Title: HxA Conference 2019
Episode: 61
Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy

<u>**Transcript**</u>

Chris Martin: Welcome to a special episode of Half Hour of Heterodoxy. In June Heterodox academy had their second annual conference in New York. Some of you know this because you were there and I had a chance to talk with you. Today's episode is a series of short conversations I had with people at the conference and one excerpt from a symposium at the conference. The first half of this episode is about psychological issues and relates to some of the themes in the *The Coddling of the American Mind*. The second half features conversations about unconventional ideas. And just a note: These interviews were recorded at the conference so there's more background noise than typical. The episode begins with Jon Haidt.

Jonathan Haidt: Sure. So just since the book has come out, Greg and I have learned a lot. I will tell you about I guess maybe three or four ways that the issues have expanded way off of campus.

So one is that it's really clear that the dynamics we described are happening internationally, at least in all of the major English-speaking countries. So if you go to TheCoddling.com, I have a new page, it has just been put up today. I'm not even sure where it will be but it will be on international findings. And what we found is that if you look at rising rates of depression and anxiety for teenagers, you find exactly the same thing in the UK, same in Canada, same in Australia. We don't yet know about New Zealand. And then we will move on to look at Continental Europe.

So the mental health crisis is everywhere and the overprotection of kids is in all of the English-speaking countries, probably not as much in Germany and Northern Europe. I don't think they do – they don't overprotect as much there. That's one expansion. It's international.

A second expansion is out into the work world. So Gen Z is the focus of the book, kids born in 1996 and later. And Gen Z really just began to graduate from college one year ago so they have only joined the corporate world for the last year. And whenever I meet business people, I teach in a business school. I meet a lot of business people. I always ask them, "Do you have any employees that graduate from college in the last year or two?" And they work in large companies so they yes. I say, "How is it working out?" And I often hear some variation of this, "I'm completely exhausted. It's just constant conflict. Somebody said something and now the whole company is in an uproar."

So speech issues that we have on campus that I think we have not handled well or resolved well, I think we've taught some very bad habits around speech and offense-taking and so students take these attitudes into the corporate world and when they overhear something they don't like, they would not deal with it themselves or ignore it, they would go to HR and file a formal complaint.

And then the third is looking at how it goes down into high schools and elementary schools. So a lot of exact same phenomena we described, this is sort of the campus culture, especially the culture around common enemy identity politics, focusing – examining everything in terms of power structures, that has spread down very quickly into elite private schools. It's not in most public schools.

My kids go to New York City public schools and thank God for the bureaucracy they can't change that fast although of course Bill de Blasio is trying. But so far, the public schools that I know of seem to be generally OK. But I hear from a lot of parents of kids in private schools and I've spoken to few private schools and it's very much like our lead to New England liberal arts colleges.

Chris Martin: If you've read *The Coddling of the American Mind*, you may recall that part of the book is about safetyism which is the tendency to reduce all risks. One of the speakers of the symposium at the conference, Amna Khalid, a History Professor of Carleton talked about her experience with safetyism.

Amna Khalid: … the same at Carleton College and in one of the courses I was teaching at the Women and Gender Studies course, I met an African-American young man. We were talking about sexual orientation and he actually volunteered which I thought was incredibly brave that he was anti-gay before he came to college and college opened up his mind and now he thinks differently and talked about how important college was for him in coming to that realization.

And afterwards, another student of mind followed me into my office and said, "You know, I was really disappointed in the way you handled that." And I said, "Handled what?" And she said, "Well, you know, this was like it was very homophobic." And I said, "No, it was anti-homophobia. This is a man who was telling us how he changed his mind and that being in educational space allowed him to do that and questioned the assumptions he made."

And so to kind of echo, I'm sure you had this echoed more broadly on campus, we had a former white supremacist came to convocations. We have these weekly convocations where we have speakers from outside the camp and he came and he was really talking about how he used to be a white supremacist, have changed his mind, and how he has devoted his life to getting other white supremacists to change their mind.

Now, I can't think of anyone more virtuous to listen to as far as I'm concerned but I walked into class that day and my students and students across campus were really upset and they found it unsafe with this person on campus. A number of them protested as well. And I find it very disappointing to see that we have lost the ability to find a space where people are allowed to change their minds.

Chris Martin: Another theme in *The Coddling of the American Mind* is the overuse of social media. I talked to Anya Pechko, founder of Project BE at the Conference. She is working on addressing our addiction to social media and cell phones more generally.

Anya Pechko: I am somebody who is trying to impact the world in a positive way to kind of connect them – connect back in a social way, human way, not social media way.

Chris Martin: And how does the work you do connect to Jon Haidt's research on how social media might be causing problems?

Anya Pechko: So I got interested in Jonathan's work after I've done some research for one of the companies that he is a co-founder of, Let Grow. Him and Lenore Skenazy set up kind of really right way of addressing the current state of frugality in kids. So this whole notion that Peter Gray talks about, the influence of free play and how we develop socially because of it, it became really interesting as I started seeing trends in social media and the likes and how everything is great. And then when you watch the rise of mental illness and suicides in young people, so the picture of likes and social media greatness did not match the data of what's really going on.

So as I got deeper into research, I realized that we are now connected to each other through this digital world and it became really clear that one of the things that I think is missing is this human connection. So that's when I decided to launch Project Be and really encourage people to literally just be. And so while we are trying to come up with apps, to get off the apps and really encouraging people to just unplug and put their phones down and literally just not be on social media, which is really, really hard.

Chris Martin: Have you any success so far?

Anya Pechko: I have. So I just finished reading a book by Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, and so he outlines a 30-day detox which I thought I had no apps and a friend of mine took my phone and said, "Well, what about weather app and Where App and Seamless app." So I've deleted most of my apps. I only have Twitter which I use for work.

So I'm going out without my phone now. I have a dog that has tremendous anxiety issues and so when I walk her now, I don't have my phone with me. And her behavior changed in ways that it's really hard – I'm really connected to her now so I don't have my phone as a distraction.

So I've been doing that. I've been doing dinners and brunches and just inviting friends over. As soon as they come over, there's absolutely no cell phones, there's no pictures, there's not shots of the food. And it has been amazing.

Chris Martin: How do you impose that rule?

Anya Pechko: Well, give me your phone now. Literally, you come into my house, you can't be on the phone.

Chris Martin: I also talked to one of the journalists at the conference. I'm here with Jesse Singal. How would you describe yourself?

Jesse Singal: An incredible journalist or just a journalist.

Chris Martin: For New York Magazine most of the time?

Jesse Singal: Yup, I'm a contributing writer at New York Magazine. I used to be an editor and a staff writer.

Chris Martin: Tell me about your new very heterodox project.

Jesse Singal: Yeah. So actually, it's not that new. I've been already working on it for a couple of years but it's a book provisionally titled The Quick Fix. It's basically asking the question of why Americans in particular, why we so often looked to this sort of TED talky, oversimplified, gimmicky psychological solutions to complicated problems.

So one example that I've written about before is the implicit association test, which is this test that is pretty trouble when you look at it. It's sort of psychometric properties or its ability to predict behavior and yet, it has sort of taken over the country like it's at the center of a lot of diversity trainings, its proponents and evangelists have made really bold claims about its ability to help end racism.

But we know racially, these kinds of outcomes are really complicated and are generated by a really tangled web of stuff.

Chris Martin: So apart from the implicit association test, what else do you cover?

Jesse Singal: These other examples that I would argue are a little bit more complicated and not maybe as straight forward but a power person is one of them where some pretty big claims about power person were made in terms of its ability to help create more gender equity in the workplace.

Another one is grit, which has been presented as a way to help reduce educational inequality but there are some major questions. First of all, over whether grit is different from conscientiousness, a pretty well-studied big 5 personality characteristic, and then whether you can even move someone's conscientiousness that much.

So what all these stories have in common is that a burst of excitement surrounds a new idea and people get the sense that this new idea is really going to help us make progress with this intractable-seeming problem. But then another wave of research where debunking comes out and it always is just the same storyline over and over, it always turns out to be more complicated than that.

Chris Martin: So what advice do you have for social psychologists if any?

Jesse Singal: I would say get involved – I would say in general though, listen to journalists' advice because I have a pro-journalist air a little bit. Get involved in the Open Science

Movement. Part of my book is about how if you adopt things like preregistration and if you do more replications, stuff like that, these ideas maybe wouldn't catch on as quickly as they did despite a lack of evidence if the first wave of research had been a little bit more sturdy and rigorous.

Chris Martin: And in the meantime if people want to know more about you, where can they find more info?

Jesse Singal: Yeah. I write a lot about this stuff on my newsletter at jessesingal.substack.com. I'm also on Twitter far too much @jessesingal.

Chris Martin: Definitely far too much.

Jesse Singal: Definitely far too much. I also have a sort of baby podcast called Singal-Minded Conversations where I talk to a lot of social scientists. You should come on it.

Chris Martin: Thank you. And for those of you listening, it's S-I-N-G-A-L.

Jesse Singa: Yes, exactly. Yeah, those are the main places people can find me. I'm also still writing fairly frequently for New York Magazine and other outlets.

Chris Martin: I also talked to a sociologist at the conference. So I'm talking to Fabio Rojas. Fabio, how would you describe yourself?

Fabio Rojas: I'm a professor of Sociology at Indiana University and I'm also editing Contexts Magazine, the official magazine of the American Sociological Association.

Chris Martin: Fabio was previously on episode 29 of this podcast on the sociology of activism. You had a very contentious blog post on your blog or theory about a month ago. It was about the relationship between sociology and economics. Can you talk about that?

Fabio Rojas: Yes. So that blog post came out I believe sometime in early April. It presented two arguments. One argument was about the way that economics as a discipline is built to produce policy impact while sociology doesn't have a lot of those similar resources. So here's a very simple example.

If you take microeconomics at graduate levels, you learn something called welfare theory. And that's a just a very academic way of saying if you do a policy and you count up all the benefits and all the costs, it doesn't make everybody better off. So this is the part of the graduate economics curriculum where people talk about things like Pareto, Pareto improvements, Kaldor-Hicks criteria for policy and so forth.

In contrast, sociology doesn't teach any of that at all. That's not exaggeration like you could take an entire PhD in sociology such as I did at the University of Chicago and you will never get any discussion of how to evaluate policy, how to count costs and benefits and so forth. And this is

not to say that doesn't happen in some socio departments. Certainly out of the hundreds of very excellent sociology programs we have, there are discussions of policy.

But analysis of policy outcomes is just simply not a standard part of the curriculum. So another example is the National Bureau for Economic Research, which is an institution whose main purpose is primarily collect economics research usually pre-publication before it hits the journal but to distribute it and later make it wildly available. And I believe they have been operating some form since the 1920s.

In contrast, sociology and SocArXiv which is a website where you can write and put working papers. It was not operational until about two or three years ago. And so what that suggested to me is that it's not in a curriculum, not in your institutions, and also not in the career.

For example, a lot of the economists go to the Federal Reserve and work for a year or two and then lots of them get jobs in academia. In contrast, sociology almost never hire people. Of course, there are exceptions. There are some people for example, my adviser at the University of Chicago, or they run corporation for a while before coming back to academia. But he is an exception.

But by and large, most sociologists once they leave academia, never come back. People are very reluctant to hire sociologists who have left the career track. So it's not on the career, it's not on the curriculum, not on the institution, what does that tell you? It tells you that sociologist have not taken the time and effort to build a platform for influence.

And when I put this out there, I'm not trying to pick on any individual sociologist, for example, sociologists who say testified before Congress or they worked for a member of Congress or something like that or a federal agency. But those are exceptions. They are not the product of a concerted collective effort to build platforms for influencing policy.

Chris Martin: Right. I believe on the day the blog post came out, Tracy McMillan caught on and was testifying before Congress.

Fabio Rojas: Right.

Chris Martin: And that just happened to coincide?

Fabio Rojas: Right. And I think she is a very interesting sociologist. We should all read her book, *Lower Ed*, which we by the way reviewed and given a very positive review to in Contexts Magazine. So three cheers for her. This is not a way to isolate or point a finger to anybody.

In fact, if I were to raise this critique, it's also a critique of myself. And that as I retrospect and think about my career, I've tried to put things out. I've had some policy impact here and there. We can talk about that a little bit. But it's not from any concerted effort.

Like for example, there is no national bureau of sociology to help me with my career or there has never been a place where I stepped up and I said, "Hey, let's build a thing for sociologists." I'm trying to change that now, now that I'm a little bit older. But it applies to me.

So this person is not triggered by any individual person. And if anybody have that concept, that is mistaken. That's just not true.

And the second issue that I raised in the blog post about economics and sociology is that sociologists have retreated from one form of communication that I personally like to enjoy that it's very good for communicating policy-related issues, and that's blogging. And what I pointed out in the blog post is that economists for example, once again using them as an example, lots of economists, from those of merit, very modest stature to those of international stature maintain blogs, frequent blogs like Thomas Piketty, the French economist who wrote the big book on inequality. We may talk about libertarians, Tyler Cowen, Alex Tabarrok. So it's on the left, it's on the right. It's all over the place.

And people in teaching institutions and even researchers, lots of them use blogs. However, sociologists have retreated from that for reasons that are honestly not clear to me. Part of it is just that the kind of trendiness of blogs probably just had this normal life cycle. But still, blogs remain a powerful tool because if you really need a thousand words or 500 words, a series of tweets is not going to really hack it. You could break something up into a series of tweets and then it kind of gets garbled.

Also another problem with Twitter is that archiving is very difficult. So for example, you are not allowed to search into the past of Twitter very far. But if you want like essays that are in between a tweet and a more formal journal article, blogs are really optimal for that. And the fact that a blog like Marginal REVOLUTION gets hundreds of thousands of readers per day, a leading economist still use it, that signals to me that they have intellectual value. And that really makes me scratch my chin and say, why have sociologists retreated from that? And I don't really have a good answer to that.

And I very humorously said in the post that maybe it's just that if sociologists were really interested in policy impact, they would build these – they would build the curriculum, they would build the institutions, they would do social media like Twitter but they would also blog and maintain other things and so forth.

And those are the arguments that I set out there. And just to underline what we have mentioned a minute ago which is that these are critiques of our collective. These are not critiques like I didn't say Chris Martin here, a bad person because you're not doing a blog or something like that. That was not what this is meant at. But to say, let's take a mirror to our profession and say, we have fabulous things to contribute. So thank God the SocArXiv was invented. I think that's a step in the right direction.

But for example, maybe more leading members in the profession could write blog posts. Like more extended discussion of issues. Tweets every day, they are wonderful, they are nice. But they just don't have the impact of a well-written essay.

Chris Martin: Right. And so the pushback you got was that there are some sociology blogs out there.

Fabio Rojas: Yeah, there were some – there were multiple pushbacks during that moment in time. And for the future or when this is listened to, maybe a year from now or maybe more, what happened was a day or two after I wrote that blog post and I can follow the traffic because like most blogs, WordPress has a console on the website that allows you to track traffic. Org Theory made it like one to two thousand readers a day. So it's a good blog. It has a healthy readership. But we are not talking New York Times level.

But then Justin Wolfers, the economist at the University of Michigan, a very prominent public intellectual, wrote a very cheeky blog post where he really made fun of sociologists and that set it off. It triggered a whole firestorm literally. So we went from about a thousand readers a day to about ten thousand readers per day for a couple of days so it was kind of real spike of publicity, a lot of it negative.

And then a couple of criticisms came out. A few of these were very kind of chin-scratching. So for example, people said, "I can't believe that you say that there are no sociologists with public impact." He was like, "I never said that." It was about the collective effort to build a platform that everybody can share in.

There was an interesting exchange between Tina Fetner, a sociologist who I respect a great deal, and she said, "Well, what about a graphic novel?" And yes, there are some sociologists who are writing graphic novels and actually on my blog, I was promoting a friend's graphic novel the day before so I wasn't against that. But the point is, graphic novels are very hard to write. Not everybody has a skill for them. It's really – if you can do it, that's great. But I don't see that's something the average sociologist can do even though we might really enjoy them and get a lot out of them. They could be very good things to read.

So there were some kind of chin-scratching criticisms but then there were some deeper criticisms that came out. One really deep criticism was people said, "Well, Fabio, the reason maybe we don't have this public impact sociology is because the incentives aren't there for it." So I think that was a great criticism which is we then have to think, what can we do to build up public impact sociology?

So originally, when people thought about like how to reward public sociology, the issue might be something like, how do you reward people for writing Twitters, Twitter streams, or something like that? But it doesn't have to be quite as out there as that. You could start with some moderate steps.

For example, why not make one on the courses you teach, public communication of sociology? Or take some of these ideas of policy now and turn that into an undergraduate course? Or another thing you could do which is a little bit more adventurous, you could say something like, OK, we will continue to hire the traditional academic like myself, like you, who spend a lot of our time in the academy but occasionally, we will hire somebody and the job description will say, must have career and lead public sector or the non-profit sector or the for-profit sector in a way that's similar to a business school or a policy school.

So maybe we aren't quite at the point today, today is June 2019, we are not at the point we are going to rebuild the sociological profession around this. But there are some very intuitive ways that are simple and low costs that would actually help sociology develop a potential and a set of resources for public impact.

Chris Martin: I also talked to Nicholas Phillips.

Nicholas Phillips: So I'm a research associate with Heterodox Academy and I've been doing that since 2016.

Chris Martin: So you have a heterodox piece in Quillette about technology that doesn't make me fall on left or right wing lanes. Tell me a bit about that piece.

Nicholas Phillips: Correct. So I think last week, I published a piece in Quillette called The Fallacy of Techno Optimism. And basically, I was looking at a popular mode of discourse for thinking about new technologies which argues that the social impacts of new technologies is like driverless cars and automation will be positive because previous rounds of new technologies had positive social impacts.

So the idea is that people that are pessimistic about driverless cars today are sort of like the horse and buggy people that were skeptical, pessimistic about automobiles at the turn of the 20th century. Those people are on automobiles for good. Therefore, driverless cars are going to be good and we have nothing to worry about.

And so I think that this argument is a fallacy. I think that when we have new rounds of technology that implicate fundamentally different problems, for example, driverless cars, implicate issues around surveillance, monitoring, national security vulnerabilities that come from everything, tight transportation system being on a hackable grid which the automobile has nothing to tell us about. It didn't implicate those problems so it's really no precedent at all for dealing with the problems that driverless cars implicate.

The heterodox angle comes from an argument that I made where basically you need a debate on the merits of new technologies. You can't make historical analogies when the technologies aren't precedent. Instead, you need to ask questions like, do we know what this technology does to us? What can we predict about it based on what we know? Is it good? And if we don't know what it does to us then what basis does our confidence in this new technology rest?

And for that debate on the merits of technology to be effective, you need a debate between liberals and conservatives, and that's important because liberals and conservatives have different cognitive styles. Liberals are more open to openness really. They are more – they prefer new experiences. They are comfortable with experimentation. And the unknown conservatives prefer the status quo and tend to fear change and prefer order.

I see conservatives as playing a very important role in the way that we think about new technology because they are basically running quality control on the ideas of the progressives and liberals. You see this most clearly in the social world where new social ideas are vetted by conservatives and the new social ideas that when a critical mass of conservatives tend to be implemented than the ones that don't.

So democracy is a new social idea at one point. Conservatives resisted it initially but a critical mass of conservatives was convinced by arguments for democracy and democracy wound up being implemented.

Marxism was a new social idea that many progressives thought was the arc of history, the right side of history, and we would be silly to oppose it. But conservatives were not persuaded by those arguments and successfully resisted Marxism. And so I think that conservatives play an important role similarly in assessing the impact of new technologies and we need to welcome that debate instead of viewing conservatives and status quo preferring people as high bound or obstacles or people with obsolete ideas that need to be overcome.

Chris Martin: So it there a prominent conservative right now who is arguing against driverless cars or any kind of technology on that basis?

Nicholas Phillips: Well, the guy in the popular sphere that has most prominently expressed skepticism about driverless cars on the right has been Tucker Carlson who has argued essentially that driving is the occupation that employs more Americans I think in any other single occupation. Maybe it was more men. I'm not exactly certain. But it employs an enormous amount of people.

So a kind of cavalier attitude where progress is always good and new technologies are always good might fail to reckon with the social costs that are implicated when you switch over from an industry that employs millions and millions of people to an industry that employs far smaller number of people and those people tend to have advanced degrees or technical skills that are not evenly distributed in society.

Chris Martin: So when it comes to you, are more concern about hacking?

Nicholas Phillips: I am concerned basically that we are – that optimism for technologies like driverless cars depends on historical analogies that are inappropriate. So I am concerned about hacking. I don't have myself any technical expertise that leads me to believe that hacking is a more or less serious problem. It's more that it's a new problem as to automobile transportation. And so, I view the fact that automobiles were successfully implemented with positive social

effects as having nothing to say about that problem. It's a new problem. It's an unprecedented problem.

Chris Martin: Nick's article is titled The Fallacy of Techno Optimism and you can find it on Quillette.com.

You can find the Twitter handles of all the people who were interviewed in this episode in the show notes. I hope you enjoyed the episode. You can find some complete recordings of symposia and talks from the conference on the Heterodox Academy YouTube page. I especially recommend the Steven Pinker talk which was the concluding talk at the conference. The title of that talk was An Unnecessary Defensive Reason and a Necessary Defensive: University's Role in Advancing It.

As always, thank you for listening. If you enjoyed the show, please leave us a 5-star review on iTunes and stay tune for upcoming episodes.

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