



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **Why Harvard History Professor Maya Jasanoff Studies the Past to Understand the Present**

Growing up, Professor Maya Jasanoff was surrounded by academics and scholars—an environment she believes gave her the confidence to explore academia herself. Initially, her fellowship at Cambridge sparked her interest in studying the British Empire, and as she dove deeper into the subject matter, she began recognizing the many ways that British imperialism has infiltrated our world. Today, the author and professor writes about history and is interested in how people—and power— have historically crossed borders, and how the relationships between power and people shift and align over time.

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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](mailto: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. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Professor Maya Jasanoff. Professor Jasanoff is the XD and Nancy Yang Professor and Coolidge Professor of History at Harvard University, and

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is a historian of British Imperial and global history. Her books, "Edge of Empire", "Liberty's Exiles", and "The Dawn Watch" have won numerous accolades including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Cundill Prize in history, the George Washington Book Prize and the Windham-Campbell Prize for non-fiction. Professor Jasanoff writes widely about history, literature, and world affairs for publications including the New Yorker and the New York Review of Books, and in 2021, she was chair of judges for the Booker Prize. Welcome professor.

Maya Jasanoff: Thank you for having me.

Fred Lawrence: Maya, we have a lot of important things to cover in the fields that you have written about, and I certainly want to ask you about that Booker Prize experience, but first I want to spend a little time on your journey to where you have gotten. You grew up in a highly academic home in Ithaca, New York. Your father, Jay Jasanoff, is a distinguished linguistic scholar who was at Cornell at the time. Your mother, Sheila Sin-Jasanoff became a science to technology scholar. Although, I note with some pride as an academic attorney myself, that she has a JD from Harvard and had some experience practicing environmental law. They both wound up at Harvard, but were at Cornell when you grew up. And your brother Alan, obviously the underachiever in the family, is only at MIT. So what was it like growing up in such a high wattage academic family?

Maya Jasanoff: Well, when you're growing up, you have no idea what's normal or aberrant about your family experience. I mean, one thing that people have often said about our family over the years is, "Oh, it must have been so interesting to be around the dinner table and listen to you guys." To which I'm like, "Well, I actually found it annoying a lot of the time to be around the dinner table in the way that any kid sometimes finds it annoying when their parents are going on about whatever it is and this and that." But I do think that what I got from my upbringing was a very conversational home. I mean, that is a place where we did have conversation around the dinner table, and we had dinner together every night in which there was real attention to literature and language.

So I got all of that, but it was also a household in which we each did our own thing. And I remember very vividly this dynamic where we would have dinner, we would have reading, and then we'd go off into our own corners. And I think that that experience of just having lots of room that was comfortable room to read, and think, and explore in my own mind was a quality that obviously was cultivated very young and that has sustained me all the way through the rest of my career.

Fred Lawrence: In my experience, there are students who grow into academics or professionals, and that's a direct line from what they thought they were going to be. So if I had told the 10 year old version of you, "You're going to be a professor of history," would you have said,

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"That sounds about right?" Or would you have said, "No, my parents are academics, and that's not what I'm going to do."

Maya Jasanoff: I don't think I would've rejected it out of hand, but I'm also not sure that if you had given me a blank to fill in, that's what I would've written. In fact, I'm quite sure it's not what I would've written. In fact, I can tell you that the eight year old me really wanted to be an Egyptologist. It might have been the 10 year old me who wanted to be an ornithologist at all events. Certainly from those answers you can glean that the idea that I could spend my life pursuing a thing I was interested in was something that I was privileged enough to be encouraged to do. I mean, it speaks obviously to our socioeconomic condition, but it also speaks to something about the priorities that my parents placed on us or the priorities that my parents held up to us. The idea that you have to earn a lot of money or you have to get married at a certain age or those kinds of things, those weren't the markers that were set out to us.

So I think with that came, as with so many things, a degree of incredible freedom and privilege, and also more subtle forms of restriction in the sense that by the time I got to college, I knew that I enjoyed things to do with reading and writing. I knew that I enjoyed being surrounded by others who liked things to do with reading and writing, and I knew that I had to support myself after graduating. But because of the milieu in which I was, the easiest way to fulfill all of those things was very clearly just to go to graduate school because I would have a stipend, I could keep on reading and writing and being surrounded by people who like to read and write, and just move along like that. And I do think that had I had different sorts of examples before me, the possibilities of following these things that I'm genuinely and deeply and in a very, very long-term way interested in, but through other forms like writing outside the academy or doing journalism or something like that, it's possible that those would've been opportunities that I would've explored differently.

And then I'll add finally, that I definitely had a feeling by the time I was in high school and much better able to follow the dinner table conversations between my parents that academia was a very fraught and difficult place. And I think that in my college years, I would've been much more likely to bridle against the idea that it's where I would end up than I would have when I was younger.

Fred Lawrence: You may be familiar with a study that was done, this was a number of years ago, trying to come up with the best correlation or the best predictor of National Merit Scholars. It was a huge data set, as you can imagine. Turned out the single best predictor was students who had dinner with their families more than four nights a week, and that obviously also implicates lots of other socioeconomic factors, and I don't think this was exactly a peer-reviewed study that was ready for primetime publication. But that idea that the first seminar that you attended, if you will, is around the dinner table, and

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people listening to you and taking you seriously, that turns out to be an important predictor of a certain kind of success and abilities in life. So when do you find yourself gravitating towards history?

Maya Jasanoff: Well, when I was an undergraduate in my freshman year, freshman fall in fact, I took my first ever history class. And I'm sure that this is something that's common to most of your listeners and/or their children, that in a lot of American high schools, you don't even run into a class that's called history until you get to the AP level. And that was certainly the case for me. Out of all of my 12 years of high school, I only ever had one class that was called History, and that was AP US History. So I didn't really, frankly, have a clear sense of what the study of history even was, other than learning a bunch of names, and dates, and this, and that, about the past. I then ended up getting a fellowship to go study at Cambridge, and I received in the mail a letter saying, "You've been admitted, and your supervisor is C.A. Bayly."

And I had not heard of this person, but I came to learn that C.A. Bayly, Chris Bayly, was one of the preeminent historians of modern South Asia and by extension, and he was already moving in this direction at that point in his career, a pioneering historian of what we now call global history. I defaulted into or had the luck of the draw into having this person be my supervisor, who by virtue of his expertise in South Asia and his interest in global history, really ended up pointing the way to me to take up the kinds of topics which have interested me ever since.

Which is to say that I'm interested in how power and how people cross borders historically and how those kinds of configurations between power and people and place end up being aligned and shifting over time. My other side of my family is from India, and I had been traveling to India on and off ever since childhood and have been always quite curious about what I saw there. And my mother is from Calcutta, now Kolkata, which is full of street names and monuments and all kinds of things commemorating the British, which I always found completely weird and didn't really understand. So under the tutelage, in a sense, of Chris, I ended up actually learning about the history of the British Empire in India, which I hadn't learned about otherwise. So that was an incredibly important step in my trajectory.

Fred Lawrence: In your own work, you have managed to straddle the lines of serious, significant, impactful scholarship and also writing for what editors like to call the serious general reader, the New York Review of Books, New York Times, the New Yorker. Who do you think of as your audience?

Maya Jasanoff: Increasingly, I think about my audiences as my students or my students 10, 20, 30 years out of graduation when they maybe have time and a little more inclination to read. But for me, teaching has been an incredible benefit to writing in the sense that I am very

fortunate to be able to teach a lot of incredibly bright, curious people who maybe don't know a lot about a given subject but are interested in learning about it and have interesting questions to ask about it or wish to have answers to things that are similar to the kinds of questions that animate me. So I think about my readers as people like that.

Fred Lawrence: This whole idea of contributing to the public discussion has ancient roots, but in the American Academy, at least as far back as the early part of the 20th century with the origins of academic freedom doctrine, it is always talked about in terms of freedom for the classroom, for one's scholarship, and for external utterances which are viewed to play a role in public conversation.

Maya Jasanoff: Exactly. And that's something that I've been pleased to see over really just the last few years I think. I mean, this is where I do think that in a perverse way, the terrible political polarization that we've been seeing in recent years has also meant that there's actually a great interest in history coming in all sorts of ways. Unfortunately, some of it is what I would have to call unrigorous, but I think it has made a lot of my colleagues and peers aware that there's a real need for us to be able to explain the history of our nation and our world in ways that can be hugely important in the very classic sense that knowing about the history of your nation and your world is important to being a steward and a citizen. And also at the moment, it's actually frankly, important in terms of combating various forms of misinformation and prejudice.

Fred Lawrence: The whole idea of a self-governing people in a democratic society is premised on the idea that the citizenry will know enough of its own history and enough of its own narrative to begin to think about how do we chart forward and chart forward from where we have been and where we intersect with the values of our institutions? So I want to ask you about one such intervention into the discussion of a broader issue, and that is your quite impactful op-ed in the New York Times after the death of Queen Elizabeth II about the monarchy. I just want to share a little bit of it. You start a sentence that you can just feel the "but" has to come at the end of it.

You write, "The Queen embodied a profound, sincere commitment to her duties, and for her unflagging performance of them, she will be rightly mourned. She has been a picture of stability and her death in already turbulent times will send ripples of sadness around the world." And here it comes, "But we should not romanticize her era." And you go on to say such things as that, "The Queen helped obscure a bloody history of decolonization whose proportions and legacies have yet to be adequately acknowledged." There's more to this op-ed and I encourage our readers to go Google it.

Well, the firestorm followed thereafter. One of my favorites, Ben Goldsmith, a financier in the UK and brother of a Tory peer, Zac Goldsmith, said the article was "appalling" and that he "was so revolted by it", his words, that he was going to cancel his subscription to

the New York Times. So the first question is, were you surprised by the reaction that you got, and was it the reaction you intended?

Maya Jasanoff: Yeah, I was surprised. I think that it showed me something which has been becoming very clear over recent years in looking at the British political scene, which is that the politics of empire have become very central to Britain's own version of the culture wars, and that it fills the role that, if you will, the history of slavery and racism has filled in some ways in the US. This is obviously a generalization. One sees more in recent years, figures on the right of the British political spectrum, weighing in on the goodness of the British Empire. One of the things that has become clearer and clearer over recent years, thanks in part to the release of many documents, some of which were deliberately obscured by the British state, it's become very clear that particularly the final decades of British imperial history in the mid-20th century were extremely bloody and contested years.

I have always in my teaching sought to resist any sort of simplistic portrayal of good and bad in history. I find that to be almost antithetical to what historical study is about. So I encourage my students not to adopt those terms, and yet we see, I think, a public discourse in which that has become more and more evident with people on the right, very determined to uphold what they see as the basic goodness of the British Empire.

So my piece obviously touched this in a way that really is completely out of proportion with what any thinking person might consider about the role of the monarchy or the role of Britain in the 20th century world. The actual substance of my piece, the facts of it, are very well known to historians and are completely uncontroversial in and of themselves except to people who are interested in looking for some sort of ginned up type of controversy.

Fred Lawrence: I know one of the topics of your lectures as a Visiting Scholar for us at Phi Beta Kappa this year is the continuing legacy of the British Empire, and its many interpretations. Can you tell us a little bit about how we see some of those legacies that remain in the UK itself or in the former colonized territories in the sense that imperialism is still with us by its impact?

Maya Jasanoff: The very fact that we're sitting here speaking English is obviously one consequence of Britain's global power, the global predominance of soccer being another one. But one of the things that I constantly come back to in this regard is just to remind my students that as recently as 1945, there were maybe 1/3 of the number of nation states in the world as there are today, and something on the order of 50 out of around 200 nation states of the world of 2023 were once British colonies. Every single one of those nations therefore has had to greater or lesser degrees the influence of the English language, of English border drawing, of English British economic needs, which meant that their

industries or their infrastructure were developed in various ways that were influenced by British imperatives. The fact that the United States behaves in what others see as imperial ways is pretty indisputable. So I tend to think that British imperial history is of particular importance for Americans to study because it's provided a model sometimes honored in the breach of global power.

Fred Lawrence: I did want to talk to you about your role as chair of judges for the 2021 Booker Prize, which describes itself as the leading literary award in the English speaking world. Other judges that year included the extraordinary British actress, Natasha Mcelhone, the Nigerian novelist and professor Chigozie Obioma, and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who is a poet, I believe. What was that process like, and what did you learn from doing that that surprised you?

Maya Jasanoff: So it's hard for me to talk about the process without immediately getting a vision in my mind of these books coming in boxes just about every week on my doorstep with the huge heft, quite materially that they entailed. And I ended up, as did my fellow judges, working our way through 160 books in about six months. So it was a pretty heavy reading load for which I must say that I was grateful to be a historian because one of the things that you learn as a graduate student in history is how to read a lot of books really fast and efficiently. So anyway, that was certainly a part of it.

But the best part really was that I actually have never belonged to book clubs. I'm not even particularly involved in reading groups and seminars that are oriented around reading that take place in an academic setting. And the result of that is that I hadn't really had experiences of just sitting down with a fixed group of people who I don't otherwise have relationships with and just talking about what we're reading. And so it's like belonging to the best book club in the world because here we are reading all these things that are brand new, getting a great cross section of the state of literature in English today, and each of us, of course, very committed readers, but coming from different disciplinary perspectives, different life perspectives. So that was by far the most rewarding thing.

Fred Lawrence: So speaking of book clubs, Phi Beta Kappa in a funny way is one giant book club. Many of our local groups do in fact have book clubs, but our readers, and I like to think of Key Conversations as a way of helping them build their book lists and their libraries. Do you have a couple of recommendations for us in the broader field of globalization and empire and post-empire studies? And I'm thinking really both those who have a fair amount of background, who would like to be stretched, and those for whom this is obviously a topic of interest. They've been with us today, but might not be an area they know a great deal about and would love to get up to speed.

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Maya Jasanoff: So in global history, we have two kinds of books. There's the books that offer the huge survey, little bit about everything, and out of those I would certainly point readers to, if you want classic works, the works of Eric Hobsbawm, for example, the work of my own former MPhil advisor, Chris Bayly, the work of historian called Jurgen Osterhammel, the work of the scholar, Peter Frankopan. So there are those sorts of things, but there are also, and this is perhaps what I tend to gravitate toward more, books that look at strands in global interconnectivity in different ways. So for example, Linda Colley's most recent book is about the writing of constitutions in different parts of the world ranging from Pitcairn Island in the Pacific, taking in Japan and Scandinavia, of course, the United States, etcetera, and offers a whole new way of seeing the global exchange of ideas.

We also have books that look at the global circulation of people in important ways, and my mind is automatically here turning to literature if it's fair even to do that, just to say, we've been talking about prize winners, the most recent Nobel Prize winner - I think it's the most recent - in English, Abdulrazak Gurnah, for example, has written numerous novels about the migrations in and out of Tanzania. I also want to highlight fiction as a great insight into global experiences. The work of a novelist like Amitav Ghosh has been incredibly important in highlighting the stories that underpin the different forms of labor and commercial extraction and circulation going on in the Indian Ocean world and beyond, the fiction of the Nobel Prize winner, Abdulrazak Gurnah also highlights circulation movement in and out of East Africa.

Fred Lawrence: When we envisioned the Visiting Scholars program, now decades and decades ago, it was precisely designed to bring serious scholars into the broadest possible classroom to be on campus and meet with individual students in classes and seminars, but also to do a public lecture. In many ways, your work perfectly exemplifies that in your scholarship, also in your teaching. We're glad that you've been able to be part of our faculty at Phi Beta Kappa this year, and to have you back as a member of Phi Beta Kappa as a Visiting Scholar at Phi Beta Kappa. Thank you for that, and thank you for joining me today on Key Conversations.

Maya Jasanoff: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. This episode was mixed by Trend Light Burn. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is "Back to Back" by Yan Purchit. 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.

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