

Tectonic Episode 03: Renewing our Governance Systems

Anne-Marie Slaughter 00:01

There's a profound paradox that if we want people to take more risks, and if we're going to be the entrepreneurial society we pride ourselves on, we need to provide more security. This is backed up by research, but it's also basically common sense.

Brendan Karch 00:21

Welcome to Tectonic, a podcast that uncovers the shifting foundations between science and society. I'm your host, Brendan Karch. Our guest is a policy leader who thinks that America and international governance structures are struggling to deliver for their people. But she says there's hope.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 00:44

Hi, I'm Anne-Marie Slaughter. I'm the CEO of New America, which is a think and action tank in the United States.

Brendan Karch 00:52

We spoke with Anne-Marie about her career as a foreign policy expert and her recent turn to domestic issues. And we tackled the two big questions that preoccupy her. First, what needs renewing in American and global politics? And second, how can we better equip societies to tackle pressing global challenges like the Coronavirus pandemic? Anne-Marie and I bonded as two people who have left behind our professor jobs, though, I'm just a podcast host, and she's the CEO of new America, one of the US leading center-left think tanks. As such, she spends these days thinking mostly about domestic politics. But it wasn't always that way. Some kids want to be doctors when they grow up, Anne-Marie? Well, she was a little different.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 01:46

I've wanted to do foreign policy all my life. I'm half Belgian and half Virginian. And that meant in the early 60s, in the 60s, I would go back and forth between suburban Virginia and Brussels. So I've always been between two cultures.

Brendan Karch 02:04

Anne-Marie had planned to practice law. But it wasn't the dream she'd imagined. So instead, she ended up teaching it, and from there moved into international law. She rose to become Dean at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs. Then, in 2009, came probably the biggest call of her career. She joined the Obama administration, working under Hillary Clinton in the State Department as Director of Policy Planning, the first woman to hold the role.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 02:35

As somebody who was engaged in foreign policy, Secretary Clinton convinced me to focus as much on development as on diplomacy. Focusing on development meant I also really took a good hard look at our own country in the United States. And it just was so broken. I mean, just riding a European or an Asian train versus Amtrak is almost all you need. The state of our infrastructure, the state of our education, the horrific state of our health care, the absence of other kinds of care that most advanced industrial economies take for granted. So that was one. I really came to believe that if we are going to lead in the world as Americans, at least foreign policy Americans assume we should, we need to fix our systems first.

Brendan Karch 03:29

After a few years in the State Department, Anne-Marie decided to exit for personal reasons. It was the resignation heard around the world. And it sparked a debate that helped nudge her into domestic policy.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 03:41

I wrote an article in The Atlantic in 2012, called Why Women Still Can't Have It All, that was an account of my own epiphany after being in the State Department and having a kid who had a difficult adolescence. It was clear to me I needed to put my family first for a while and I recognized at that point just how many women were still really struggling with a system that still isn't really accommodating gender equity.

Brendan Karch 04:11

A year later, Slaughter left her post at Princeton to lead New America, a domestic focused think tank. Now gender equity and care issues are at the center of her agenda. And it's also a major topic of her recent book, Renewal. For Anne-Marie, the word renewal has special meaning

Anne-Marie Slaughter 04:30

although Americans love to think we can reinvent ourselves completely and there's an entire, you know, self-help industry around a whole new you. I don't believe you can reinvent yourself completely. I think you have to confront who you are, how your life has shaped you. You have to confront the good parts and the bad parts with what I call radical honesty.

Brendan Karch 04:54

The book is a blending together a personal memoir, and an ode to America's promise which she feels can be fulfilled only by a true reckoning with America's history, and its current challenges. For Anne-Marie, this requires structural changes to our democratic and economic systems.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 05:13

We have to start in my view by renewing the promise of America. And the promise of America is in the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, Martin Luther King said, you know, that was a promissory note. It said, all human beings are created equal. It actually said, all white men are created equal, but over time, we've come to expand that definition. And they all have unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That's that commitment to those ideals is what needs to be renewed. And if you then take those ideals seriously, you have to start with our democracy, which is badly broken. So I really

think we have to start with pretty profound reforms to our political system. I would favor rank-choice voting, which would allow for a multi-party democracy.

Brendan Karch 06:03

Anne-Marie says America also needs structural reforms to its educational and care systems.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 06:08

We need really dramatic overhaul of our educational system, and higher education as well.

News voiceover 06:15

43 million borrowers have about one and a half trillion dollars in federal student loan debt.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 06:21

Overall, we have students drowning in debt, many of whom don't even graduate and are still drowning in debt. Building an entire infrastructure of care - and this is a way of unlocking our talent, and again, mostly women who are caregivers, but a growing number of men. We need a system of childcare, elder care, care for those who are ill or vulnerable or disabled. And it's perfectly possible to do.

Brendan Karch 06:49

Finally, Anne-Marie believes that our economy's ethic of endless growth must reform itself, in order to save the planet.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 06:57

We need a renewal of our economy. Our version of capitalism is unsustainable, certainly, in terms of climate change [and] biodiversity. But it's also based on just a relentless ethic of growth, and more, as opposed to, I write about, you know, the ethic of enough. We want everyone to have enough. There's a certain level above which more consumption certainly doesn't bring you the pursuit of happiness.

Brendan Karch 07:29

But where do we start? For Anne-Marie, many of the necessary reforms, especially on the economic and welfare sides, can be summed up by the concept of de-risking society.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 07:42

There's a profound paradox, at least to most people the first time they encounter it, that if we want people to take more risks, we have to provide them with more security. This is backed up by research, but it's also basically common sense. People for whom losing a job does not mean just getting another one, but could conceivably mean destitution, do not take risks.

Brendan Karch 08:09

As Anne-Marie notes most of the successful entrepreneurs – the aspiring Mark Zuckerbergs – hail from an economic upper class that affords them the luxury to fail. And the other 90%? Think of all the talent and innovation that never gets a chance to shine.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 08:28

Obviously, it does depend on personalities, but much less than we might think, and some risk takers – individual risk takers are, you know, accountants but who also skydive, right? So it really isn't just personality. It has to do with these conditions. And if we're going to be the entrepreneurial society we pride ourselves on, we need to provide more security.

Brendan Karch 08:52

As Anne-Marie notes many of the policies she advocates, like subsidized childcare, enjoy broad popular support in polls. But political change sometimes feels impossible in a system many called broken. Anne-Marie, however, thinks the answer remains reform, not a whole-scale revolution. Not everyone agrees, though, not even in her own house.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 09:17

These are arguments my husband and I have all the time. I'm a lawyer, American lawyer, and for American lawyers generally the Constitution is sort of a civic religion. So the idea of junking the Constitution [and] starting over, I find quite terrifying.

Brendan Karch 09:35

Yes, Anne-Marie has a religious-like faith in our founding ideals. But she thinks our history shows how these ideals can, and should, evolve.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 09:46

And my example again would be our political system. At the turn of the 20th century, we changed the way we elect Senators from state legislatures to popular vote. It was a big change. And we moved from conventions to primaries, which was also a big change. Now, today, some folks think primaries are disastrous, and we need to change them. But the point is, we have really dramatically changed our electoral system and our political system, sometimes through constitutional amendment – which is fine by me if you can get it through – but many times by other changes at the state level. So for instance, to adopt rank-choice voting, which would allow multiple parties, all we have to do is do that state by state. To do it in presidential elections, you would have to amend the Constitution and the Electoral College. But I think if we did that in all 50 states, or most states, you would probably then have support for that kind of an amendment. Of course, there's a Catch-22 there, which is, yes, if we had a representative political system, we could make more of these changes, but we need a representative political system. But you are seeing these changes. I mean, we have two states, Maine and Alaska, and they're both very independent states that have sent as many Republicans to Congress as Democrats, that have adopted rank choice voting. You have a growing number of cities, and it's on the ballot and many others. So part of what this book is about, is hey, we can do this.

Brendan Karch 11:19

While Emory spends much of her day thinking about domestic policy, she hasn't abandoned her interests in the world beyond the US border. She sees major shifts happening internationally too, and major opportunities for renewing the promise of global progress. Not surprisingly, she orients her thinking here around the US role as a global leader.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 11:43

I see a really fundamental change coming in the way the United States will be in the world. And when I say coming, I'm talking decades. I'm not talking this administration, although I think you can already start to see the signs. And not just with withdrawing from Afghanistan, but actually starting with Barack Obama, who I think was saying we can't be the global policeman all the time. We need to be the global problem solver.

Brendan Karch 12:12

As Anne-Marie sees it, domestic fatigue over America's failed nation-building adventures is prompting a reckoning, but a slow-moving one. And what if we want to see faster change in the world? Well, maybe the answer lies less with our nation-state politics, and more with the bottom-up energy of transnational social movements and NGOs. Take, for example, the global impact of Black Lives Matter.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 12:49

The United States was more popular in the world for Black Lives Matter than it was for anything the Trump administration did. In other words, that capacity of not only African Americans, but multiracial coalitions coming into the streets to say, enough. That's what triggered emulation in many other countries, because in many ways, that's us at our best where again, our system allows for radical honesty. So I do think that the ground-up, movements can make a big difference. They don't have to go one way. If you look at the Extinction Rebellion or the Friday demonstrations, those start in Europe and come to the United States.

Brendan Karch 13:39

Anne-Marie thinks new communication forms like social media, can allow transnational communities of activism to more easily connect.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 13:49

One of the other things that's so excited me back in the early 2010s was the promise of civic technology, was the promise of how technology could connect and mobilize people. And here, you know, if you're passionate about the environment, you will find people around the world you are connected to.

Brendan Karch 14:11

For all the bottom-up energy in the world, and for all the power that nation-states wield, Anne-Marie actually locates much of the promise of international progress at the in-between, meso level. Take for example, cities.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 14:33

Cities to me are a source of great optimism. In many ways, a world of 190-odd states is too many to get things done at the intergovernmental level, but too few to actually tap into the behavior of citizens, because those governments are too far away. Cities, on the other hand – let's just take the global covenant of mayors for energy and climate – that's 7000 cities around the world. Those mayors are far

more directly connected to what actually happens on the ground, whether that's emission controls, or racial policies or economic policies. They are, you know, they're powerful. Many of those cities are bigger than countries

Brendan Karch 15:32

Anne-Marie's own academic research focused on how to best transparently recombine government resources at different levels, to tackle issues. She calls this disaggregation.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 15:45

The book I wrote in 2004, called *The New World Order*, talked about disaggregating the state so it's not this black box that you know, is a box on a map. But rather, you take apart the different parts of government, and the different levels of government, and you let them interact with one another and collaborate with one another in ways that you really have levers, then, to solve problems and change behavior. Whereas at the United Nations, you often have the feeling that these are 190-odd heads of state who float above the ability to grapple with things like pandemics, and climate change, and food security. You know, of course, they can adopt policies. And I'm not saying government action at that level doesn't matter. But often those policies are not enforced, and again, they are just not connected enough to their people.

Brendan Karch 16:40

For Anne-Marie, global governance has become immensely harder as the original design of the UN outgrew itself, thanks to decolonizing states in Africa and Asia asserting their sovereignty.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 16:54

We're in a century where if the current international system was set up in 1945, when there were fewer than 50 states in the world, and indeed, they designed the United Nations General Assembly for no more than 60, which is extraordinary, and tells you a lot about why the current system of global governance is not nearly as effective as we need it to be.

Brendan Karch 17:18

What are we to do? One proposal Anne-Marie has floated is for new temporary alliances that bring together various stakeholders – international organizations, NGOs, corporations, foundations and nation-states – in order to solve a problem. They assemble their resources, fight the challenge, and then move on. She calls these issue-based initiatives impact hubs.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 17:45

So my example of an impact hub is the Global Vaccine Alliance, or GAVI, which was brought into existence through a combination of the Gates Foundation, the World Health Organization, a group of national governments, pharmaceutical companies, (you're not going to vaccinate the world's children without pharmaceutical companies), and many, many civic organizations. It is an impact hub. It had a very clear mandate: we are going to vaccinate as many of the world's children as possible because that will protect their health – and without health, they can't do anything else. But to achieve that impact, it is not bound by the United Nations, but neither is it just NGOs, and neither is it CEOs. It brings everybody

together whom we need, and indeed in different countries, and indeed on different continents, it's structured differently, because it has the flexibility to adapt to local circumstances.

Brendan Karch 18:44

For Anne-Marie impact hubs can assemble constellations of actors that, working together outside their own bureaucracies, can create fast-moving collaborative solutions.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 18:55

Imagine if we had that kind of impact hub for every one of the Sustainable Development Goals. There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Many of those break into three or four sub-goals, because you have to get something very specific so that you can measure progress toward it, and so you can really design a hub that will have that impact. We have the capacity to do that. We just have to build the structures to enable it.

Brendan Karch 19:25

At the same time, I pushed Anne-Marie on the idea that hubs can really accomplish that much without the structures of authority and the resources provided by nation-state governments.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 19:39

Vaccines are a great example because you hear all these corporations and foundations right? The Gates Foundation has given, you know, a great deal of money for these vaccines. Gates Foundation is the richest philanthropy in the world by a lot, and even so, it's just a drop in the bucket compared to what governments can do. So absolutely, and to me, all of this is both/and. You know, whatever I might think those 190-odd governments are either elected by their people, or at least not rejected by their people, and most people will trust government more than a corporation.

Brendan Karch 20:17

Then, of course, there's the need of governments to answer to their own people at home. Take vaccines: the rich nations of the world have started supporting global vaccination for COVID, but mostly they've been looking out for their own citizens' needs. Many Americans, like myself, have gotten three doses, while over 40% of the global population has had zero doses.

Anne-Marie Slaughter 20:40

One of the reasons the rich countries don't do what they should do, or any of the countries, is because obviously domestic politics, the 'who gets what' domestically. So the way you design these impact hubs is in part to mobilize government spending, but to mobilize it in a way that more people participate. This isn't the idea that you would have impact hubs that replace the current UN system. It's much more that you would put it over top the UN system. And actually, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General, has talked about networked multilateralism, and he sees it often as UN agencies will be those hubs. I see it as sometimes they'll be those hubs, sometimes they won't, but they'll always be a part. And the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals, are the kind of thing that only the UN can really make happen, because you can't get that kind of agreement otherwise. So this should be consistent with a more effective intergovernmental system at the same time as we mobilize so many other resources.

Brendan Karch 21:53

In other words, hubs should strengthen the international system we have in place, not weaken it. What then, are other areas where we could create these impact hubs? I asked Anne-Marie, the question: if she magically had unlimited funds, where would she create an impact hub?

Anne-Marie Slaughter 22:11

I think one place I would start would be to create an impact hub around digital governance. It would be something that would, again, probably start with a number of states, probably smaller states, maybe those states that are most advanced digitally. And think about both, how can we build a kind of public layer for the internet, the kinds of protocols, for instance, that allow us to have email, but the protocols that allow different people to use it were built into the internet. And you could do the same thing with ID and payment systems. You could enable governments to collect taxes better. I would think about how to design an impact hub that again, had some governments, certainly had the engagement of the international entities we do have, but would also have companies and NGOs and citizen groups. Because, as I look at where we're going, we live digitally as much as we live physically. You know, there's a European vision of what the internet should look like, there's a Chinese vision, but there's not a global vision, and we need one.

Brendan Karch 23:35

If you'd like to read more about the impact that Anne-Marie is trying to make, check out her new book *Renewal: From Crisis to Transformation in Our Lives, Work and Politics*. On our next episode, we talk with Ben Wurgaft, a historian and author who has taken an anthropologist's eye to our latest food technologies, particularly lab grown meat.

Ben Wurgaft 23:58

Many people presume that meat is going to become harder to create as climate change shrinks available farmland, as water becomes less readily available. If you could grow animal products under laboratory and then factory conditions, you would fundamentally change the way human beings relate to non-human animals.

Brendan Karch 24:22

He discusses the hype around some techno-solutions to our fundamentally social challenge of feeding the planet. Tectonic is hosted by me Brendan Karch, with production and sound design by Anour Esa. You can subscribe to our podcasts on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google, or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you have a second, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. We'd love to hear from you. We are a production of Swissnex in Boston, the world's first science consulate located in the heart of Cambridge, Massachusetts. You can find us on LinkedIn or on Twitter at [swissnex Boston](#), or on the web at [swissnex.org/boston](#).