybe I'm naïve. But in a country that calls itself the world's greatest democracy, nevermind how justified or not that claim is, that some of our so-called national leaders can feel comfortable just coming out against people voting.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Ah but see there you are with that democracy again,

John, you're just so old-fashioned. Yeah, yeah. But you know, this is one thing where, if I could just nerd out for a minute, when I started learning about neoliberalism, I really started to see that part of the reason they can be so flagrant about it is because they're appealing to a way of thinking that's been cultivated for a long time. And actually, now, is quite common. And for that reason I think it's worth taking some of these neoliberal ideas seriously, at least to sort of scrutinize them.

John Biewen: Yeah, so let's do that. And we said, I said earlier that we were gonna talk about whether these ideas actually make sense. And as we heard, the idea is that free market economics and traditional morality are fundamental to the best human life, to human freedom, because those things—markets and the ideas about morality that we inherited from the past—they emerged spontaneously, almost in a kind of Darwinian way, right? From human culture. As opposed to this so-called social justice malarkey that, frankly, people like you, Dr. Kumanyika, college professor, community organizer, podcast polemicist, you know. All this social justice stuff that do-gooders like you, and, well, me, are trying to foist on everybody.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, and I mean, I get that, right? Aside from the shade you just threw at me, you know what I'm saying, but it's like – I get the idea, right? All of this government intervention is kinda messing up the natural order of

things. And, for some people, I think that has, it's not just a scam. It has real moral power, right? And even – I can understand too, because I grew up in the eighties, and a lot of these ideas were gaining momentum with Reagan and Thatcher. I mean, on one hand it was like, crack and all those kinda things were going on, but it was also like, Wall Street, right? And this celebration of the entrepreneur, and the idea that the market is just this natural expression of what's going on. So, I understand, but here's what I started to see that changed my thinking. First, I noticed that whenever white folks start talking about unwelcome social engineering and disturbing the natural order, it never includes acts of oppression that set the system up to start out with. So for example, you know I'm gonna talk about the genocide of indigenous nations and slavery, right? But I mean, it's, you hear this talk about those things but they're not talked about as interventions in the natural order of things, right? And so when I think about government intervention, what I think about is many of the things we've covered in our various series on this show. Laws that prevent Black people and women from participating in social, political, and economic life. I mean, these were literally laws created to impose a hierarchical order. But it just doesn't get talked about as government meddling.

John Biewen: That's it, right? And as we've shown on this podcast, a lot of our cultural inheritences, just for example, white supremacy and patriarchy, they're systems of domination and control. And they WERE designed, despite what

Friedrich Hayek said, they were designed to advantage the people who built them, you know, in our part of the world, people who look like me.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's really the "free part of free markets that also has to be debunked. I mean there's all kinds of coercion built into what gets called freedom. And in fact the "freedom" that neoliberals extol ignore those power differentials. One economist called it kicking away the ladder. You intervene and control the order of things so that you can climb up -- at the expense of the people you're exploiting. And then when others try to join you up there, and they struggle, you look down and what you tell them is we're all free, we're just making our way out here in the marketplace, you know, if you can't get up here with me, that's your problem, not mine. And importantly, it's not just in the past. Like we talk about it in the past, but it's right now. Look at the herculean efforts on the part of government to save various industries. But somehow this is still the free market.

John Biewen: Yeah and despite these inconsistencies and logical problems with the theory, another thing that Wendy Brown has pointed out is that neoliberalism has become so pervasive. People like Buchanan and Hayek and Milton Friedman wanted us to accept the market as the guiding metaphor for pretty much everything in our lives.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes. And we were talking about an example of this in our pandemic episode. The problems with this idea that everything should be run like a business. But neoliberalism is really this on steroids, right? It's like society should just be a marketplace, in fact, Margaret Thatcher famously said there's no such thing as society. Just a collection of individuals. So in that picture, we're not even citizens, right, we're just kinda like, independent contractors.

John Biewen: And notice that language, the way so much of our language now is borrowed from the financial world and from markets. We're not caring for ourselves, we're developing our humanity, we're investing in ourselves. We're not sharing our gifts, we're building our brands. We don't have responsibility to take care of each other, we're out here competing.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I have this hilarious book by Herman Cain -- remember him? The presidential candidate? It's called CEO of Self. So literally my body is a business. My life is an entrepreneurial venture. And I'm the CEO. To me, it's hilarious.

John Biewen: Yeah, hilarious, and kind of a nightmare. But, you know, if we approach things that way, we'd be a lot more efficient, right? More productive.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yo, listen, I used to really believe it. I was like, if I could

just get more, be like a business, I'd be more efficient, I'd get my sh** together, could start maximizing my output, you know.

John Biewen: Maximizing your out—yeah, and I think about that sometimes when I'm taking a walk in the woods or something. And I don't have to pay to go to these woods, either, so... but I'm thinking, I'm not making a nickel right now. And I'm not contributing a thing to gross domestic product out here.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: No, sir, you're not. You're just sucking on the teat of the nanny state. (Laughs) So I mean, I think that's the problem with this market metaphor, right? It goes back to the power differential, which always gets left out of the picture. If we're all just independent contractors, fending for ourselves, some people are always gonna be way more vulnerable and they're gonna take on more risk. These, like, Amazon makes a trillion dollars but doesn't pay taxes AND the workers have to pay their own sick leaves. I mean that's nothing close to a level playing field.

John Biewen: Not in the marketplace, not in the "marketplace of ideas," or the marketplace of power. And going back to Wendy Brown's point, we've come to accept these tiers of access, depending on how much you can pay and that includes access to political influence. Now, this has always been true in the U.S., but the Supreme Court pretty much made it official in 2010 with the Citizens

United decision, which allowed corporations to spend unlimited amounts on campaign ads and the argument was that a corporate funded political ad is free speech, in the same way you and I have free speech when we put up a yard sign or stand on a street corner making a speech to three people.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, so, again, you're making these sort of constitutional appeals, you're talking about free speech, but the effect is that corporations have even more power than they already had before that decision. You and I have one vote, but a corporation or big donor as the equivalent of who knows how many votes, thousands, millions.

John Biewen: And in the ultimate neoliberal vision, government is only doing armies, courts, and police anyway. So there's really nothing left for regular people like us to be concerned about, as so-called citizens, our job is to shut up and play our role in the marketplace. Go out there and make our way as independent contractors and entrepreneurs.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, we're recording this in 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, and some people are talking about how this crisis could upend things. People have written articles declaring the death of neoliberalism, because the crisis is actually showing a lot of people that markets don't work and we need government. Of course, that is true, right, a lot of people are starting to see the

failure of this market, sort of, fundamentalism. But it's just a shame and a tragedy that so many people had to die for that to be seen.

John Biewen: Because as Wendy Brown pointed out, there have been plenty of crises before this one that could have made the point, that did make the point, we saw jobs disappear by the millions because of globalization over several decades, money just going out and finding the cheapest labor. And then in 2008 and '09 comes the start of the Great Recession, which was caused by unregulated wheeling, dealing by the financial industry. And you know, there were some protests and so on in the Occupy movement that emerged, but over all what lessons did Americans take from all that? Listen, here's what Wendy said:

Wendy Brown: Instead of reacting to that as a problem of capitalism, what we saw was an emerging right wing formation among working and middle class white people that defended capitalism to the letter, defended free markets in an absolute and just unqualified way, and increasingly turned their ire not just on immigrants, which was important, not just on those who they considered to be favored by racial preference policies, which was not actually the case, but that displacement was also important. But they increasingly turned their ire in the direction of what they understood to be the libertinism, the loss of morality, the family wrecking practices, of

liberalism and lefties.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Alright, so we've come to that question that has launched a million think pieces. We know why wealthy folks voted for Trump - but why did middle-class and working-class white people vote for Trump? The mainstream media said it was "economic anxiety," and then a lot of progressives -- especially a lot of progressive Black folks -- said no, it wasn't economic anxiety at all, it was racism. And, I see that, for one, I remember standing in a church in Charlottesville surrounded by angry white dudes with tiki torches - and I was thinking, this might have something economics but it definitely feels like white supremacy or racism.

John Biewen: Right. But as people who make this argument point out, first of all, the poorest people, people who definitely are feeling economic anxiety, the majority voted for Hilary Clinton, not Trump. Black and brown people of course, but also the poorest white people. And multiple surveys found that Trump voters actually showed just as much, if not more, cultural anxiety as economic anxiety. Or to be more blunt about it, racism and sexism.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Absolutely. But here's how I navigate that terrain. So those factors, economic anxiety on the one hand, and fears about a changing culture on the other, are not separate issues for people. They've never been

separate, probably, but they've definitely become fused together after forty years of these neoliberal ideas that we've laid out in this episode. So think about the political dialogue since Reagan. We need government to tax us less. Why? To unleash free market economy AND to stop these handouts to undeserving people, especially Black and brown people. So what do you do? End welfare, balance the budget, not by cutting military spending, but by cutting quote-unquote "entitlement" spending. Building a border wall so those aliens won't take our jobs. Those are all economic policies that are also deeply entangled with white people's racial grievances.

John Biewen: I think that's a really good point and I think from the perspective of a lot of white folks it's look, those Black and brown people are trying to take what's mine. My birthright as a real American, the kind of American this country was built for, and they're trying to get it without earning it the way my people did. This is the narrative, anyway. And those social justice warriors over there? They're trying to give it all away to those people at the same time as they're looking down on me for my faith, my patriotism, my alleged racism, so I really believe this, that for a lot of white people, a vote for Trump was a big raised middle finger. Not towards the people who really run the world and who've actually created the economic pain that we're talking about, but toward social justice do-gooders. People who conservative politicians and fox news hosts have painted and redefined as elites.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, we're the elites. But when you have movements that feel like they're about cultural or morals, and people do feel them deeply, they unleash at least two kinds of oppression. First you get direct violence and racial violence that sort of is this kind of hate that we've seen rise. And then at the same time, you have these policies that articulated as weakened democracy, that hurts a lot of people who support it. And so, I think once you grasp that classically liberal idea of the market as the primary force for good, then you can actually see it's not even just a GOP thing but it manifests in different ways in the republican party versus the democratic party.

John Biewen: Yes, okay, this is important, it's the democrats as well. And there are some people who have heard people on the left call Obama or Hilary Clinton "neoliberals," and it might be confusing.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. It's hard, because you're thinking, wait a minute, Obama is a neoliberal? Don't he and Hilary have a different approach than the GOP? Why are their own people attacking them? And so if you wanna understand this, I mean, I think the reason is that these kind of establishment democrats have shown that although their approach to governance is different in some ways, people like Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden, are pretty upfront about their belief in the idea that the market should be the center.

John Biewen: Bill Clinton famously in the 1990s declared “the era of big government is over.”

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Exactly. Even Elizabeth Warren, who I find very inspiring at times, has clarified that she’s a capitalist to the bones, right? Like not even just tactically, it’s in her bones, she says. But why does this matter? Take health care, right. Some democrats will say they think health care is a right, but they also go to great lengths to insure that health care stays as a commodity, right, something that can be bought and sold, people can profit from it. Those two things don’t match up. The same thing could be said for housing, public education, so actually, even though you said health care is a right, now you see democrats changing the language of “rights,” and what they actually talk about instead is “equal opportunity” and “access” and things like that. So it’s kinda like saying, yeah, we get that the system is tiered, exploitative, and unequal, but as long as people have equal opportunity to it, to fight for a spot, to compete in the marketplace for it, then our work is done. But we’re not gonna change the structure. And this applies also to how democrats tend to deal with race and gender. I’ll give you one example of that. My colleagues in the debt collective organization pointed out that with the stroke of a pen, the federal government could eliminate the debt that destroys people’s futures. Years of college loan debts. Disproportionately affects Black and brown people, women, etc. But democrats even won’t make that a part of their agenda. Instead, they’re kinda

like look, hey, as long as Black people and women have equal opportunity to accumulate college loan debt, that's our equity and diversity program. So that's the Democrat version of neoliberalism.

John Biewen: We should also say, even the antidemocratic impulse that we've talked about isn't ONLY a Republican thing. Democrats will sometimes do partisan gerrymandering when they get the chance, for example. But we gotta say there is a big asymmetry here. The Republican party in its current form is pretty much doomed politically if everybody is allowed to vote, and certainly if everybody votes. Just recently Trump himself said on Fox and Friends that if voting were expanded and made accessible in ways that the Democrats wanted to do in the coronavirus relief bill, he said quote, "You'd never have a Republican elected in this country again."

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I do think that this is a real difference between the parties. Voter suppression is mostly on the GOP. Look at the voter ID laws, closing polling places, especially where Black and brown people live so people wind up standing in line for hours if they want to vote. Restricting absentee and early voting. Disenfranchising people who are convicted of crimes, who of course are disproportionately Black and brown people given the racist criminal punishment system. So all those—that's GOP stuff.

John Biewen: Yep. And now here we are in 2020, in the midst of the virus crisis, and we're gonna have a huge fight this year over how to do the election.

Assuming we're gonna do it in November. And whether to make it safe and easy for people to vote, or whether to make it hard and risky. To have that of all things a major partisan fight in the world's greatest democracy.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. That's where we are.

[Music]

John Biewen: Next time: American Empire. To what extent has the United States really tried to advance democracy in the world?

John Biewen: Our editor this season is Loretta Williams. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Our theme song, "The Underside of Power," is by Algiers. Other music by John Erik Kaada, Eric Neveux, and Lucas Biewen. The show's website, where we post transcripts and other stuff, is sceneonradio.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter, @sceneonradio. Chenjerai is @catchatweetdown. Scene on Radio is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.