



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Anthropologist Elizabeth Cullen Dunn on Why Geography Is a Way of Thinking

She has spent years studying displaced people living in refugee camps around the world, and has sometimes even been claimed by residents thanks to her ability to acclimate with her research subjects. Here, Cullen Dunn explains why geography is a way of thinking, how we can reconsider the role of charity in resettlement efforts, and what the digital revolution has to do with forced migration.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, Professor of Geography at Indiana University Bloomington. An anthropologist and geographer, Professor Dunn studies refugees, internally displaced people, and asylum seekers. She has conducted research on forced migration for over a decade in the Republic of Georgia, Greece, Germany, and the United States and elsewhere. Her work has appeared in *Science*, *American Ethnologist*, *Humanity*, *Ethnos*, and other academic journals, and she has written about migration for wide audiences in *Slate*, *Boston Reviews*, and other public media. And she is the author of *No Path Home: Humanitarian Camps and the Grief of Displacement*, published by Cornell University Press in 2018.

Welcome, Professor Dunn.

Elizabeth Cullen Dunn:

Anthropologist Elizabeth Cullen Dunn on Why Geography Is a Way of Thinking

Thank you. It's so nice to be here.

Lawrence: I think it's fair to say that when many people hear the word geography, they think about physical geography, but in fact, you study more political and human geography. Is that right?

Dunn: Yeah. That's exactly true. You know, geography is not really a topic. It's a way of thinking that focuses on space and the relationship between different kinds of spaces. So, a lot of my work over the last 10 years has been focused on the refugee camp as a space that has been produced since World War II, but is a kind of unusual space in which different forms of governance apply. So, I've been really interested in the ways that, for example, humanitarian organizations take over governance in camps from national governments. And I'm interested in the way they're laid out, the ways that we think about emergencies, and the way we think about time in these spaces, because refugee camps are always meant to be temporary, but in fact, now the average length of stay in a refugee camp is over 17 years.

Lawrence: And in some cases, even multiple generations being in that same refugee camp.

Dunn: Oh, absolutely. The record holders right now are the Palestinians. I think they're on something like their 75th year of displacement, and their camps have become cities, so asking questions like—in what ways is a camp like a city?

Lawrence: So I want to spend time today in our time together talking about a lot of those questions, but before we do that, I want to talk a little bit about your journey, so where did you grow up and how do you think that influenced your path?

Dunn: Well, I grew up in Colorado and in Montana, out in the Rocky Mountain West, and I think from an early age, my goal was to find out what was on the other side of the mountains. There's an ethos of exploration that comes with being a native to the Rocky Mountain West, and that ethos drove me to a lot of unusual places. I spent a lot of time in Poland just after the fall of communism. I spent some time in China under martial law after the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Lawrence: So, with the focus on displaced people, that too, was that something that... How should we put this? That you went looking for? Or did the problem come looking for you?

Dunn: Oh no. That problem was dropped right on my head by Vladimir Putin. And I was planning to work in an apple processing plant, because I had done other studies of agricultural processing. And I literally was on the way to the airport to fly to Georgia to take up my Fulbright when Putin ordered the invasion of South Ossetia, and of course when I got into the middle of it, I didn't have any background in forced migration, so it very much came to me. I didn't come to it.

Lawrence: In your book, *No Path Home*, you talk about how humanitarianism can actually trap those it is alleging or seeking to help. What do you mean by that?

Dunn: Humanitarian aid is meant to be temporary, but it traps people both because there's geopolitical concerns, they can't return to occupied territory, but it also prevents them

from moving into a host society because it traps them in continual uncertainty. So, one of the things I spent a lot of time thinking about is how disempowered displaced people are by the way humanitarian aid is delivered. It's delivered without warning. No one makes an appointment with displaced people. They just assume they'll be home to receive it. There's no advanced notice of what people are going to get.

The other fundamental problem with humanitarian aid is that it is done on the basis of projects, which are by their very nature short term. Nobody knows, either the humanitarians or the recipients of aid, what is going to happen after a project ends. And then they slowly spend down all the money and assets that they have, because the aid is never enough to keep them alive, and finally they're so impoverished that they can't leave the camps and go into a wider society even if they're allowed to do so.

So, camps can be incredibly disabling, and in fact, of the people that I worked with, 11 years on most of them are still exactly where they were the day they moved into the camps in 2009.

Lawrence: So, what did they make of you when you first showed up there? You essentially dropped in from outer space.

Dunn: Yeah, and at first they assumed I was an aid worker. Then, the aid workers all disappeared and I stayed, and I started showing up at community events, and I think the real turning point was when a friend of mine's husband died. I was the only foreigner who showed up at the funeral. I was the only person from outside this community who noticed that this man had died. That was a sort of breaking point for the research, because that was the moment at which this community decided I was at least peripherally attached to their community. And there were buses being loaded to take people to the grave site and I started to get on a bus, and someone yelled at me, "No, no, no. That's for the other village. Our village is over here." And that's when I knew that I was one of them.

Lawrence: You had transitioned from they to we.

Dunn: So, it wasn't they as much as I was theirs, but I was their anthropologist, their ethnographer. I was the person recording their stories. And we've been in touch now for 11 years, so there's that kind of ongoing relationship I have with them, where even people I don't know know me.

Lawrence: So, there's a challenge that comes with this too, though, right? I mean, for anthropologists, and sociologists, and social psychologists, and geographers, when you become connected to that which you're studying, how does that affect your necessary objectivity in order to also observe what it is you're observing?

Dunn: You always observe from a social position, so there is nobody who has a god's-eye view and who sees all parties equally. And I decided very early on that my commitment was to see humanitarianism from the perspective of the camp, not from the perspective of the humanitarians. The people in the camp don't understand what's happening. They don't see the institutional relationships at the national and international levels that are

happening. So, for them, it's absolute chaos, and one of my informants said it's, like the March weather. You just can't predict what's going to come next.

Lawrence: I'm sure you get asked this question a lot, but have you seen Ai Weiwei's Human Flow?

Dunn: Yes. It's deeply moving.

Lawrence: Well, I was going to say that I found it extraordinarily moving, so I was going to ask how you found it as someone who came to it with a deep knowledge base of your own. The movie, of course, is just this extraordinary documentary of impact of forced migration around the planet, but I wonder what it feels like to watch that from somebody who comes to it with the knowledge base that you bring to it?

Dunn: I think it points to two real fallacies in the way we generally think about refugees, and it aims at rupturing those perspectives. One is that we generally think about forced migration in terms of flow, and we have tsunamis of refugees, we have flows of refugees. There's a trickle of refugees, except when there's a river of refugees.

Lawrence: People are flooding in.

Dunn: They're flooding in. It's a tide. And it's threatening in the way an uncontrollable natural force is. We fear that we'll be drowned in refugees. When Ai Weiwei sets out the idea of flow, you start to think that maybe thinking about flow is the wrong way to think about it. You have to think in a much more granular way about how different people with different resources are making very, very different decisions about when they're moving, where they're moving, the timing of each stage in their journey.

But the other fallacy I think that comes in that film and in the way we think about refugees more generally is this overwhelming focus on the journey. Somehow it's that two miles across the Aegean Sea that matter instead of all the years that led up to it, and one of the things I tried to do in this book is talk about forced migration not as something that happens like an emergency, not like a natural disaster that happens and that is soon over, but as a process that takes decades in the run up and decades in the aftermath. It's a long-term problem.

Lawrence: In some ways, and you've written about this as well, impact of refugees and forced migration on just a whole wide range of phenomena around the world has a lot to do with the growth of nationalism in many parts of the world. Arguably a big piece of the Brexit vote in the U.K., arguably a big piece of rise of nationalism in the United States. Major economic issues even prior to COVID. Is forced migration the cause or the result of these other factors?

Dunn: Forced migration today is the result of dramatic changes in the world political system and in the globalized economy. We are living through a period right now that is really analogous to the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century. So, the digital revolution has dramatically changed the way international politics works, as well as domestic politics. So, arguably you'd never have had the Syrian Civil War without Facebook, and of course the Syrian Civil War did not end up creating any kind of pro-democracy progress.

Lawrence: Right.

Dunn: But led to the complete collapse of that society. So, what's happening is that refugees are the result of the collapse of 20th century modernism. I think we have to look at forced migration as a symptom of a larger issue, not as the cause of issues. But it certainly has major ramifications and some of those ramifications contradict each other. So, let me give you an example from a project that I'm starting now, which looks at refugees in the United States in the meatpacking industry. So, the meatpackers went looking for a group of people who were willing to do an extraordinarily dangerous job for very low wages, and what they found is that refugee resettlement agencies were looking for jobs for refugees who were newly arriving in the United States through the U.S. State Department's resettlement program. That program gives newly-arriving refugees 90 days of aid and they have to be economically self-sufficient in 90 days, which is not a lot of time to learn a new language and find a job.

So, the entire meatpacking industry came to depend on flows of refugee labor to continue. So, now what we're seeing is that because refugees live in extremely low income housing, which is densely crowded, because they are working in very close proximity to each other in these meatpacking plants, the densest outbreaks of COVID-19 have been in meatpacking plants, largely among refugee population.

On the one hand, they were quickly designated as essential workers, and so they were ordered by President Trump to stay open, even though in one plant in Logansport, Indiana, almost 50% of the workers tested positive for COVID-19. And on the other hand, the Trump Administration cut off all refugee resettlement because they said it posed a COVID-19 risk. So, we have to decide. You know, are we in fact dependent on their labor and we should let them in? Or do they pose a health risk to us and we should fence them out?

Lawrence: And this has a particular resonance in the time of COVID, but even before the pandemic, you have a similar kind of tension between the reliance on migrant workers or even refugee workers on the one hand and at least in the last couple of years, increased desire to at least stop those people from coming in and even to deport them from the United States.

Dunn: So, many of the people who are coming into the agricultural sector are in fact being forced to move. This is most Central Americans who are coming to the United States to seek asylum are coming because they are subject to unspeakable violence, and we don't realize that these are the people who produce the food that we need. So, in cutting off that labor flow, what are we doing to our own agricultural industry? How are we affecting, for example, the meatpacking industry, which will shut down if they can't get a steady flow of refugee labor?

And we depend on those people, so in this country we cannot solve the immigration debate until we also solve the issue of our need for immigrant labor.

Lawrence: So, let's talk about some of the other places where you have done fieldwork. We've been talking about Georgia, but you also did field work in Poland after the fall of communism, didn't you?

Dunn: Yeah, I did. I think a fundamental question for me is, how do people contend with massive social change or even social collapse? So, I first went to Poland right after the fall of communism in the spring of 1990, and it was an amazingly chaotic time in which people were trying to work out what the new rules of that society would be. And I got really interested in how these companies tried to instill a particular form of personhood in workers, which they had to have in order to make capitalism actually function. And so, I wrote a book about what workers had to believe about themselves in order to create a market economy.

Lawrence: So, what do workers have to believe about themselves in order to create a market economy? And obviously you're going to have to give us a slightly shorter version, but it's a good chance to pitch the book, as well.

Dunn: Sure. One of the things that workers have to believe is that they're the owners of their own labor, and that under state socialism was not necessarily clear, because other people had a lot of claims on their labor. So, for example, under state socialism, the government could require people to go and work Saturdays. People's families had a lot of claims on their labor, particularly on women's labor. Because state socialist households didn't have a lot of machines to replace women's labor, women had to do the jobs of making food, of preparing things fresh, of shopping every day, and families had claims on those labors, and that meant that factories couldn't make claims on that labor.

So, teaching people that they own their labor and could sell it for a wage was one of the first things that happened in that factory.

Lawrence: And you also worked in Kyrgyzstan, the former Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan, right?

Dunn: Very briefly. We did a project there because I was interested in displaced people from the Caucasus, and there's a Chechen population, so we went there because of the Boston Marathon bombers who were from that community originally, and we got really interested in the ways that that community, Chechens in Kyrgyzstan, had been kept separate from the Kyrgyz-Russian population for decades. It was really amazing.

So, we first went into NKVD archives. That's the early Soviet secret police. We went into those archives and we found documents in which NKVD officers are telling the directors of collective farms that the Chechens who have arrived are cannibals as a way of permanently socially isolating them. And that community really remained apart and I thought what was really interesting about the Boston Marathon bombers was how it wasn't just that they had been held apart from society in Kyrgyzstan, but they had been held apart from society in the United States, and never really allowed to integrate because of their status as new immigrants.

And so, I think some of their bitterness came from being held apart from American society.

Lawrence: Right.

Dunn: So, this question of what happens when we hold forced migrants apart from society was an important question for us.

Lawrence: So, you have written and spoken about how the United States asylum system is failing and failing badly. Suppose you could write a memo to the President of the United States, either this one or a future one, to address the issue. So, what are the bullet points to finally at long last fix our asylum system?

Dunn: Here's the take home point. We have, since the end of World War II, thought about refugee resettlement as a humanitarian act to uphold the human rights of people who have had theirs taken away. And I think that that is a noble and important thing to do, but I also think it's time that we stopped thinking about refugee resettlement as pure charity. These are people who have been extensively vetted. They are the most closely scrutinized category of immigrants in the United States. So, we need these people. They are immediately contributors when they arrive.

Lawrence: So, this is Phi Beta Kappa. We after all have a lot of people who look for us to provide book lists, so I like to ask my guests on Key Conversations to give us the syllabus that they would recommend for their particular field. So, if somebody was particularly interested in the issues of asylum seekers, of forced migrant populations and all the types of subjects that you have studied, what's a good port of entry in?

Dunn: I would suggest first of all a novel, one I really enjoyed called *Exit West*, which is a brilliant description of what it's like to have to move multiple times, and that's the norm for many, many people today. And one of the things I loved about *Exit West* is that instead of focusing on the journey, the author completely obviates it by having magical doors. So, people enter the magical door, and they pop out into the next country, and all of a sudden you're focusing on their lives in a new country rather than on the trip itself.

The other book I think is absolutely brilliant is by Ilana Feldman, who is an anthropologist at George Washington University, and it's a book called *Life Lived in Relief*, and it's a study of the intersection of humanitarian aid agencies and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And it's such a sensitive book and it looks very carefully at both the positive and negative effects of humanitarian intervention in Palestine. It holds up chillingly well.

Lawrence: Yes.

Dunn: That is a book that in its entirety could have been written yesterday in so many ways, but there's a particular chapter which is about the rights of refugees, and one of the things that Hannah Arendt argues is that when you are a refugee, you lose all the rights that are given to you by nation states, and so all you have is your human rights. But there's no one to enforce human rights. There's no state that upholds human rights. So, when all

you have is human rights, she says you have no rights at all. And I think that that is a really key insight when we think about forced migration.

You know there are 70 million displaced people today. It's bigger than the population of France. And 70 million people who have not even basic human rights. I think that should pose both a political and a moral problem for us in the same way it did for Hannah Arendt.

Lawrence: Elizabeth Dunn, thank you so much for sitting down with me today and sharing your experience, your wisdom, your passion, and I hope that you get to write that memo to a president, this one or a future one, and can hopefully have an important impact on our refugee and immigration policy. Thanks for being with us today on Key Conversations.

Dunn: Thank you so much for having me.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Michael Castaneda mixed this episode. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is "Back to Back" by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. "Anthropologist Elizabeth Cullen Dunn on Why Geography Is a Way of Thinking." *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, August 27, 2021. www.pbk.org.

Produced by:

