

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian & “The Cosmopolites”

SEASON 1
episode three

Nicholas Lemann

Hello, I'm Nicholas Lemann, and welcome to Underreported, a podcast from Columbia Global Reports. Today we're welcoming Atossa Araxia Abrahamian to the studio. Atossa is the author of *The Cosmopolites: The Coming of the Global Citizen*, a book we published back in 2015. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *London Review of Books*, the *Guardian* and other publications. Atossa, welcome.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

Thanks for having me.

Nicholas Lemann

Well, we have a lot to talk about, because this was one of the first books we published at Columbia Global Reports, and things have changed since then. We'll get to that. Let's start with just, well, let's start with you. So of what country are you a citizen?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

Great question. I'm a citizen of Canada, where I was born, of Switzerland, where I lived for 18 years, and of Iran, where my parents were born.

Nicholas Lemann

You didn't mention the United States.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I'm not a US citizen. In fact, I'm in the middle of applying for a Green Card, which is an arduous process.

Nicholas Lemann

Oh, okay. Well, you know, I wish I were single, and then we could get married and it'd solve your problem, but... [laughs]

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I have many offers, Nick. [laughs]

Nicholas Lemann

So it's on you. I want to start with the book, that story you tell in the book, and then we'll go to some of the broader issues, if that's okay. So how did you stumble onto this fascinating story, or interlinked series of stories that you tell here?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

So because I'm international myself, I always had a strong interest in citizenship and immigration, as a subject in the world and as a journalist covering them. I stumbled into the sale of citizenship, not because I was looking myself, although it did occur to me at various points. I was working as a reporter at Reuters and I began thinking about what I could do that wasn't just my beat. And one day I received an email about the Global Citizenship and Residents Conference, and I thought, "Oh, that's interesting. That must be some kind of a UN thing, must be, you know, a crunchy humanitarian enterprise." But I clicked on it because I identify as a global citizen, and I was curious about what they really meant by global citizenship. And this led me to a website of a company called Henley & Partners. And Henley & Partners was not using this platform to talk about all of the wonderful things that we can do for each other if we care about people on the other side of the world. They were selling passports. And there was, as it turned out, a large and healthy market for passports. This was in 2012, and I was lucky to fall upon this at a time when it was growing quite dramatically.

Nicholas Lemann

And then, you know, in the book itself, you end up focusing a lot on a couple of very memorable examples of the kind of bulk sale of citizenship. So if you could just walk us through those examples and tell us about them a little bit.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

Sure. So in my mind, there are two threads that connect in the book. One is the sale of citizenship to wealthy people. The ultra-high net worth individuals who buy another passport for convenience. It's kind of like an AmEx card. It's a privilege. It's something you get to make your life easier if you don't have a good passport that lets you travel. That's one part.

Nicholas Lemann

You were saying when the book was coming out, I think: you can never be too rich, too thin, or have too many passports.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

That's the motto of this industry catering to the wealthy. On the other side, there are millions of stateless people around the world. 10 million, I think, was the last count. One million of whom are the Rohingya who've been in the headlines lately. But these stateless people suffer from a lack of citizenship. They have no passport, they have no nationality, no country recognizes them as a subject or a citizen. And through a long and sordid tale that I get into in *The Cosmopolites*, some of these stateless people who live in the United Arab Emirates wound up having Comoro Island passports bought for them by the Emirati government.

How this happened is, I think, fascinating. It involves a Kuwaiti French businessman going to the Comoros, falling in love with the islands, and thinking about how he could a) make a profit, and b) help the Kuwaiti stateless people get a citizenship. As somebody who had acquired French citizenship later in life himself and seen the advantages that being French gives him over being Syrian, where he was born, he was naturally inclined to, you know, try to extend this logic to the stateless.

Nicholas Lemann

So for those of us who haven't taken geography in a while, tell us where the Comoro Islands are and a little bit about them as a country.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

The Comoro Islands are an archipelago off the east coast of Africa. The closest country is, it's kind of between, near Kenya geographically. And it's three islands. It's actually four islands, one of which voted to remain French when the islands had an independence referendum. But the three remaining islands constitute an independent country. It's a very poor country. Their biggest export, I think, is cloves and vanilla and some essences that they use in very fancy perfumes. Infrastructure is abysmal. There isn't a lot of aid to the country, and it's just, it's been kind of abandoned by the French. I know a lot of Comorians feel like they've been abandoned. And so they have to resort to operating on the fringes of the global economy and providing something that other countries want that isn't just, you know, perfume.

One of these things during the apartheid era was money laundering and banking for South Africans who were trying to get around sanctions. And now it's providing passports for stateless people when repressive governments don't want to give them their own.

Nicholas Lemann

So why doesn't the UAE just make its stateless people citizens of the UAE? These are people you refer to in your book as Bedouins, right?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

Yeah. "Bedouin" means "without" in Arabic. And the reasons why the Emirates won't give them citizenship is it's ultimately political and tribal. Some of these people just didn't sign up in time when the Emirates were established as an independent country. So they missed out. And some of them are actually descendants of illegal immigrants. So there's that reason not to give them citizenship. Not to get too inside baseball, but there are certain tribes, and certain groups vote a certain way, and on the top level, there is an interest in keeping the status quo and not opening up the franchise to these people as well.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. So after they become citizens of Comoros, then what do they do? Do they ever go there or do they just stay in the UAE?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I don't know of any formerly stateless Comorians from the UAE actually going to the Comoros. In fact, that was one of the conditions under which the Comoros granted them citizenship and issued them passports. They said, we don't actually want these people to come.

An earlier version of the plan, as laid out by the French Syrian businessmen I mentioned, Bashar Kiwan, was that he would actually build them condos and make kind of resorts for them in the Comoros, and they would go and settle. That was not really what the government envisioned in the Comoro Islands. They can barely provide for their own people, so forget about these troves of foreigners. Most of the people who received Comorian passports, I don't think even left the country. They were just documented. With the exception of one human rights advocate called Ahmed Abdul Khaleq. He was not, he didn't leave by choice. He was deported. He previously couldn't be deported so easily because he didn't have papers to travel. But

once he received his Comorian passport, the authorities thought, “Oh, well, this is convenient. We can get rid of him.” They sent him around the world and now he lives in Canada and he’s doing quite well. But it was it was a rough process for Ahmed.

Nicholas Lemann

Why? Why was it worth it for the UAE to spend the money on this mass purchase of citizenship instead of just leaving the Bedouin stateless in the UAE and saying, “We’re not going to make you citizens, we’re just going to kind of let you live the way you’ve always lived?”

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I’m really not sure. This began before the economic crash, so they must have felt flush and willing to take chances and to try out this little citizenship experiment. There was a lot of pressure from the UN and humanitarian organizations to document the stateless people. Given the political constraints of that, this seemed like a good option. And I think that there were also people in the government who maybe had a stake in this. The person, the businessman behind all of this is very well-connected in the in the Gulf states. And I think there were some favors that were done.

Nicholas Lemann

Okay, so now let’s talk about the part of the book that’s set in the Caribbean, and just take us through in the same way, the characters and the setting and so on.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

Sure. So earlier on, I mentioned that company, Henley & Partners, that was putting on the citizenship selling junket. And the man who – the chairman of Henley & Partners is a Swiss, a native Swiss, who now has many passports, named Chris Kalin. Chris saw an opportunity in the sale of citizenship in the early 2000s. He saw the world changing, he saw visa restrictions going up, and he saw rich people chafing at the idea that they had to apply for visas like every other person.

So Christian Kalin went to St. Kitts and Nevis in 2005, 2006 and negotiated with the government to overhaul their part of their immigration law. St. Kitts, since it became independent in the ‘80s, had a provision of their citizenship law that allowed for the sale of citizenship to wealthy foreigners, no strings attached. They didn’t really make very good use of it, they didn’t publicize it, nobody knew about it. And at that

point, the idea of buying and selling passports was seen as pretty shady. Wasn't a good look, kind of a James Bond thing. Chris Kalin went in there and he's this very put together Swiss guy, very proper. And he designed a new program where wealthy people could buy condos and get a passport – they could make a donation and get a passport – and he kind of formalized this process.

But I think the thing he added to the equation that was the most valuable was that he would then go around the world, marketing it and building awareness around the fact that, you know, if you're Russian or if you're Chinese and you get a St. Kitts passport, your life's a lot easier. You can go to Canada without a visa. You can open bank accounts in certain places. And the fact that this was taking place at a time when, broadly speaking, there was more and more instability in the world – between economic crashes and terrorist attacks – I think he really capitalized on this sense of fear, and marketed passports as a plan B, almost in a survivalist way. It was very successful.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's go to some of the larger implications of this, and also to what's happened since the book was published. You know, you talk about this a little bit in the book. There's a famous old short story that some of us of a certain age were raised on called *Man Without a Country*. And the idea was that to be stateless was the worst thing that could happen to a person. It was a horrific fate because national identity was supposed to be who you were, right. In addition to, you know, your national identity gets you things like Social Security and Medicare and things like that. So do we still think that in the world? Is citizenship, is nationhood important in a globalized world?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I think that's been the debate of the past year or two, even. If you ask somebody like Stephen Bannon, former White House advisor, he would say, yes, nationality and citizenship is the most important thing and we need to restore it. Forget make America great again, make citizenship, make national identity great again. I think that these ethno-nationalist movements are very invested in the idea of nationality and citizenship. Perhaps not in a civic way, perhaps more in an ethnic way. But at the same time, we have what those people call the globalists, who maybe see beyond that and don't think that one should be bound by their citizenship in quite the same way as they used to. And that's a real conflict.

Nicholas Lemann

So there was a time when, at least pundits were really talking about globalization as the future of the world. Meaning, you know, a sense of national belonging and identity and citizenship, which has become decreasingly important to people around the world. Because, you know, as the saying goes, the world is flat and people move around a lot, and money and information move very freely. Why isn't that happening? Or maybe it is happening.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

It's happening and it's not happening. I think after the financial crisis, there was a growing awareness that quote unquote, globalization benefits the very wealthy much more than everybody else, and that the positive aspects of globalization, this ability to travel the world, to live where you want, to taste different cultures – the benefits of this were not being distributed.

I think that was due to economic pressures. I think it was also because people felt a lack of control. They couldn't really control what was going on in their backyards because there was a Chinese company there all of a sudden. Of course, this has been happening for a long time, but politics brought it to the fore, and now we're having these debates all the time about is globalization good? Should we identify as citizens of more than one place? And what are our responsibilities to people on the other side of the world when there are people in our countries that aren't doing so well?

Nicholas Lemann

When people are, as is happening all over the world now and very much in the United States but other places, going nationalist, and this is somewhat of a right-wing phenomenon and somewhat of a left-wing phenomenon. I mean, this is a broad and therefore somewhat unfair question: What are they thinking? When somebody is politically behaving as a nationalist, where does that person think they're for and what does that person think they're against?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I think that nationalists, as a broad group, think they're for each other within the country. They are against others in the broadest of terms. And this can mean individual people or it can mean other countries. It could mean they want to redistribute wealth within the country in a more equitable way and prevent it from going offshore. It can also mean banning certain types of foreigners or indeed all foreigners from coming in physically.

So there are some common points between right-wing nationalism and left-wing nationalism, and I think that on the economic front, there's a little more overlap. But we're seeing two types of nationalism emerge. We have more civic nationalism, and ethnic nationalism. And ethnic nationalism is decidedly undemocratic, and it's definitely not in line with the way that a country like America conceived of itself in the past. And that has less to do with citizenship and more to do with race and ethnicity.

Nicholas Lemann

Can you give a couple of examples of these two types of nationalism?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

White nationalism is a term we hear thrown around a lot lately. People like Richard Spencer, Breitbart News, the white nationalist media, seems to think that the US would be a more coherent and peaceful and prosperous place if there wasn't so much mixing between the races.

But that's a pretty obvious example. You have these groups in Europe, you have these groups all over the world. And a more civic kind of nationalism is something that a candidate like Bernie Sanders had at various points expressed, that would involve not letting companies move their profits offshore. It would involve taxing the rich to help poorer people, and I guess the idea behind that is that you can't do it without having boundaries and borders. You need somewhere within which to distribute wealth. And this unit happens to be the nation.

Nicholas Lemann

There's another part of that – I mean, you're sort of saying this already – which is in addition to everything else you've said, the nation-state is really still the dominant, overwhelmingly dominant, provider of welfare-state benefits. Global organizations, NGOs, etc. don't do, on the whole, mass healthcare, mass pensions, mass education, things like that. So there's a reason to want to cling to nationhood because it gives you stuff that you need, or that a lot of people need. Maybe the ultra-rich that you're talking about don't need these things, but most people do.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

That's right. And I think that's what motivates nationalism, economic nationalism,

from the left. If you want more people to be better off, you have to find a framework within which to make them better off. And so far, attempts at doing this globally have not even really gotten off the ground.

Nicholas Lemann

Well, you know, there's a whole argument that, you know, we've got the famous disaffected white working class in the United States. And, you know, why shouldn't it be disaffected when its status relative to the rest of the country has fallen in the last generation pretty dramatically. So often you hear globalists, if it's fair to use that term, if anybody uses it, you know, in a positive way, say we have equalized incomes for unskilled workers between, you know, the developing world, the Global South and the United States and other developed countries. And, you know, how can you not do that? How can you justify having a world where the American worker is paid, you know, 10 times, 20 times what, a Chinese worker, an Indian worker is paid. What do you think of that argument?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

So when you look at the data globally, globalization, and that that means lots of different things, including freer trade, a bigger movement of people, and technological advances. Globalization has actually improved the lives of a lot more people than it has made worse. Especially in Asia. The incomes of many, many people in China and India have gone up while the incomes of a very small group, mostly white men, have gone down or stagnated. If you really are just looking at it in a utilitarian way. Globalization has done more good in that respect than bad. The problem is that white working-class men have a lot of political power in the places that they live. So that's, I think, why we're hearing so much more about it. You're not really seeing the same kind of anti-globalization backlash in Shenzhen, for example.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. But conversely, in western Europe, the policy web is much thicker, the social policy web is much thicker than it is in the United States. So you don't have this argument because unions are more powerful, etc. So, you know, the moral side of it is, you know, if you're going to say that about the United States, would you say, just to press you, it is morally indefensible what working-class Swedes, Germans, and French people make? Because it's so above the world standard.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I think that instead of thinking about what happens when they make less, we should be aiming to make everybody else make more. And it's not that they make so much more that's indefensible. It's that other people make so much less.

Nicholas Lemann

So in other words, if you could build a global political economy that treated workers as well as workers are treated in northern and western Europe, that would be the best possible world.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I think so. And as we know, in the US, having gone through these endless health care debates, and debates again about it after health care has passed, it's that it's much harder to take things away from people than to give it to them. And so it's very hard to say, "Okay, Swedish factory worker, you have to live with less now," because he's used to that and you start to think of it as a right and not just a privilege. Whereas if you tell someone else, "Hey, have a couple more dollars," they're very happy about that. So it's all relative, and it's hard to be a cold utilitarian when it comes to these things.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's talk a little bit about immigration and migration. This, you know, really your book touches on this, but it's become a much bigger issue in the two years since your book came out. Do you think it's plausible, or are we moving toward a world that would have truly open borders where these citizenship questions would kind of go away? The old, maybe old EU model, where you can create at least a zone, and maybe the whole world where people can just move freely from country to country?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I think the prospect of these kinds of zones is much more likely than the whole world. I don't think we were ever on the road to a world with open borders. I think that was rhetoric and it was a myth. But maybe the world had more open borders before we had border controls and passports and this whole system of security and immigration enforcement. But I don't think that, there has never been a formalized open border policy for the entire world. Zones, I think, will adapt however they see best.

I think that in Africa, there was talk of a of a Pan-African passport that would allow citizens of all African countries to move freely. I don't know if that's going to be implemented any time soon, but there was certainly talk of it. And, you know, in the Caribbean, in parts of Asia, you have free trade agreements that also establish that people can move a little bit more freely.

Nicholas Lemann

Let me ask you about some of the subnational separatist movements we're seeing now. I'm thinking the top-of-mind examples as we're talking are Catalonia and Kurdistan. What's that phenomenon, how should we think about it?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I think we should think about that also in terms of people feeling like they want more control of what's going on around them. These are two very, very different examples. The Kurds are a pretty tight, coherent ethnic group, and the group has gone through a lot over the years. They have been organized. They have fought wars. They have established ways to share social services. And yet they are not recognized as their own state. They have wanted statehood for a very long time, and this is just those voices coming together again and they're trying to make another bid for it.

Catalonia is certainly an example of a group of people who have a regional identity. And the motivations in Catalonia, at least to me, seem maybe a little bit more selfish and less noble than in Kurdistan, because Catalonia is the part of Spain that's doing the best. And so you can think, national identity aside, you can think of it a little bit more in line with, say, Silicon Valley saying they want secede.

Nicholas Lemann

Right.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

Not to be crude, but it's a matter of not really wanting to share with their fellow Spaniards because they see them as somehow other or less successful.

Nicholas Lemann

Do you see the Trump phenomenon as specific, in part, at least specifically a reaction to globalization and, you know, cosmopolites spreading through the world?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

I think that's one of many. I wouldn't discount pure racism, and disdain for other people and misconceptions about foreigners and brown people and black people. There's also an economic component to that. But sure, you can think of that as an aspect of globalization. If you have a more global place anywhere, if you have a more diverse place, you're going to have people that don't look like you, that don't talk like you, and maybe they don't act like you. And that makes a lot of people really uncomfortable. It always has, and probably always will as long as we're alive. And I think that the Trump phenomenon capitalized on that very successfully.

Nicholas Lemann

Can you tell us something about what you've been working on, what you've been writing since this book came out?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

So most recently, I published a story about a young man named Amos Yee. He is a Singaporean citizen, and back in Singapore he was best known for some very provocative YouTube videos that he made about the Singaporean government. He called their founder, who recently died, a dictator. He said some really offensive things about Christians and Muslims and religion in general. And I say offensive, offensive to the Singaporean state, because Singapore has some pretty strict laws about not offending other people's religions. That's one of the ways that Singapore says it keeps a harmonious and multiethnic population. And to be fair, they're pretty successful at that. Singapore has low crime. People generally get along. It's not the worst place in the world in terms of ethnic conflicts, but they have their own.

And Amos Yee got into a lot of trouble for his videos because, a) he's a kid, and a kid talking – sorry. Amos got into a lot of trouble. He was a minor. Minors insulting older folks, especially the leaders of countries, is frowned upon in many countries, including Singapore. And Singapore also has some pretty strict speech laws, like the law that I mentioned, where you're not allowed to offend other people's religions. And so as a result of his YouTube videos, he spent a fair amount of time in prison. He was sent to a mental health facility. Basically, the Singaporean state gave Amos Yee a really hard time, and he didn't really do anything to help himself either. He wouldn't stop. And he said that he was continuing to do this because it was his right to free speech.

Amos fell in with a group of internet atheists who, depending on who you ask, really don't like organized religion. Or use that as a pretext to insult Islam, because

many of their criticisms tend to be focused on Muslims and their practices. Amos Yee befriended a number of these people. Most of them are in the US, and in their conversations online, they suggested that Amos come to the US and apply for political asylum. He didn't love the idea at first. He's just a kid, he lives with his mom. But after his second time in prison and his second trial, he decided that he was sick of this in Singapore. He wanted to have a life.

And so he actually got some money together, bought a plane ticket and flew to Chicago, where he was supposed to meet a friend of a friend who would take him in for a while. He kind of fumbled at the airport, he didn't really go through the asylum process the way he was supposed to. But he did declare ultimately that he was there to seek asylum, and he was detained.

So he arrived here shortly after the election of Donald Trump. And between last November and last week, Amos was in a detention center trying to obtain asylum. At first, about three months into his stay, he won. He got asylum. A judge in Chicago said he's a young dissident. He deserves asylum. He's being persecuted back home.

But the Trump administration's lawyers actually appealed that, which doesn't happen super often, and they appealed under and are very interesting grounds. They said, "His evidence isn't good. Singapore is a great country. They have a very fair judicial system," everything you'd expect. But they also said, "If we let this kid in, if we grant asylum just to an internet troll, then we have to let in all of the internet trolls, and it sets a really bad precedent." Now, the irony of that is astounding because who is the biggest internet troll in the world? I won't say it.

Nicholas Lemann

DJT. Those are his initials, right?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

That's right. But Amos, he and his team of lawyers kept fighting this, and they were able to convince the final court that Amos was, in fact, going to get into a lot of trouble if he went back home, that he had a legitimate claim. And now he's a free 18-year-old wandering around the Chicago suburbs. I believe.

Nicholas Lemann

That's great. We're running short on time now, so I think I better wrap up. So Atossa, I want to thank you so much for being here, and please let us know right now where

to find you online. How do we get you on Twitter or anywhere else that you're present online?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

Well, there are lots and lots of it Atossa Araxia Abrahamian out there. So I'm going to have to...

Nicholas Lemann

How many? Really?

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

You can find me on Twitter at a Tuesday at atossaaraxia. And that's my first name, and my second name, and that's about it. I don't I don't have a blog or anything like that. My website is the same as my Twitter handle, atossaaraxia.com

Nicholas Lemann

Okay, thanks a lot. And this book is *The Cosmopolites. The Coming of the Global Citizen*. It's available now wherever you buy books. I'm Nick Lemann, and thanks for tuning in.