



## TRANSCRIPT

### ***Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa***

#### **Sociologist Marta Tienda on Why Demography is Not Destiny**

The Princeton University professor shares how instrumental one teacher was in her own path to college, and why the U.S. should do more to invest in higher education. She speaks to Fred about how important public policy is in shaping our individual and collective destinies.

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.

Lawrence: 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 Scholar lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Lawrence: Today, it's my pleasure to welcome Marta Tienda, who is Maurice P. Daring '22 Professor of Demographic Studies and Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs Emerita at Princeton University. She is co-author and co-editor of several books including *The Hispanic Population of the United States*, and has published over 200 scholarly papers in academic journals. Among other things, she has written extensively about equity and access to higher education and lectured about consequences of underinvestment in public education. She's the past president of the Population Association of America, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, and the American Academy of Education. Welcome, professor.

Marta Tienda: Thank you very much. It's such a privilege to be able to talk with you today. I have been looking forward to this, having recently delivered three virtual lectures at three different institutions, and it's been a remarkable experience.

Lawrence: Well, we are so pleased to have you as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar this academic year and I do want to talk to you about some of those lectures, but first I want to walk through your journey a little bit. Did there come a moment when you thought to yourself, "I want to be a demographer?" Or, maybe if not in those words, that you thought to yourself, "I'm fascinated with population issues and population studies, and if I can swing it, this is what I want to do?"

Tienda: Well, it's interesting when you're coming from a background like I do, where my parents had very low levels of education, I'm first generation in the late sixties, early seventies. I could see that teaching was a good profession and I had some skills. So I entered Michigan State seeking a degree in Spanish literature, which I received, but along the way, life interfered. I had an internship between my junior and senior years certifying migrant farm workers for food stamps, and it was an eye opening experience because even though I had not had much social science training - I was in the honors college so I got to pick and choose and I took great courses - but I didn't have the requirements, the required distributions. For me, it was a return to my own journey because I had been in those fields picking crops when I was a child in Michigan, when daddy was laid off, and then I was encountering people who were talking about the fourth count.

Tienda: I didn't know about the fourth count, and people were talking about the fourth count in the census and I thought, well, the fourth count. Well, that was when they began to enumerate population characteristics and that's how they began to count the Hispanic population. So you can see I'm backing into what also became my career path. I returned and finished my degree at Michigan State in a couple of quarters, but then I got a statewide appointment working with the cooperative extension service, working with the Hispanic population across the state and I had to learn more about population, where it was distributed, and so that was my entree into demography, and the Ford Foundation had a fellowship program. Of course, I applied in Spanish literature and I was accepted into institutions. I went to UT Austin because that was the place that had a really strong program in Spanish Peninsular literature and Latin American literature. But I met my mentor.

Lawrence: That was for your masters and PhD-

Tienda: Masters, but I didn't do it in literature. I transferred out because I'd had that experience, so when I got there, I already knew I was in the wrong field. I took my first sociology course ever when I was a graduate student, it was an introduction class, and then I took one on Mexican society, and it was that very first semester that I met my major professor, who was a demographer, and that was my journey into sociology, into demography. To be perfectly honest, literature was my introduction to sociology because literature portrays society in so many ways, and looking back, I can see how the

literature of Spain evolved, representing its rise and fall from being an Imperial colonizer to the state it is today. I was very fascinated by numbers.

Lawrence: Interesting that you talk about literature as a sort of introduction or a way into sociology. We talk about the way that the liberal arts are, in fact, integrated in a very deep and substantial way. I like to quote Harold Bloom's observation that we read imaginative fiction because we can't know enough other people. Through our reading, we meet people, some of whom are real and some of whom are fictional. It doesn't matter. It opens up whole new kinds of people to us, whole new worlds to us, and in a sense, that's what happened with you. Do you think it was self-conscious as you were studying literature? Were you thinking to yourself, "This is what's happening to me," or that's looking back on it when you realized that?

Tienda: That's my reflection after a 40 some year career as a social scientist. I think, as a concrete example, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, which is Garcia Marquez, one of my favorite novels, and I couldn't stop reading it in Spanish, I just couldn't put it down. And then we go through this COVID pandemic. Right? There were some very strong parallels of how he was portraying the times of cholera with the way we're experiencing pandemics and the challenges it poses for personal relationships. It's at a micro level, but there's also societal levels of who is exposed and who isn't exposed. I would take it class by class, but these survey courses really force you to think through more broadly literature and how they are speaking to the times.

Lawrence: Before we go forward in time, I want to go even further back in time now. You alluded to your own experience, in the fields, actually, as a girl. Tell us a little bit about that and how this all led to Michigan State and the beginnings of an academic career.

Tienda: I had to write a paper recently our own conversations, a couple of social scientists are doing a collection of women, authors, scholars, and social scientists who are reflecting on their past, that they can bring in a segment of their own experience and tie it to some social science constructs, and I decided to write on poverty. I wrote about my experience in the fields because I remember, as a child, we were living in the migrant camps and the reason we were there is my dad was laid off and there's a big family and we had to get school supplies, so just pack us all in the car and go live in the migrant camps and do tomatoes, another summer we did cherries. It's a whole family affair, so everybody was pitching in to make ends meet. What was striking to me that still resonates, and I wrote about this in the essays, was when I realized we were poor. I would look at this big white house, which is the grower's house, and where we were living. All the plumbing was outside and outhouses and there was one source for water that we had, a pump, and I had these memories of these pieces and I blocked out the things I don't want to remember, how did we all sleep in two rooms and whatever. But I do remember that contrast, and when I actually worked in Alpena, Michigan, accertifying migrant farm workers, it brought those things together because I saw myself. I said, "These are not other people." "These are my people." "These are us." Sitting inside one of the homes, the grower, his wife was crying to me saying, "he's going to plant something he shouldn't." I didn't know about vertical integration at that time. I

Sociologist Marta Tienda on Why Demography is Not Destiny

taught sociology of agriculture, but these experiences shaped the way I understood reality. I wasn't going to take sides with the growers or with the workers. I said, "We all need each other and let's try to work together and come up with a common solution."

Tienda: And that was how I approached things. I wanted to solve the problem, not create problems. But that white house, suddenly, I wasn't on the outside. I was on the inside and they saw me as one of the officials, and now you can see why I became so passionate about it, that I could link my own history to this future and try to understand it and make it better. But I also remember something from Cervantes, they would criticize the dog who would protect the orchards. He said, "The dog of the orchard owner, he won't eat the fruit, but he won't let us eat it either." And, so, there you see the boundaries between availability and who can access. I resonate with my literature training in trying to understand the current realities.

Lawrence: Did you always assume that you would go to university or was that something that came to you along the way?

Tienda: No, that wasn't the expectation at all. My parents wanted so badly for us to get through high school because that's something they did not have, and in the 1950s, a high school diploma meant you could move into managerial positions, but they both had less than third grade in formal training in Mexico. So they just wanted us to do high school. It was their goal. My seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Miller, and I can tell you what she was wearing that day, a Navy blue sweater and pearls, she had me in the back of the room doing gerunds. I don't know what everybody else was doing, but it wasn't gerunds. So I was doing gerunds and she said, what are you going to do when you finish school? I said, I'm going to be a beautician. She said, "Why?" I said, "Because I fix people's hair on my street", I was 14 years old at the time, and I said, "And they like it and they pay me for it." And she said, "But you could go to college." And I said, "That's for rich people." And she said, "You can get a scholarship." And I thought, "I can?" She said, "Yes, you can earn a scholarship."

Tienda: And you know, that was transformative. One teacher, one conversation that raised my aspirations, put a bee in my bonnet, and suddenly that was on my radar screen: college. I was president of the Girls' Athletic Association and we took a trip to Michigan State in my junior year, and we went to Michigan State to some dance program and I went to the union and we had lunch there. I was just fascinated with the campus. I had never seen anything like it, and students lived there. I'm embarrassed to tell you, but it's actually a true story. When we went to have our lunch, I had a fruit cocktail on a little plate and it had Michigan State's symbol on it, and I put it in my pocket and I promised myself that I was going to bring it back when I enrolled. And that was the second stage in my journey. I did go back and I delivered on my promise, and I guess the highlight for me, recently, this is a little emotional, but Michigan State will be giving me an honorary doctorate. I was supposed to get it in 2020, but the pandemic delayed that.

Lawrence: How moving to have traveled this path and to receive an honorary doctorate from them, how amazing.

- Tienda: For my Alma Mater, because they opened the door and gave me a chance. That's where I received my Phi Beta Kappa recognition. So, for me, it is a full circle. I have some other honorary doctorates, and they're important, make no mistake, but to have it from your Alma Mater, to me, is really powerful, and I want to give back because I have taken advantage of opportunity. I know I worked hard, but I know there's so much talent that doesn't have the opportunity, and that is what drives me.
- Lawrence: That story about Mrs. Miller, I have to tell you, is a such a powerful story, but also it fits within a whole category of story of somebody who turned the key that opened the lock. When I do induction ceremonies and talk to the students, I always say that all of you, I don't know you personally yet, but all of you have been deeply blessed because somebody at some point said the right word, made the right suggestion. And then I always say to them, because I can see many of them start to get this far away look, and I say, some of you are thinking of that person right now. And for you, it was Mrs. Miller who might have not said that to you, and it might have been an entirely different path.
- Tienda: Exactly. She broadened my aspirations and she said, "You can do it." Those of us who are educators have an extra responsibility because we are the transmitters. Whether we like it or not, we are the transmitters, especially at younger grades, throughout the entire pipeline of education.
- Lawrence: Right. A colleague of mine once said to me, "I didn't go into this to be a role model." And I said, "Well, then you picked the wrong profession. You get to stand in the front of the room. You get to ask the questions, you get to hold forth and lecture. You are a role model by the way, and whether you want to be or not, you are. So you may not like what you're projecting, if you don't like being a role model, but you are a role model."
- Lawrence: I want to talk to you about some of your Visiting Scholar lectures and also your experiences already. So one of them asks the question of, "Is demography destiny?" So, let's talk about that a little bit. If the ethno-racial composition of the US population is changing, what are the implications of those changes, particularly in relationship to higher education, but generally as well?
- Tienda: My premise is: demography is not destiny. Destinies are made by public policy, and we have been struggling with who we are as a nation. We've done it in the past when we had a big wave of immigration at the turn of the century. As a nation, the percent foreign-born is still below what it was, but the vitriol surrounding immigration and diversity has really changed, and I find that to be very problematic. The way I approach this is with the age structure in education, and I look at my own trajectory and I say, "What was happening?" Now the luxury I have is to look back and see my own trajectory through where we are as a nation and what was happening, in the periods during which I was being trained and during which I was developing my professional career and as I'm evolving.
- Tienda: I look at the age structure of the US population in 1970 and I look at it in 2020 and that period in between, and I see that I was very lucky. We shouldn't have luck be the driver of our national power. Why was I lucky? Well, I entered the university at the time that

we're going through a massification of higher education, right after the Russians launched Sputnik, the US administration started focusing on, "How did they get ahead of us?" We were falling behind. We were underinvesting and they started all this testing. I realized that I was going to about double promoted early on, even though I started with limited English skills. There were opportunities to train us and public schools were really good. You paid taxes and you got good public schools. So I am a product of public schools, K through 12 and university and graduate school, public education. Because the country was investing at the time I went. The second thing is that we would provide opportunities to train low income populations.

Tienda: When I attended Michigan State, they had a sliding scale for tuition. There were Pell grants, so I didn't pay anything for tuition. I would sign some forms. They'd come in the mail. I'd give them to somebody, and I just had the room and board, but then I became a resident assistant so I left without any debt. But I have looked at the cost of Michigan State when I started in '68 to what it costs today in real terms and it's increased 3.4 times, in real terms. UT Austin from '72 to today has increased 6.7 times.

Tienda: So would I be able to attend today? The answer is no. I would be disinclined and, add to that, that some groups like Latinos tend to be more risk-averse with loans. So we are losing an opportunity to invest in our future because we're now going through the baby boom retirement bulge, and what we need is well-trained workers to generate the social security, the economic productivity, and taking advantage of technology, and instead, we are falling behind. We have not invested as a nation in higher education, K through 12, the way we should have to keep up with the population and the demographics.

Tienda: So that adds another dimension of, well, those are not my people. All we need to do is look back in history, where we had the Common School Movement. As long as we're funding for our students at the local levels, it's collective. But once that heterogeneity starts entering into the composition of school funding, there's more resistance. Why is it that diversity continues to foster these resistances? And I think it's going to come at our peril. Right?

Lawrence: Right. And when it falls to not the public investing in the public but "I invest in mine and you invest in yours," that's when the nation state, as a model, begins to fray around the edges.

Tienda: It's more than the edges. College completion rates have increased for all groups, but they've gotten wider by income groups. So all of this is unfolding at the time that we're becoming even more diverse, so diversity should not be part of this narrative. It should all be about income inequality and how we can come together. We did live through a period of more broadly shared prosperity, and I asked, "What would it take for us to move in that direction?"

Lawrence: Phi Beta Kappa is part of the consortium of groups advocating for doubling Pell Grants, double Pell, known as #DoublePell for anybody who wants to follow what we've been doing. Pell Grants are just about \$6,500 so doubling Pell would be \$13,000, not a huge

Sociologist Marta Tienda on Why Demography is Not Destiny

sum for students, but, in fact, although the administration says we're on the path to doubling pell, the most ambitious additions right now are in the neighborhood of \$500 to a thousand dollars on top of that \$6,500. Now, it's better to have an increase than not to have an increase. But when you talked before about the increase in tuition, it's both the increase in tuition and, in real terms, the lessening of the help that a Pell Grant can give.

Tienda: Yeah. It pales by comparison. So we're being very selfish with the young who don't vote. If you look at the composition of federal spending that the Urban Institute, the share of federal spending on seniors on Medicare and social security has gone up, all the places that are beating us in education have education as a fundamental right, at some national level guaranteed. In the United States, we have 50 social contracts. So I've been looking at how much they vary and in the lectures that I give, if they're interested in the public education lecture, I actually bring up their own constitution and show what it's like in Virginia, you know, what it's like in Florida, and what tuition is like at that institution, so that we have a base of comparison. It's not just out there, it's here at this state, at this institution.

Lawrence: And it's not an accident. Just about the time you and I were beginning our education, our post-secondary education, the United States Supreme Court took up a case about whether or not it was a fundamental right to education and decided it was not. That was a decision that was made and that it would be pushed down to states, which is why in some states it's built into the constitution and in some states it's not, but, as you say, we have 50 different social contracts as opposed to one national social contract with respect to a right to an education.

Tienda: Yes. And I discussed this Rodriguez case for those that are interested in Latinos, in the courts and the Plylers case on undocumented immigrants. The latter would probably not pass muster in the current court, but it's something that lays out personhood and other fundamental concepts that, as a nation, we need to grapple with and what we're trying to accomplish and how best to do so in a way that aligns with our democratic principles.

Lawrence: So let me switch gears here for a second, and it's a big switch of gears. I understand you're researching adolescent romantic relationships in the digital age. So tell us a little bit about that project. What got you interested in it and what are some of your findings?

Tienda: Post-doctoral, a fellow, she was interested in adolescents and she did a lot of research on young women and fertility and premarital sex, but she didn't know much about immigration and the fellowship had to do with immigration. So we thought, well, let's try to combine our talents. I'll learn about young people and you'll learn about immigration and we looked at existing national data sets. That was when we realized there is a big gap in the existing literature on how teenagers form their romantic relationships. What is a romantic relationship? How does your experience as an adolescent impact your later life chances of staying in a more stable relationship? So we

decided to actually see if we could come up with more granular measurements. We realized that teenagers are also using social media. It's become ubiquitous.

Tienda: One of my colleagues had a longitudinal cohort that they were following since 1998, and they interviewed them in 2015. That cohort is what we sampled from. So we have all of these intermediate from birth through age three, age five, age nine, age 15 interviews with the same individuals and we sampled from them and this coincides with the release of the iPhone. So this generation has grown up with all the digital media. They post everything, right? So can we implement a digital diary and implement it with a subset of that sample? Because we have all these precursors, the antecedents of their romance and measure every other week. So what we did is asked them about their romantic relationships every two weeks for an entire year. And that way you get the granularity, you can see those crushes that develop into relationships, the talking flirting that does, the new forms of friends with benefits, the official dating, we measure the on again, off again. So the profiles that we're able to generate, most people mention them, but they don't actually measure them. We actually measure them over an entire year.

Lawrence: How fantastic. Well, we look forward to seeing that and the continuing work you're doing in the population area. When I listen to your story, there's something very American about it. It's a great American journey. I'd like to think Phi Beta Kappa has been a part of that journey going back to Michigan State and is now with you as a Visiting Scholar. We're so honored to have you as a member of the Phi Beta Kappa family, and I very much appreciate you sitting down with me today at Key Conversations.

Tienda: Well, thank you. It's been a really terrific journey and I totally believe that learning is a lifelong proposition and that I have a moral responsibility to support anybody along the way who wants to continue their own education. So, I will persist.

Lawrence: Thank you for all that you've done and thank you for letting us be a part of it.

Tienda: Thank you.

Lawrence:

This podcast is produced by LWC. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. This episode was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. 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](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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