



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

How Professor and Journalist Corey Robin Interprets Political Theory in and Beyond the Classroom

Growing up in a New York City suburb, Corey Robin was influenced by his public high school teachers who taught American history via the Socratic method. Today, Robin tries to replicate that magnetic energy in his own classroom as a political science professor at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center while authoring books and essays that have been read and translated across the world. In this episode, Robin touches on his Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar teachings of Austrian economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek, as well as his upcoming scholar lecture on “Who is Clarence Thomas, and Where is He Taking Us?” in which he explores Thomas’ identity as a conservative black nationalist jurist.

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. Since 2018, we have 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.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Professor Corey Robin. Corey Robin is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. He is a frequent contributor to the New Yorker, the New York Review of Books, and other publications, and is the recipient of awards and fellowships from the Cullman Center at the New York Public Library, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the American Political Science Association. He is the author of *The Enigma of Clarence Thomas*, *The Reactionary Mind*, and *Fear*. His books and essays have been translated into 13 languages. He's currently at work on *King Capital: A Political Theory of Capitalism*, which is under contract with Random House. I'm particularly pleased to note that this year, Professor Robin is the 2024-2025 Carl F. Cranor Family Visiting Scholar. We are grateful to Carl Cranor, a philosopher in his own right, as well as a loyal supporter of Phi Beta Kappa. Welcome, professor.

Corey Robin: Thanks so much for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

Fred Lawrence: Corey, you are, as my intro said, a distinguished professor. Your writing has been highly influential, and we will get into all of that, but I have to tell you, when I Googled you, the first thing I got was Corey Robin, journalist. Now it goes on to list your academic achievements in your positions, but it leads with journalist. So I wonder how that strikes Professor Corey Robin?

Corey Robin: Honestly, I think journalism is an honorable profession, and if people consider me a journalist, I welcome that. It tells me that I'm doing my job, which is to bring the news that isn't news to people. So I appreciate that. I didn't realize it was the first thing that came up.

Fred Lawrence: It may also have been my Google stroke. But to a certain extent, I'd like to think of that title of journalist for you tells us a little bit about who your classroom is, as a student sitting in front of you at Brooklyn College. We're fortunate at Phi Beta Kappa that it's people you're lecturing to as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar this year, but obviously it goes well beyond that to readers of the New Yorker, the New York Review of Books, and all the other places your work has appeared.

Corey Robin: Absolutely, and I'm glad you brought up the classroom because I do feel like the work that I do in the classroom shaped and continues to shape how I write, and the writing that I do in the public sphere shapes what I do in the classroom. I think both of those are very different spaces from what most academics are thinking of when they're writing, and I'd like to think that it has made my writing stronger, that I'm thinking about those two spaces as opposed to others.

Fred Lawrence: Can you think of a time when, as a result of something that happened in class, maybe particularly a seminar, but maybe a big class, you thought to yourself, "I have to present this a little differently. I have to describe this a little differently"?

Corey Robin: Absolutely. In fact, it just happened when I went to Riverside for my second visit as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar.

Fred Lawrence: UC Riverside.

Corey Robin: UC Riverside. I have been teaching Friedrich Hayek and writing about Hayek, the economist and philosopher from Austria, who's an extremely influential conservative thinker. I have been thinking and writing about him for a very long time, but I've only taught him to graduate students. When I went to UC Riverside, I had to give a lecture to undergraduates. I had never had to do this before, and I completely revamped how I told the story of Hayek and ultimately framed who he is, and that is going to now affect the chapter on Hayek that I'm writing in that book, *King Capital*, which you mentioned. I think especially nowadays, when there's more pressure on academics and there's more receptivity from academic administrators for academics to write for a popular audience, the approach that most academics take is, well, I've written my academic article for this highly specialized research journal, and now what I'm going to do is dumb it down.

Fred Lawrence: Right.

Corey Robin: They end up inserting jokes and cliches and phrases that honestly really makes me cringe, and I think that's not what this writing is supposed to be. I was talking about this with a friend of mine, that often editors will ask you fundamental foundational questions that academics will not ask you. What do you mean when you use this term? And suddenly you're caught up short and think, oh, yes, what do I mean? It's been so long since I had to grapple with that idea in a foundational way, and that's what I think of writing for a public audience. Undergraduates do this to you as well. They say, "I don't understand what that term means," and you're just brought up short, and I think there's a precision, a clarity, and a specificity that public writing demands. Also, it demands that you dramatize the stakes of what it is that you're writing about. You have to earn the attention of your reader.

Most academics are always writing for an academic reviewer, an anonymous reviewer that is somebody who's already a specialist in the field and understands the stakes. That is not who I am writing for.

Fred Lawrence: Tell us a little bit about growing up in, if I have it right, Chappaqua, New York in Westchester County. What was your childhood like, and obviously in benefit of hindsight, how does it all connect with this scholarly trajectory?

Corey Robin: Wow, that's a good question. I did grow up in Chappaqua. It's a very wealthy suburb of New York City, just north of New York City. We moved there about 1974. We had a big family. I have a lot of sisters, no brothers, and my father worked for IBM. My mom early on worked at home as a homemaker, and then went back to school and got her degree, and then started working in communications. I was very fortunate. I had a

really wonderful public high school education, more like a private school, if I'm being honest, because of the wealth of the community. But I had really amazing teachers, all of the teachers, but in my areas of special interests were in English and Social Studies, as we called it back then. They set me on a path.

I think what I got from those teachers was not just a great education, but some of my teachers were real intellectuals and wonderful writers, and I think that combination of people who were intellectual and writers and cared about writing just stayed with me, and from a fairly early age, I took writing very seriously. I don't know that politically growing up in Chappaqua had that much of an impact on me, except I guess what I'll say is that it was a very insulated environment, one that we were not aware of just how insulated we were.

Fred Lawrence: My mother was a high school English teacher for about 40 years. I've been a law professor now for, I can't quite believe it, but roughly that same length of time, a little over 35 years. I like to think that on my good days, I'm having an impact on my students, but I have no illusions. Can you think of somebody at Chappaqua High who, because he or she said this, did that, wrote this comment, you found yourself thinking differently, approaching differently?

Corey Robin: Absolutely. There are several, but the one that just immediately comes to mind is Mr. Damon. He was my American history teacher. He had gone to Columbia for his Ph.D. and had studied with Richard Hofstadter and was an editor at American Heritage Magazine, and he used the Socratic method. We started with Hakluyt's travels, voyages in American history, and I think maybe by the end of the year we got a little bit past the Puritans, and there was just that much to take apart. He typed up documents for us and would hand them out. We had them photographed, mimeographed, or whatever it was called back then, and that kind of close reading of texts, not in an English class, but in a history class, was absolutely transformative for me, and it's how I still teach today.

When I was out at Riverside, as I mentioned, we started with one of Hayek's essays from 1946. We put it up on the screen. The technology is slightly different, but the method is the same. Look at the buzzing of the language. Why does he use this word here? What effect does that create in you as a reader? Those kinds of questions that I think of as literary, but also intellectual and historical questions, were magnetic for me. They made the classroom alive, and I have always tried to replicate that with my students.

Fred Lawrence: And the fact is we're getting that data, if you will, all the time. How is it when you were in third grade and a substitute teacher came in one day, you knew in an instant whether this is somebody you can get away with things or whether you better get in line? And you knew it and everybody else in the room knew it, and nobody had to write it down.

So the story of your education is going to end with a PhD in Political Science from Yale, which has a distinguished Political Science department. But along the way, you get your bachelor's degree from Princeton, but you're not majoring in Political Science. You major in History. Princeton has distinguished political scientists, political philosophers, social psychologists, political sociologists. Looking at where your work has wound up, that would've been the guess of what you would've studied at Princeton, and yet you studied History. So is that due to the training of this teacher in high school or are there other factors involved there?

Corey Robin: I think so. He had such an impact on me. There were wonderful historians at Princeton, especially, well, all of them actually. The European History Department, Arno Mayer, a European historian, Lawrence Stone, a British historian, and John Murrin, an American historian, these were just extraordinary classes that were just hyped up versions of Mr. Damon's class, although honestly, I don't know if anybody ever really superseded him. I did take, in the politics department, probably my most influential professor, a man by the name of Sheldon Wolin, who was a political philosopher, an absolutely transformative teacher. I've always been a night person, never a morning person, but I got up at eight o'clock on Monday morning and learned how to chug down a cup of coffee to get to those lectures because there was nothing I could do to miss those lectures.

Fred Lawrence: Let me turn to one of your very, very influential works, *The Reactionary Mind*. *The Reactionary Mind* was originally subtitled *From Burke to Palin*, Sarah Palin, when it came out in 2011, and then in 2018 when it was republished, it's retitled *From Burke to Trump*, for obvious reasons. The New Yorker called it the book that predicted Trump. Do you think it was the book that predicted Trump? And if so, what were the factors that influenced this prediction?

Corey Robin: Well, first I should open with a disclaimer, which is that I myself thought in 2016 that Trump would lose, and I was very public about this. So I'll explain why they wrote what they said in the New Yorker, but I feel like honesty requires me to say that I made a big mistake in 2016 when it comes to predictions, which is why I really try to stay away from them. Now, I learned my lesson the hard way.

The reason why they said it was the book that predicted Trump was that when the book came out, I had made an argument, which was at the time, very controversial, very heterodox, and was not particularly well received, which was to say that the conservatism that we have in mind when we use that term, and I'm asking people to get their mindset back, pre-Trump, back 10, 15, 20 years, people thought of conservatism as a very prudent traditionalist philosophy, not even really a philosophy, more of a disposition of restraint that was, above all, concerned with preserving traditions and customs and institutions, and that was the way conservatism was described. If ever a politically relevant question came up, the question was, how is it

that in today's society, the Republican Party, the conservative party, doesn't seem conservative? I sort of took that question and flipped it on its head and said that in fact from the very beginning, going back to Edmund Burke, conservatism has been a much more ideologically extravagant, politically adventurous doctrine than we have realized.

So what I did was, I really began with a very close reading of many of Burke's texts, some familiar, some less familiar, and tried to fill out that picture, and then went to look at some other figures, some very familiar from the canon of political thought, of conservative political thought, but some not so familiar. So I looked a lot at the American slaveholders. Again, at the time, that was perceived as a fairly unorthodox move. People didn't associate the American slaveholders with the American conservative tradition. I did. And so the portrait that emerged of what conservatism was from that book ended up looking somewhat like Donald Trump, and I think that's why the New Yorker had said this was the book that predicted Trump, because I had said this is what the essence of conservatism is. We have not seen it because we have not paid enough attention to what conservatives, both political theorists and statesmen and politicians, have said about their own tradition, and so that's how that book came about and why it was received the way it was after Trump's election.

Fred Lawrence: One of your Visiting Scholar lectures that you'll be doing this year for us is entitled, "Who is Clarence Thomas, and Where is He Taking Us?" which I assume draws heavily on your important work, *The Enigma of Clarence Thomas*. So let me ask you a range of questions. So who is Clarence Thomas, in terms of how do you answer the question you pose for yourself? So who is he? And as you're doing research for the book, was there something that you learned that just really surprised you, where you said, "No, that's not something I would've expected of him"?

Corey Robin: Let me answer your second question first because I think it'll actually help us get to the answer to the first question. The thing that most surprised me and why I ended up writing this book was when I discovered that Clarence Thomas had a past as a younger man, in both college and law school, had a long time residency, not just on the left, that's not that uncommon for conservatives to have been much more on the left when they were younger, but on the black nationalist left. He came of age in 1968, the moment that Martin Luther King was assassinated, and really takes a turn towards figures like Malcolm X, the Black Power Movement, and not just in a symbolic or rhetorical or fashion sense, but at a very deep level, and what doubly surprised me having discovered this, is that even though he makes this migration to the right beginning in the mid 1970s, he never loses many of the fundamentally orienting ideas from that black nationalist movement.

And so the answer to your question of who Clarence Thomas is, Clarence Thomas is, as you mentioned, an extraordinarily influential conservative jurist, but he's probably the only conservative black nationalist jurist that, I think it's fair to say, that we've ever had

on the Supreme Court, and that, to me, is what became the enigma of Clarence Thomas, is that how is this man taken motifs and ideas from Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, real figures in the black nationalist tradition, how has he taken them and imported them not only into a Supreme Court opinion, which as you know from your work, is a kind of a staid literary genre, how has he taken both of those ideas and not only put them into Supreme Court opinions, but into Supreme Court opinions that are very conservative? And this is the kind of only in America type of story. You'd need somebody like Ralph Ellison to really tell it, the novelist, but I did my best in that book.

Fred Lawrence: When I think about the, if you will, black nationalist roots of Clarence Thomas, I think about an opinion that he writes, a concurring opinion in a case involving gender and higher education and gender classifications, and he writes separately to make sure that everybody understands this is not meant, in his view, to limit the important project of HBCUs. Now, Clarence Thomas himself is not a product of an historically black college or university, he went to Holy Cross for undergraduate and Yale Law School, nonetheless seeing that as an important part of what higher education offers for African-Americans, and to say the least, as one of the major opponents of race-conscious admissions policies, this puts him in something of a quandary. Technically, legally, it's not a quandary because HBCUs, historically black college and universities, don't, as a matter of principle, refuse to accept students who aren't students of color, but as a practical matter, they tend to get fewer of those applicants, and that's how you legally solve that issue.

But philosophically, for him to be so enthralled with an educational model that is clearly race-conscious as the author of the major opinions critiquing race-consciousness is at least worthy of discussion, it is at least interesting.

Corey Robin: I totally agree, and I'm glad you put it that way because it raises the question that, what did he actually say in those opinions where he critiques race-consciousness? And what he actually says is not the kinds of things that we normally expect from conservatives. Namely, you have to adopt colorblind institutions, colorblind policies, and all the rest of it. He actually has said very straightforwardly that the United States is not a colorblind society, it has never been a colorblind society, and it most likely never will be a colorblind society. His critique of affirmative action is not that it violates principles, basic principles of colorblindness. It's that it is, in fact, and I want to pause here because I realize what I'm about to say is going to sound so completely extravagant and wild to people as to be improbable, but I promise you, read the book, you'll see that he really does say this, his critique of affirmative action is that it is essentially a white program for white people, that this is a way that white elites can decide what kind of aesthetic, and he uses that word, what kind of racial aesthetic, will be at their institutions, and that they get to choose an exercise discretionary judgment, and that this reprises a whole history of white supremacy going back to slavery and Jim Crow.

Again, I acknowledge this sounds to the, I won't say the untrained ear, but the unfamiliar ear, as really a wild kind of a claim, but it is actually rooted in a whole tradition of thought. And so I, in the end, don't think there's much inconsistency because what he's also said repeatedly is that black people, particularly black men, who I think are his primary constituency, which I think is interesting given what's happening right now in the election and some of the shifts in public opinion polling towards Trump, but black men thrive, do best, flourish, to the extent that they can in the United States, in black institutions, and so he's very protective of things like historically black colleges and universities.

Fred Lawrence: One of the things that Phi Beta Kappa is certainly known for is our readers, our listeners to the podcast are readers, so I like to ask my guests on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa, to help them build their reading list. Can you give us a couple of suggestions for people who are generally familiar with the things we've been talking about, but for whom this is still relatively new in terms of their reading, and maybe a couple of suggestions for people who have a fair level of sophistication in these issues, but are ready to take on a bigger challenge and take their level of knowledge to a different height?

Corey Robin: So I'm going to make what are going to seem some out of the way recommendations, but these are books that I think do speak to some of these issues. Annie Ernaux is a novelist in France. She just won the Nobel Prize.

Fred Lawrence: Just won the Nobel Prize, right?

Corey Robin: Yes, exactly. And I picked up, because she won the Nobel Prize, her book, *The Years*, which is a kind of semi-autobiography of growing up in post-war France up through the early-2000s. She was from a very poor background and from Normandy, and it gives you a real sense of, first of all, what public education and what the promise of education was in the post-war era, which she was the beneficiary of, and then what happened in the 1980s when the right was sort of in ascendancy and just the decline in the sense of the public. And then I'm going to switch completely. I am writing, there's a new translation of Marx's *Capital*, a very big book that people don't read very much, which I first of all would highly recommend. That's a book that has been daunting to people for a very long time, but there's just a beautiful translation that two German scholars have done with Princeton University Press of Marx's *Capital*. So I would recommend those two books, different types of books.

Fred Lawrence: Corey, we're so delighted to have you with us this year as a Visiting Scholar. The range of your areas of interest, of course, are inspiring, but as you and I were saying as we got started today, you've had the, I'll say, good fortune that the issues that you find of interest and that you have great talent in explicating also really came to the fore in American society and the American political system at just the same time. So thank you for being the teacher to all of us who have benefited from your work, and thank you

for being a Visiting Scholar this year, and thank you for sitting down with me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Corey Robin: Thank you. I really enjoyed it.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode, Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer, and 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.

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