

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(00:17\)](#)

I'm Samantha Rose Hill. This is "Hannah Arendt: Between Worlds" a podcast from the Goethe-Institut.

Hannah Arendt was a stateless refugee for nearly 20 years of her life. Forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1933, after being detained by the gusstapo for eight days for conducting antifascist research at the Prussian state library, she was released by as would later come to say pure luck. She fled to Paris where she lived for the next eight years, helping Jewish youth immigrate to Palestine before she herself was forced to escape an intern camp in the south of France in the spring of 1940, with the help of the American journalist Varian Fry and the Urgency Rescue Committee. Arendt was finally able to escape Nazi occupied Europe and immigrate to New York City with her husband Heinrich Blucher in the spring of 1941.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(01:13\)](#)

So she knew firsthand that when you're stripped of your status as a citizen and rendered stateless, that human rights, which are supposed to come in effect for you, are supposed to be there to protect you, don't. In fact, being stripped to the position of a human is an extremely precarious place to be.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(01:35\)](#)

Right now over 80 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them nearly 26.4 million are refugees. Around half of whom are under the age of 18, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

In this episode, I talk with Stephanie DeGooyer about what it means to have rights today and whether or not Hannah Arendt's concept of the, to have rights holds up in our world now.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(02:07\)](#)

I get emails from time to time from students and from people who really want "the right to have rights," to be a kind of progressive prescription for how those who are right-less and disenfranchised can signify or enact their rights. And it is always so hard to nuance and explain the difficulties of that. When so many people really just want a kind of quick slogan or energy or feeling to signal their anger.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(02:41\)](#)

Stephanie is assistant professor in the department, English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She's the co-author of *The Right to Have Rights*. Stephanie DeGooyer, welcome to Between Worlds. It's a pleasure to have you on this podcast.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(03:13\)](#)

Oh, hello. Thank you for having me Samantha.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(03:16\)](#)

So when we started planning this podcast about people who think *with* Hannah Arendt, I knew right away that I wanted to have an episode about rights and refugees. Arendt was a stateless refugee for 18 years, almost 20 years of her life. And that has always seemed so integral to me about her person, her politics, and her writing, and you edited and, and published a book on the right to have rights thinking with Arendt, not so much kind of diving into secondary scholarship, but really trying to wrestle with the contemporary refugee crisis today. And so I'm wondering if we can, can just start with you maybe explaining, uh, to people who aren't familiar with this phrase of Arendt's "the right to have rights," what the right to have rights is and what drew you to Arendt's work on this and her and her work from the forties and fifties?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(04:14\)](#)

That is, uh, a great, huge question, but I'll start with why I came to co-author this book. The right to have rights in many ways is a phrase that's taken from Arendt in two places. She speaks of it in the ninth chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which is the book she wrote after coming to America as a refugee, her first English language book. But before that, a few years before that, she had also spoken of the right to have rights in, um, a labor movement magazine called *The Modern Review* in an article that was called "The Rights of Man, What Are They?" She speaks about this maybe twice, three times, and then never again, in, in her work, which of course is very significant. She has written a lot, but I'd say beginning in the 1990s with a bunch of historians and philosophers and political writers, the right to have rights became significant again.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(05:13\)](#)

Um, and a lot of people started to think with it. And so when I was in graduate school, for example, we would read Judith Butler's theoretical musings on the right to have rights. She's published a bit, or, uh, Sayla Benhabib, about her writings on the right to have rights. And so it became a kind of, it, it had a kind of political theory philosophy attached to it, um, that I, I was familiar with, and it all centers around the kind of question for what is the right to have rights? And how does it work? Is it the same as human rights? I mean, is it just a kind of longer roundabout way of saying human rights or is it something different? And that was something that myself and the co-authors Leda Maxwell, Alastair Hunt and Sam Moyn, we really wanted to, um, break the phrase down and really sit with what it means for Arendt.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(06:04\)](#)

I mean, there's lots of writings on what other people think it means, but we really wanted to sort of pull it apart. And it was no easy task. What happens is, is when you begin to study it in how it appears in Arendt's work, and then what it means within the context of that work for me, I came away and I'll speak to this in a second with a more sober realization of what Arendt was meaning when she said the right to have rights for some people. It's a kind of prescription for a positive politics or a kind of radical claim that is supposed to be enacted for people who don't have rights. But when you follow down what it means for Arendt, it becomes something that's no longer possible. And really this comes out of, as you suggested, her own experiences as a refugee.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(06:59\)](#)

Stephanie, can I ask you to define positive politics for our listeners who haven't studied political philosophy?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(07:08\)](#)

Yeah. Another word, a, a word, you know, that would, would make sense here is *affirmative*. When you hear the right to have rights. I mean, this is a phrase that people use, you can go in to Twitter right now and type it in, and you will see people using it without any connection to Arendt. It has this sense of something's happening. It's a right for the people that have been, who've lost rights, right? So that first right in the phrase is a right upon which all else can be given. And a lot of people from detainees in Guantanamo Bay to people agitating for the right to gay marriage in Ireland have used the phrase sort of without knowing its philosophical registers. And they mean it in the affirmative sense of we deserve this right. Or *these* people deserve this right. And they have a right to those rights.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(08:00\)](#)

It's a right that already exists, and it's a petition to also have that right?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(08:09\)](#)

Yeah. It can be, um, for some thinkers, it's a moral, right. It's a, a right. That maybe it doesn't exist in law, but it's the basis upon which rights should be made for others. It could be a kind of transcendental right. A kind of right that exists in nature or some other metaphysical source. So there's a lot of ways that the phrase has been read and summoned and thought about that I was interested in is how Arendt meant it. Because I think in the end, I came to the conclusion that when you follow down what she thinks you do get some sobering, but really important lessons that can be helpful for understanding our own moment of refugee crisis. So yeah, that was the impetus to start the project really.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(08:56\)](#)

Can you say what some of those sobering lessons were? And, and I think it, it strikes me that part of what you are saying and part of what Arendt is conceptualizing with the right to have rights is a critique of what we might term "the rights of man" or "inalienable rights" or this idea that natural rights somehow exist.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(09:19\)](#)

That that's exactly right. So what happens if you take the phrase outta context, it can sound affirmative, but she invents the phrase or uses the phrase as a critique of human rights. Now she's writing this in 1949, a year after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is published. She's writing this after enduring her experience as a refugee, who is expelled from Nazi Germany and interned in France, and only managed to escape France, not because of some grand claim to her human rights, but because a bunch of people can conspire to get her some visas and to defy the orders of their superiors. So she knew firsthand that when you're stripped of your status as a citizen and rendered stateless, that human rights, which are supposed to

come in to effect for you, are supposed to be there to protect you, don't. In fact, being stripped to the position of a human is an extremely precarious place to be.

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([10:22](#))

And that's why Arendt in *Origins of Totalitarianism* will say that you become human and nothing but human. And so for her, she's really critiquing the notion that being human can be some sort of place of protection, or a place upon which to base a kind of universal right. Human rights are supposed to provide relief to you when you're stripped to your most reductive state, but in her experience and the experience of millions of others, you know, 6 million Jews, for example, who were killed by the Nazis that, in fact, did not happen. And so it's out of this experience that she really wants to critique the notion of a transcendental or universal right, of belonging. Because for her, it's only when we discover that all of these millions of people have lost their ability to be members of a state that we realize the importance of something called the right to have rights.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([11:23](#))

You know, so this starts to get into her critique of the nation state as a political institution. And the fact that nation states are exclusionary. And one of the things that she writes about is the ways in which rights are not just this affirmative thing that's granted to citizens of the state, but that rights actually become instrumental in the emergence of fascism in the 20th century, because state systematically stripped groups of people of their rights in order to exert power over them and create superfluous masses of people who had no place in the order of the world, which is organized according to states. Can you talk a little bit about this, not belonging to the world at all, and the limitations of the nation state, or how we think about the nation state and relationship to the refugee crisis today?

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([12:25](#))

Absolutely. And, and you just touched upon something that for me, uh, in my own work and in my writings on Arendt, which I've written, I've written now in several places about this, but I'm, I'm still so interested in. It is the right to have rights is a, a way of talking about a right to be a member of a nation state, which for all right, is the most important, right? If you're not a member or a citizen of a nation state, then you're, you know, rendered stateless or you're cast out. But at the same time, for her what she's really diagnosing and which I think is worth paying a lot of attention to is what you mentioned, which is the beginning of what she calls "a regime of de-naturalization". And I study naturalization in, in my work more generally, but the moment that states have this legal power to expel their own members, that for Arendt is the moment of collapse, right?

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([13:19](#))

And she talks about the disintegration of the nation state system. And she doesn't mean disintegration in the sense of European Union or something. She means that in the sense of as soon as nation states become completely invested in sovereign and control of their own borders, expelling people to kind of become the scum of the earth to other states, we're in a situation where it's impossible for somebody cast outside of that state to find a home. And so that for her was really the moment of deep concern. And that can lead, as you said, it was a tool

of fascism and totalitarianism; expulsion de-naturalization, and denationalization. These are the concerning movements for her that she was witnessing and, and had indeed experienced herself.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([14:06](#))

I'm wondering if you can maybe give us an example to tie this to our contemporary political moment. Um, I can't help but think about, uh, Donald Trump, sorry. Stephanie is shaking her head and laughing as, as I'm sure many of you are. You know, the rise of right wing populism as it's called today is in part blamed on the current refugee crisis that's been going on in Europe for a number of years now. How do we start to put our argument about the emergence of totalitarianism in the middle of the 20th century into conversation with the rise of right wing populism in the world today?

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([14:49](#))

Yes, this is, um, you know Arendt's work on the right to have rights has really been boosted the last few years since the election of Donald Trump. I mean the book become a kind of mini bestseller again, and there's lots of camps out there debating whether in fact, we are in a fascist moment. But I, I would say that if you look at the archive, it's a bit confusing because in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt is really skeptical and cynical about human rights and the ability for stateless people to ever find a home. But the one place she holds out hope, or this could be possible is the United States. And to read that as a contemporary reader is to really feel an awfulness in the stomach because what we are seeing or have been seeing is the opposite of that. And indeed Arendt, when she had moved to America, the place that she did see so much hope in, she had quickly realized herself that America wasn't the great hope and savior of refugees that it could have been.

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([15:56](#))

And she was very critical of an effort in the 1950s, or a proposal that was put forward, to denationalized communist sympathizers. And she was deeply scared that the United States would do what had happened to her in Germany. So America kind of loses its luster in her account and indeed in ours. But I will say maybe this is myself talking now since we can't really interview Arendt on, on this question is that Trump is only brazenly done what it's possible for any head of state to do. And there are no laws for the refusals of refugees. We talk about international norms, you know, you shouldn't do that, but in fact, it's always possible within the construct of national sovereignty to deny refugees a place of belonging. And the protocols for refugees in that way today resemble what the minority treaties would've been like for Arendt. They're weakly reliant on norms rather than rights. And so we still aren't.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([16:57](#))

Can you say what that difference is? Uh, because the language of norms I know sometimes can trip people up. Sure.

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([17:05](#))

Well, it's pretty easy to understand, um, you know, we could get into all of the political theory, but norms are, are things that are, are customary to do things that are, are the right thing to do are things that we've always done. Of course, Donald Trump was the great norm buster in so many ways as he held office and while he was campaigning. But norms are just things that we do as a country. We don't have to. And so Biden, for example, president Biden has only recently spoken of making the caps for refugees in America larger. And of course, he's only talking about restoring them a little bit past what Trump had done when he, he slashed them. We're not in a place where we can speak of president Biden as mending the damage done by Trump. In fact, they're all part of the same problem: national states prioritize their own people and their own citizens ahead of anybody else. And if they decide that, for example, president Biden did recently that in the interest of the health and safety of American citizens, that refugees shouldn't be admitted because they may infect people as we were seeing at the southern border, they, they have the right to do so because there's nobody that can enforce international norms on a sovereign state, especially a powerful one like the United States. So, um, you know, we, we, we're still in this condition that she was diagnosing.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([18:35](#))

One of the questions that I get often when I'm teaching or, or talking about the *Origins of Totalitarianism* is, and I wanna ask it to you, What was Arendt's position towards the nation state? And you brought up how, when she first immigrated to America, she thought that the constellation of the United States as a political body was a counterexample to the ethnonationalism of Europe, which she had come from. There's a great letter in her correspondence with Carl Jaspers, uh, shortly after she arrives where she says this melting pot thing is a myth. There's no melting pots here. The great part about America is that we have all of these independent immigrant communities who exist alongside each other, but she argues ultimately that the United States is not a nation state in the traditional sense. So what is her position on the state, on the nation state and how we think about human rights or rights in relationship to the political?

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([19:45](#))

I mean, this is a complicated question, because again, it goes back to the right to have rights. And what does that phrase ultimately mean? And Arendt is basically saying that if you're not a citizen, um, if you haven't been accidentally bestowed that, right, or hasn't been taken from you, then it's very, very hard for you to find belonging in the world and to have your place within it. And she was deeply suspicious, and also not convinced in a kind of body like the United Nations that it would ever have the force to bring about a kind of universal order or international order that would ever be able to sort of put the nation state into check and to force it to deal with its own members and those whom excluded. And so that's led some historians to say that our is in many ways, kind of hawking a, a normative there's that word again, vision of the state, right?

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([20:43](#))

And that the state is ultimately, lump it or like it, the, the nation state that is, is the body that gets to decide and how we get around that problem. I mean, again, this is still the problem we're in today is how do you force a powerful nation state to care about people? It doesn't wanna care

or to bestow upon them rights that it doesn't wanna give them. And I think for her, I don't think she had faith. There was any kind of international body that could ultimately disrupt that power. Um, and that is a troubling and disappointing truth to her writing that I think, think isn't always what people wanna hear.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(21:30\)](#)

When you say troubling and, and disappointing. Do you mean that it's a failure of her imagination to think about rights outside of organized political communities? Or how, what are you thinking about?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(21:43\)](#)

Yeah, no, I don't mean a failure. I, I, I think she's right if I was to, I don't think she's right on all accounts. I mean, she's not interested in social and economic rights at all. And other people have talked about that her disinterest or distrust of social welfare or policies, I'm not with her on everything she says, but I do think the conundrum she identifies is so singular and so important that even if it's a disappointing one, it's still the realest one I know, which is that, how do we force European nations, America, Canada? How do we get them to admit newcomers, especially ones who are so in need? How do we make it possible for them to become members of the state? I mean, that her question and her conundrum that she theorizes is, is still very much active and with us. Although it's very different because we're no longer in the same world she was in and we now have our own kind of neoliberal economic issues that she wasn't exactly seeing.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(22:56\)](#)

The question that I was thinking about is how have the transformations of the state, and even since the late eighties, especially with the rise of globalization, as it's called technology, digital technology revolution, how has this changed the way that we, we think about answering that question, but also the ways in which states are now interacting with one another?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(23:20\)](#)

I mean, I guess I could follow this question in a couple of ways, but one thing that's interesting is when we talk and this may not be exactly what you're getting at, but when we talk about the stateless we think of a kind of refugee who has no home and who is pleading at the gates of the nation state for entrance, but there's all kinds of neoliberal, stateless capital that moves around and skirts rules and offshores itself here and buys a passport there. And that is really sort of no longer nationally bound in its

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(23:59\)](#)

We saw this recently with the, uh, evacuation of citizens from after Afghanistan, quite visibly, the contrast between people who were able to charter private jets and people who were clinging, uh, to airplanes as they took off on the runway.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(24:16\)](#)

Well, and in fact, that's a, that's something that scholars of refugees have long insisted upon is that the refugees who make it to your country, if they even get there most don't are among the more, you know, monied or more fortunate. Um, so many can't even can't even leave. They're not arriving. They're sort of stuck. Millions upon millions of refugees are in camps all over the world who can't even move. If anything, I think that the problems that emerge post-war are, are bigger now and certainly in numbers, they tilt that way.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(24:49\)](#)

Well, I think you're, I mean, I think that's a pretty strong critique in a way of Arendt's conception of the right to have the rights in the way in which he talks about it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where it's very much explicitly not about socioeconomic rights, which she wants to a set, as you said, a few minutes ago, completely aside from political rights, one of the things that has become more visible today is the, the extent to which we can't untie those two in our contemporary world. Socioeconomic equality and political equality.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(25:27\)](#)

Absolutely. And I think, and I think that's one of the reasons that some people have, you know, misgivings about Arendt's larger project, which is that it is weary of or disinterested in those very basic social and economic rights. I mean, and the importance of being a, a speaker and being a speaker in a pluralistic world is of course important, but we can't just be in a place of people all speaking together and having the right to speak and the right to be members. It's about thriving and surviving, being able to access those things and to be able to move, to get them. And I think those are things that aren't, aren't best covered by her work, of course. In my writing on her, and I think Sam Moyn is similar to me in the book, we think of the right to have rights as not the thing to fix on with her, because I don't think she fixated on it. I think in some ways it's a throwaway phrase that she was using to speak of a right, to be a member of the nation and its importance. Of course, I'm brutalizing dozens of pages of work that I've done on this to be succinct. But I don't think we're meant to see it as something we should rely on in diagnosing the real problems that we face.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(27:16\)](#)

A word that's come up a few times is home and thinking about whether or not this is a throwaway phrase in Arendt's work. I, I kind of love that, especially because so much ink has been spilled over it. I think alongside this conceptualization of rights is the ways in which Arendt talks about home or *heimat* in German, which is not quite the same thing as home. But I wanna read you a quote from *We Refugees* and maybe talk about it a little bit because this quote has always really resonated with me. Well, I won't say why. I'm just gonna read it. "We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions and the simplicity of gestures." So this is not the usual list that we might expect to attach to our idea of home. How do you understand our dealing with home when she's, when she's talking about home and her essay in *We Refugees*?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(28:31\)](#)



In some ways she's speaking to a world in which you matter, a world in which you can speak, a world in which you have belonging. And I, I don't think it's territorial always. It can also just be all of those political givens that she sees as lost when you become stateless or a refugee. She sees, you know, those things. And so it's, it's a place of where one counts, to use some language from Jacques Ranciere, a French philosopher who's also spoken a lot on Arendt's meaning of the right to have rights. And so that's, that's how I would read it. But I would also just say, hearing you read that I love those essays. *We Refugees* and *Stateless People*, her early essays on statelessness from the early forties. I teach them all the time and they're beautiful. If I spoke earlier of a kind of cynicism or a, a soberness in her outlook, it doesn't mean that she didn't do an amazing job of rendering the situation and what it meant for so many people. I mean, that's what, when you read these essays, you really get that feeling for them. But nonetheless later by '49, I think some of her thinking in those essays has started to wither away and she's come to see that the internationalist forms of protection that may be necessary in something like a European Federation are no longer possible.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(30:11\)](#)

Do you think something prompted her between 1943 and 1949 to kind of step back from this sardonic and ironic tone to deal with the loss of dignity?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(30:25\)](#)

I mean, if you really wanna explore, you know, a fascinating new answer to that question, um, Mira Siegelberg's new book on statelessness really positions Arendt as sort of less at the forefront of initiating this new reading of the world and statelessness place within it, but really kind of hawking, and as I said earlier, a kind of normative version of it. And in fact, being completely in step with some of the legal thinkers of the time. That's a separate, um, thing and I would encourage people to, to pick up that book and, and check it out, cuz it was, it was really interesting to see Arendt repositioned. But I think also she's by 49, she's read the drafts, uh, at least the drafts of "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and is deeply suspicious of that thinking and has more of a handle on what's happening politically around her to, to be short about it. The language and the experience. I mean, there's a reason why *We Refugees* is taught so often and that so many people who have had to leave their home for, for reasons that are aren't of their own choice, read that essay and, and feel so much about it. I mean, it's very beautiful and very effective, but I think it doesn't match up with the kind of political diagnosis she later gives by '49 in *Origins*.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(32:00\)](#)

You've been talking about refugees. There are other populations of people who are stripped of their rights in our society. And I'm thinking about the large number of people who are currently in prison in the United States right now. How do we begin to think about the racial and social aspects of criminal law and rights in the United States today? That's an easy question. This is not a big question.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(32:25\)](#)

No, I mean, it's a great question. I mean, firstly, it, it calls up something, we've been talking a lot about how citizenship is sort of like the, the most basic line of protection that Arendt is interested in and sees as necessary. But as we know that citizenship does not guarantee one a glorious life of inclusion and protection within one state. And incarcerated persons are certainly stripped of the right to vote. And that's frankly ridiculous and doesn't make any sense and should be changed. I mean, I don't think, I don't know how to be more clear than that. I mean, and the same thing with, with all kinds of people who, um, are kind of what we could call second class citizens with within the, the sphere of citizenship.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(33:11\)](#)

Well, one of the things that I hear in your description of rights is this almost kind of Aristotelian conception of human flourishing. That when we, when we talk about rights, we have to talk about almost creating the conditions that allow people to flourish. And that to me seems to extend far beyond the limitations of the law. I'm wondering how, as a society, we, we begin to open up a broader conversation about human flourishing when there are so many American citizens who have anti-immigrant attitudes, who would absolutely disagree with you about extending the right to vote to incarcerated persons? And how do we begin to have this broader conversation about rights?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(34:06\)](#)

I mean, this, these are great questions, Samantha, and they're, they're huge ones. And they're the ones I wrestle with. Um, and I will wrestle with probably forever. I think a lot of people who are anti-immigrant, if I can just be very general for a moment, also subscribe to founding narratives about origins. They believe in that where you're born guarantees you, for example, the, the right to have more than someone who's not born here. I'm Canadian, I'm not naturalized, but to become naturalized, it would require me to demonstrate all kinds of skills, language, a history test, that if I was born here, I would never have to demonstrate, right? Because it's just as soon as you're born on the soil here, you're, you're considered to have everything you need to be a member and anyone else's not natural enough. These are stories we've been telling and propping up.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(35:04\)](#)

And sometimes you'll have people that will refer back to the constitution or to support them. But one of the things I've been doing quite recently is reading a lot of founding documents and theory from the early American Republic to think about how America was founded on an idea, Now I'm not gonna say it's open borders or anything like that, because I think that is completely unrigorous and untrue, but it was, it was founded on the idea that everybody had the right to leave. That's the exact language, the country in which they're born. If that country doesn't protect them, or they're no longer able to flourish there and to come somewhere and start a new. And that is actually the energy that drove a lot of the founders to write the documents upon which, you know, America is based. And I think a lot of people who are anti-immigrant have no idea about this history. They've grown up, up with an idea that's just not supported actually, if you look farther. So I think one, one place is that we really need to aggressively open up why we hold those ideas.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(36:10\)](#)

Well so on the one hand, there's the arbitrariness of chance of birth of where it is that we are born and the rights that and opportunities that we receive as a result of that. But you know, on the other hand, I'm thinking of Arlie Hochschild's book *Stranger in Our Own Land*, which is a work of political sociology, where she, she talks about these kinds of anti or in attitudes as a form of line cutting is one phrase that she uses. That these political opinions are sometimes the reflection of the lack of political mobility in the United States for working class people. You know, we've had economic stagnation in this country since the early 1970s. Americans aren't moving anymore. There is absolutely no middle class. We have no functioning, social welfare state education, uh, on many counts as abysmal right now, you know, how do we also address the, I mean, I, because I think that's also a legitimate political grievance one might even say.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(37:20\)](#)

I don't have a prescription for how to talk to people who are economically oppressed or disadvantaged in America and to make them not see the immigrant is the problem. But part of them is to talk to them about how useful that narrative is for politicians, rich politicians to use. And you know, something I've been wondering quite a bit about lately, but I don't have the kind of fully formed sense of how to bring it together is we have a kind of, you know, "the great resignation" as people are calling it. We have people leaving their jobs and droves, and we have all of these vacancies. And of course there are plenty of people, the world over who would give so much to be able to have the crummiest jobs in America, which is not suggesting that we should pay immigrants crummy wages at all, but we can't have all of these vacancies and have our borders closed and not have a conversation about how those two things work, I think. But I'm not fully vested in how I wanna bring those two together. But I think it's worth thinking about that.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(38:29\)](#)

Well, I think this brings us back to home in a way, you know, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which is, this is epic work, it's three books in one. And Arendt talks about the three underlying kind of existential conditions of totalitarianism; homelessness, rootlessness, and loneliness, or the, the German word is a sense of abandoned. That sense of making a home of feeling rooted seems essential in a way to part of what we're talking about. That there's a kind of existential crisis, not just in the United States right now, but in other countries as well around issues of identity, work. Can you unity how it is that we organize our day to day lives and how that's changed in the past 20 years or so with the rise of technology in the changing shape of the world economically.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(39:30\)](#)

Right? And maybe this is partly to explain why we see so much for resurgent nationalism and, and what the lure of that nationalism is, right? Which is to give one sense of connection that maybe they're not experiencing through their job or online. Not that I wanna explain it through such simple ways of thinking, but that could be a kind of reason, one reason,

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(39:55\)](#)

But this is, this is an argument we, he, on the liberal left right now on the one hand, the argument that people are prone to form cliques that they're territorial. Um, and at the same time, an argument for kind of resurgent nationalism. I'm thinking a little bit of George, what George Kateb might say to that in his work on Arendt. But I think Arendt would've been horrified by the kind of suggestion that nationalism can give us the kind of meaning that we are talking about. But I think other people might disagree with that reading. How do you account for this kind of political shift?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(40:38\)](#)

Oh gosh. I mean, why we are having a kind of xenophobic populism, resurgent nationalism, not just in America, but, but all over the place is such a huge, huge topic. But it all has to do with the ways that we could look at neoliberal capitalism, for example, is disenfranchising so many people, the ways that our towns are being erased, newer, bigger box stores being brought in. The ways our forms of connections online are becoming more abstract and full of trolls and anonymity that allows people to speak in ways that are upsetting. The norm busting of the last presidency. I think all of these have sort of opened the door for these kinds of major nationalist shifts. I personally, and just to be honest, I can't clearly account for why. I'm, I'm the kind of person that when I write and think, I really think slowly, um, and, and through a lot of things, and I wouldn't wanna throw out something to explain why I see this happening, but I do think all of these things have to do with a kind of, you know, a, the loneliness of living under the conditions of modern capitalism.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(41:57\)](#)

I mean, I know that sounds simple, but I think, I think it's safe to say that they're at heart and the rise of anti anti-immigrant narratives are not new. They didn't arrive through Donald Trump. Donald Trump was just a kind of more on and upfront and in some ways refreshing to have somebody just say it.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(42:17\)](#)

To bring it into the public sphere.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(42:20\)](#)

Rather than someone like Obama, who, who kept it kind of hidden away from the public face of his administration though we know very much that, like Clinton before him, there's been many nativist policies. And Biden certainly has them too. So in some ways Trump can interest us because he has been so overt about what other presidents and administrations have done as well with the exceptions sometimes of George Bush, which is not something people like to hear about.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(42:52\)](#)

Yeah, but I think that the, the way people tend to generalize what the Democratic party does and what the Republican party does, doesn't actually align with their public policy, uh, platforms.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(43:03\)](#)

Well, I'm being, I'm trying to be careful about how I say them, because I don't wanna, you know, explain nationalism in three seconds. So that that's, these are the questions everyone's trying to answer right now. And a lot of people have easy answers and, you know, ones that are more thought out or, um, ones that are, you know, more Twitter friendly or all kinds of things. But I personally haven't found the greatest answer for myself.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(43:32\)](#)

I mean, I'm not sure there are answers in the way that we might like to hear to a lot of these, if not most of these questions, you know, right. So right before this conversation, I was talking with Ken Krimstein about storytelling. And we were talking about the Isak Dinesen quote, "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it." And we were talking about the difference between people's desire, just to have facts like, okay, this is why it is this way, which is probably the reason why the scapegoat theory I think, is so palatable and, and powerful as opposed to truth, as opposed to actually getting at the messy, complicated truth, which opens up more questions and hardly ever provides answers. So I have no expectations of answers.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(44:25\)](#)

Well, and I think, I think what you just said works the other way around too. I get emails from time to time from students and from people who really want the right to have rights, to be a kind of progressive prescription for how those who are, are rightless and disenfranchised can signify or enact their rights. And it is so hard to nuance and explain the difficulties of that when so many people really just want a kind of quick slogan or energy or feeling to signal or anger. And, um, it is very hard to write nuanced, thoughtful, slow, careful writing at a time when people aren't doing the reading carefully, they're just retweeting. They're just putting emotions on top of it. Um, it's really hard. And I, I can always tell when someone hasn't read what I've written, because I would know if they had. So I think that's on both sides too, that the quickness, the emotions, just the inability to sort of think. And I think that's what I do love about Arendt is that phrase, to think what it is we are doing. And her emphasis from, from Eichman that I always tell my students about, to think what it is we are doing

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(45:43\)](#)

And that desire to not think to assuage that that feeling, that the, the quickness that the Twitter like is a kind of new utopianism in a way that we don't have to wrestle with these questions, if we can just kind of, you know, do away with them, which I, I don't think is, is helping the contemporary political situation in this country right now any.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(46:11\)](#)

No. And, and I, and I know from all kinds of places, there's a lot of hopelessness right now, and morale is bad and anger. We're in the midst of a pandemic. It, it is hard to write these things, right, because they're not just intellectual exercises. This certainly aren't for me. They're not just about getting tenure, and getting an academic book out, or getting a credential in a newspaper. Although those are nice. At the end of the day these aren't just debates. These are real people's lives. It can be really hard to, to read these things all the time and to think about exclusion and

racism and xenophobia, um, and what we can do to make life for refugees better. I think sometimes when we get into the political theory, we, we do risk a disconnection from the many lives for whom this isn't just theory. This is a pre-lived thing. And I, I think I'm very, I try and stay aware of that and not let my cynicism take over too much.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(47:15\)](#)

Oh, absolutely. But at the same time, I'm thinking about the almost endless stream of images that were bombarded with in the news of the children and cages on the border, which feels pretty much invisible in day to day life right now. I think most people think about it, and then they don't think about it. Images of the people crossing the border, of children dying, of dead bodies, of boats overturned. It's visible. And yet, how do we, it, it seems to be a kind of absence of humanism in a way maybe that's too harsh, but it doesn't feel like it.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(47:53\)](#)

Um, I have a friend who was head of communications at Doctors Without Borders. And I heard him speak once. And I've spoken to him quite a bit about the challenges of trying to make European citizens care about these migrants being trapped in the Mediterranean and, and dying. And the kind of awful feeling it was to use pictures of toddlers and other forms of images to try and shock people into caring and the, the kind of uphill battle that more and more images ceased to shock or, and that you only have a few minutes of people's time before the issue recedes from their and how hard that work is. And at the same time, I'm thinking of Behrouz Boochani, a former detainee on the Australians in Papa New Guinea. He was a refugee and he wrote this exquisite book, a memoir of his time there. And he is just so angry at the way the media covers refugees. It's really worth returning and looking at how we make refugees faceless screen grabs for, for stories often and fail to see their individual humanity in each situation. So I think, I think images, I think media, as much as it aims to give stories to people can also just be part of the problem.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(49:26\)](#)

Well, it becomes impossible to discern the difference between what's what's a entertainment, what gets consumed as an item of entertainment and what we might call news if such a thing exists anymore or something that is explicitly political, not something that we're just clicking through, scrolling through, is a news item. You know, after whatever sitcom it is people are watching. And there's a space in thinking between what it is we're being confronted with, which is real in human and where we sit.

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(50:03\)](#)

And the opposite works too. You have people who are anti-immigrant and hold views that are, you know, untenable with a kind of liberal politics of openness. And yet in their communities, they will meet a refugee or an immigrant from time to time and separate that person out. So in other words, the, the lives we're living and the images we're consuming, aren't always on the same level. And that we can read stories about things, but do nothing about them in our individual lives. Or we can, you hate a nonsense on the internet and, and yet be perfectly fine with, you know, one good immigrant who lives down the street. I think it has a lot to do with the

side we live in. I mean, I, I feel like I'm speaking in platitudes right now, rather than concrete analysis, but I think it's just the mood I'm in to be frank after reading and thinking so much.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(51:00\)](#)

Yeah. You know, and I, I, I, I think this leads to at least the last question that I had, which is, you know, how do we begin to imagine human rights outside of political, the political or political communities?

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(51:17\)](#)

I, um, this past year have have written a few pieces. I have a piece coming out in a little bit. A lot of people on the left, uh, are interested in something called open borders that no one is illegal. You'll see that slogan, sometimes borders shouldn't exist. I share, of course, a strong understanding of why we wanna critique those things. But at the, at the end of the day, I also, I think if we really wanna reimagine the conditions of entry, and of course I'm an academic, you can tell. I mean, we have to really think about what we mean by that. I think a lot of the things I read about open borders are, are more polemical and they're very under thought and very hard to understand what it would look like in practice. Although there are some very good philosophical and historical things I've read on open borders, of course. But I think we, we need to start with, you know, maybe the things that aren't as grand, but thinking about our immigration requirements. I spoke about that earlier birthright and the undocumented people here and, and why a single law or expiration date can evict them and why natural people always have the potential of being deported, where those histories are. And reenvisioning starting there before we sort of slip into a kind of open borders is where we need to head. I think we need to be really strong about what it is we want in our immigration requirements, if any, and how, how to get there. And that's the work I'm doing. And it is not very sexy some days. I'll tell yo, it can be pretty dry.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(53:04\)](#)

But I, but I hear you doing the important work of bringing the rhetoric back to reality and not just the idealism, but getting into the muck of what it means to reimagine immigration and perhaps even conceptualizing a new form of natality, or when thinking about birthright and, um, naturalization and the new and newcomer newcomers talked Arendt about that's needed in this political moment right now,

Stephanie DeGooyer: [\(53:35\)](#)

We would probably need some constitutional amendments, which are always those impossible things. And so at the end of the day, whatever we imagine is gonna run up against it's impossibility in Congress. But I think that those are the things I'm most interested in, which is one historicizing, not just for the sake of it, but to really understand where these narratives come from, how long they've persisted, not to be susceptible to the idea that, um, Donald Trump is some kind of new and rogue actor, um, representing all kinds of new things in the United States. I mean the United States has a very deep and long history of denaturalization, and in many ways inspired the Germans to do what it did. And I think, again, reading more on those histories think is pivotable. If even if I sound like that old professor who no one's gonna pay attention to,

when I say that. That's the best I can do. And of course, showing up to help people. I mean, that, that sounds also kind of naive, but I don't mean it sound naive. Activism, organizing. Organizing is huge. A lot of immigrants organizations could use help some days. I, I, I have no idea what it is I'm trying to do, but I'm still going back to the archives, so something's happening,

Samantha Rose Hill: ([55:04](#))

Stephanie, I appreciate the work that you're doing. You're, you're in the weeds as we sometimes say, and I look forward to your work and essays on birthright citizenship, and human rights. And I hope you get a chance to again soon.

Stephanie DeGooyer: ([55:20](#))

That sounds great.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([55:38](#))

Between worlds is a co-production of the Goethe-Institut and Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. It was produced and edited by Lisa Bartfai. Music by Dylan Mattingly. Project management by Kathrin Engler and Lena Joehnk. And it was hosted by me, Samantha Rose Hill. We have seven more episodes for you on storytelling, friendship, eros, Hannah, public rights and memory. Until next time.