

# Episode 11 Transcript

## Covid-19 and Political Resistance

**Hosted By:** Rebecca Richards

**Guest:** Assistant Professor Meena Krishnamurthy

*Transcripts may have been edited for clarity.*

Hello and Welcome to 'Just Emergencies'. I'm Rebecca Richards and for today's discussion on Political Resistance during the Covid-19 pandemic, I am joined by Assistant Professor Meena Krishnamurthy. She is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario where she works on social and political philosophy, as well as African American and Indian philosophy. She's currently working on a book about Martin Luther King Junior's political philosophy and her expertise on racial justice and the civil rights movement made her the ideal contributor for today's episode.

In what follows, we talk about the ongoing anti-racist protests around the world, whether there's an obligation to participate in them - especially during a worldwide pandemic-, and how they differ politically and philosophically from the anti-Covid-19 protests that have also sprung up.

*[Intro Music]*

This is 'Just Emergencies', the podcast where we show that global health emergencies are anything but just. In each episode we explore an issue, question, or event that makes us think about global health emergencies, humanitarian crises, and how to best respond to them.

Without further ado, let's get into the episode!

**Rebecca:** Hi Meena. Welcome to the 'Just Emergencies' podcast and thank you so much for joining us today.

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk with you.

**Rebecca:** Over the past few months we've been seeing a lot of political protests all around the world. Can you give us a little bit of background on those protests and what your thoughts are on why people are protesting during the Covid-19 pandemic?

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Right. So I think we've been seeing a lot of protests of different natures. One of the global movements we're seeing are protests to remove racist statues, to take them down, or to alter them in some way. This kind of encounters the fact that these statues are of people that were racist in very different ways. Then we're also seeing obviously a lot of movements in the United States and solidarity movements against police brutality and against the carceral system.

I think in terms of thinking about the broader context, I think we're all quite aware of racial disparities and these protests are essentially in response to racial disparities, inequalities, and racial injustice. And what's been really interesting I think is thinking about the way they sort of started in the United States against police brutality and removing confederate statues. But then, in a way, the global context is taking these as a starting point and then using them to capture racism with their own local contexts.

So, for example, I live in Kingston, Ontario in Canada. And in a sort of prominent place, in City Park Area, there is a statue of John A. Macdonald, who was our first Prime Minister but also quite responsible for the residential school system and part of the cultural genocide of indigenous people of Canada. There was a protest here that sort of linked the movement that was happening in Kingston to the broader global context of specifically the one in the United States that was arguing for racial justice and an end to police brutality. But also thinking about the links to white settler colonialism, of course, in the Canadian case.

So I think, in a way, the beginning is sort of happening in the US, but then it's being spread across the globe and localised in really interesting ways.

**Rebecca:** And obviously protesting during the current times is potentially a bit different from when we're not in a pandemic. There's a lot of questions being asked around 'is it socially responsible to engage in political protests when Covid-19 is still spreading through the population?'

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Right. So I think there's a few things to note.

Right now, in terms of looking at the data that we do have, there doesn't seem to be any community widespread that's resulted from participating in protests. So in general, the worry that it's somehow going to lead to community spread within a place where there's a protest doesn't seem to be borne out by the data - at least not yet.

The other thing that I think it's really important to bring out is that any kind of protest part-and-parcel - if we think about the civil rights movement and what's part of non-violent resistance - is to be willing to take on certain kinds of risks. And the reason to take on that risk is to express the level of significance and importance: this is such a bad situation, it's so important, that I'm willing to put myself and those I care about at risk.

It's not like Covid is the only risk. If we think about, in general, the kind of violent backlash there can be to protests at any moment, there's always a risk that protestors are taking on. You know that you might very well get either arrested and have to deal with the calamity that that will cause for you and your family, or you can be pushed, or hurt, or beaten by the police. So, particularly for Black civil rights activists both back in the day and also today, they're already at risk any time they protest. But maybe, specifically in the conditions of Covid, there might be even more so.

The other I think I also want to make clear: the people who are protesting largely when we think of these movements, is led by Black Americans in the United States. These are the groups that are most significantly at risk already of catching Covid and also of death. It varies state by state in the United States, but we know that Black and Latino Americans are three times as likely to actually catch or contract Covid. We know that death rates are starkly higher for Black and Latino Americans as well. So, in a sense, those groups are already being disproportionately affected by the risks of Covid. So in a way, stepping out into a situation that might seem more risky for others isn't really different from the day-to-day life that they're already living.

**Rebecca:** Do you think that changes depending on your own health status? So you said there, and I very much agree with you, that in these kinds of contexts where there's such an important issue, and you know, you kind of need to be willing to take on some personal risk. But obviously, some people are immuno-compromised or live with people who need to shelter or are immunocompromised. So how does that factor in?

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Alright.

So I think the other thing to notice in the fact that we haven't seen any community-wide spread, is the precautions that people are taking. So a lot of these protests and movements are being organised by women of colour: Black and Latino women, Indigenous women in Canada. And many of these women already actually have positions as essential care workers and are thinking and coming from a perspective of care: how do we take care of people? Very aware of the risk that might be imposed in taking steps.

So I think about the protests that I've been to here in Kingston, but also in the United States, there are people that make masks and are handing them out for free, giving people hand sanitiser. At the protest that I've been to, there's been respect of physical distancing - keeping a certain physical distance away from other people. There has been water distributed because

it's been very hot, to make sure that nobody gets dehydrated. So I think because of the kind of organising that's being done, there's already this attempt to mitigate risk for people who are already so obviously at risk.

And again, there are immunocompromised people who... just look at the demographic data that people who are people of colour are being disproportionately affected by Covid - those people are already among the people most at risk. But in terms of the immunocompromised... I mean every family, I think, and every individual, think(s) about the risks that they have to take on and whether this moment is right for them. And in a way, that's an individual decision. But I also think that many of us are talking with people, our families. Because even if I'm not immunocompromised but my mother or my partner is, I could be inadvertently putting them at risk. But I think the thing to say is, a lot of us are making these decisions in a community or having conversations... asking whether there's consent. Are you ok mum if I go to these protests and maybe that's inadvertently going to put you at risk?

Part of what's interesting to me is thinking about the kind of collective decision-making that's happening in this moment. Especially, it seems like to me, it seems like women of colour who are having these conversations are thinking about how to mitigate risks for people who might be immunocompromised. So that's one thing.

The other thing your question is getting at: do we have a duty? If we're immunocompromised, do we have a moral duty to get out on the streets? In some ways I think... obviously you could give a philosophical theory about that and whether that's right. For me, I think it's going to depend a little bit on the context: how at risk are you? To what level are you immunocompromised? How complicit do you feel in the practises that are happening? Do you feel like you have an obligation to mitigate that?

There are a lot of big questions. I don't think there's an easy answer. And I do think, truthfully, in lived reality, if we think about ethics and our duties,

there's always going to be conflicts between our duties to be out there resisting or do we just protect the people we care about? But those always come up in the instance of non-violent resistance. So Black Americans were protesting during the civil rights movement, they knew they could be fired. So if you're the main income earner, you're putting your whole family at risk, you're putting yourself at risk. So people have to make decisions about whether they ought to take that risk on or not. I think those questions are real. I don't think there's an easy answer, but they're real.

**Rebecca:** So on one end obviously we have the Black Lives Matter and anti-racist protests. But we also have people who, you know, are of the opinion that Covid is perhaps a conspiracy by the government or that governments are overstepping their bounds in their Covid-19 responses. The people who protest these matters are surely very convinced as well that they're protesting the right thing, here. Do you think there's a difference there? Is there a moral difference between those kinds of protests?

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** I think that's a great question. I definitely do think there's a difference.

So again, many of the protests that people are thinking about when they're thinking about the white backlash protests are happening or happened in Michigan. If you look at the dialogue around what's going on, there's this discussion about it being a violation of civil liberties. You know, 'you're imposing on my freedom to move and to go and occupy spaces that I want to occupy. I can't get my haircut. I can't go and hang out with my friends on a patio and have a drink'.

So we all care about liberty. Absolutely. But we have to think about what liberties are being interfered with and again, about the democratic duty to make sacrifices. So I think one of the things that's really intrinsic to the civil rights movement - I'm thinking about Dr King particularly, but Gandhi, too - is when the protestors are out there, they're making a big sacrifice by taking

on all this risk to convey an important moral message to the community. And to hopefully raise consciousness. So part of the thought behind that movement is that there is a kind of duty to make sacrifices for democracy.

And one thing we can ask ourselves about the protestors in Michigan is: is it a democratic message that they're trying to spread and convey? 'I can't get my haircut'... well we see what's going on in the United States. They have the highest increased number of cases, daily increase, yesterday. Where in most other countries we're starting to see the levels go down. You know, where you sacrifice your liberty to have a haircut to promote the wellbeing of the most vulnerable people in your community. That seems like an important democratic sacrifice to make - that's a democratic duty that we have to our fellow citizens.

So I do think there's a difference. We have one group saying 'Let's have more democracy. Let's make sure that racial minorities aren't oppressed by the state and by the police in particular'. And then you have another group that doesn't seem to have that democratic message at the heart of what they're fighting for.

**Rebecca:** And between these two groups of protests, are we seeing a difference in the levels of privilege? Is there a difference in those populations?

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Right. I think that's a really important point to bring out, so I'm glad you asked that.

So I think when we're looking... if we look at the data specifically in Michigan around who has Covid, we're seeing Black Americans in Detroit, predominantly, [being affected by Covid] in high numbers. So again, we're seeing a disproportionate effect of Covid among racialised populations in the United States. And then we look at the protests in Lansing, people with their guns in favour of getting their haircuts and storming the legislative buildings,

they're predominantly white. I don't know if we have data about their economic status, but minimally, they have a kind of race-based privilege.

Even the kinds of things that they're asking for... it isn't 'please stop the police from killing me'. It's 'please let me go get my haircut'. I think there's a reason social media kind of fixated on that sign of 'I need my haircut': because it seems so trivial. And if that's the thing that you're fighting for, it does seem like clear evidence of a certain kind of privilege that you're fighting for and that you have. You're not worried about your grandmother dying, you're worrying about whether your hair looks nice today. That in itself, that message that's being conveyed, is also one of privilege.

**Rebecca:** We've discussed matters of justice, but are there any other specific concerns that you think involvement in protests raise in the context of Covid-19? And how do they slot into other sort of overarching justice concerns that we might have in society?

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Yeah, that's a really good question.

So going back to one of the earlier questions that you asked about social responsibility; people sort of suggesting that it might be socially irresponsible to protest. But these public health workers are saying 'Look, the very same things that are leading to people of colour being disproportionately affected by Covid are the same things that, first of all, have to do with good public health infrastructure. At the same time, you have these protests against police brutality, but in a way, that's connected to, and expressive of, systemic racial inequality, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

So I think one of the things that we see when we think about Covid and people that are protesting... yes, race and police brutality seem to be the trigger. But in the moment of Covid, it's drawing our attention to these broader structural processes that are contributing to the disproportionate impact of Covid on people of colour, particularly Black, Latino, and Indigenous Americans. So I



think it calls our attention to the fact that there's poverty, there's high unemployment rates among certain racialised groups. We know that chronic stress because of structural discrimination can make people's immunities compromised; make them more at risk of Covid. Those all have to do with the legacy of racism and structural inequality within the United States. But also globally, it's the same phenomenon; where we see Indigenous people and Black people disproportionately affected by things like Covid and other health issues.

**Rebecca:** And during this time of Covid we've seen sort of an upswing in solidarity. Do you think that environment has fostered the anti-racist protests and has sort of made people more receptive to that?

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Well a lot of people want to say 'What is leading to this moment? In this moment, why are there so many people out in the street, especially when there seems to be all this risk to even leaving your home? What's happening?'

So the thing about solidarity that I think is really important to notice, and many historians are pointing our attention to this fact, is that they seem fundamentally different than the civil rights movements in the United States. So if you look at people in the streets, some of the early data that's been collected for example in a study by Fisher and Hensley, suggests that 60-65% - if you look at New York and Washington - of the protestors are white. And we even see 55% or something like that in LA. More than half of protestors that are out there are white! Now that seems like there's a multi-racial coalition growing and showing up on the streets in a way that we have not seen before in the civil rights history of the United States. So that seems really significant, to me. Something is different. So I think the question is: 'What's happening? What explains these actions of solidarity?'

I think a lot of things. So one of them I think is that the protest culture in the United States has been growing. It's been a decade if we think about the

Occupy movement in the United States as kind of the beginning. And then we see Black Lives Matter building on that protest culture. And then we see post-Trump Black Lives Matter sort of quietens down, then we see the Women's March/the Women's movement, and now we see BLM rise again. And so what we have is this long period of protest culture building.

My own view is that engaging in protests and becoming a non-violent resistor is something that has to be habituated and encultured. So you see more and more people are getting practice and it becomes a habit to show up on the streets, to give up your time, to take on certain risks to be out there, fighting for justice.

But the other thing is, this is the point where we have to start thinking about capitalism and labour. So many of us spend so much of our time working, working, working, working. When is there time to get out on the streets, even if you wanted to? So now as we have more time for self-reflection and actually to show up, I think people are actually showing up. And the increase in time... and this really does seem like a moment where people are engaging in self-reflection. And I think with the Movements of BLM in particular - Black Lives Matter - has given us the frame for thinking about what is happening through the lens of racial discrimination. So we're looking at Covid, we know that it's disproportionately affecting people of colour. But we've also gone through this moment with BLM where we're looking at this as a kind of structural racism. But that's also not only putting people of colour at risk, but also white folks. So now, in a way, their self-interest is also becoming wrapped up in it.

So it's part self-interest, self-reflection, I hope consciousness raising. But I also think it's important - as you already mentioned in the point about the white backlash - to also recognise that there may be limitations. We always want a progress narrative: to see that things are getting better, that people are coming. But one thing is that these movements take decades and decades and decades. And maybe now that Covid has affected us and we have more time, there's lots of people showing up. But will they show up tomorrow?

When they, you know, see micro-aggressions happening at the water cooler, will they call them out? Will they fight for raises for people of colour who aren't making as much as they should be?

In some ways, it's easy to show up on the streets sometimes as an ally. The harder work is at all these small levels and also pushing for structural change all the while. And that's a really long, I think, fight that takes a lot of heart and commitment and personal sacrifice. So on one hand I'm feeling really optimistic about this multi-racial coalition that's forming. But I'm in a kind of agnostic mode about let's see where this all goes and how long-lasting and deep it is. But I do basically a deep sense of optimism in this moment.

**Rebecca:** Well, let's end on that positive note. Optimism is always a good way to round-out a podcast. Fingers crossed. So thank you very very much for joining us today. That was very thought-provoking and hopefully inspiring to people to get involved as well.

**Prof. Krishnamurthy:** Thank you very much. It was great talking with you.

*[Outro music]*

That's it for today – we hope you enjoyed the today's episode.

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Thanks for listening and see you again for the next episode.

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