

Title: Lara Schwartz, False Equivalence
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Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: "Everyone is entitled to his opinion but not to his own facts." That statement by Daniel Patrick Moynihan often gets quoted. But if you're a college professor, what should you do if a student believes that all opinions are equally valid regardless of the facts that support them?

I'm going to be talking to Lara Schwartz about that question in today's episode. Lara is the Director of the Project for Civil Discourse at American University where she's also a professor in law and government.

She's also the co-author of *How to College: What to Know Before You Go and When You're There* and she was a panelist at this year's Heterodox Academy Conference.

So we're talking about false equivalence today. Give me some examples of false equivalence that you've seen in the classroom when you've been teaching classes.

Lara Schwartz: Sure. Well, first of all, there are a few kinds of false equivalence. So I think it's worthwhile to mention the various kinds that come in. So I think the most common one is false balance, the extent to which you want to show both sides and sometimes that's called bothsidesism and that might include just deciding to sort of teach the controversy, when there isn't one.

So an example of that that you wouldn't see in a college classroom very much but that you might see people trying to make one in for instance to K to 12 education is teaching the controversy when it comes to evolution or creationism.

Of course there isn't a controversy. The more common one you might see in media or potentially in a classroom situation would be regarding perhaps creating more controversy than there in fact is for something like the origins and impact of climate change or the extent to which vaccines are healthy or not. So saying, well, maybe we should teach both sides. That's one kind.

Another kind is sort of what-about-ism, which would be introducing a false equivalence where you say that two things are equally relevant or should have equal weight in your decision-making or evaluation of a topic even when they shouldn't.

So an example of what-about-ism is if you had two politicians, one of whom had once made a mistake and miscalculated what the impact of his policy was and one who regularly lied and treating those as similar. So calling out a politician for lying and someone saying, "Well, what

about that time that Senator Smith was wrong about his healthcare bill?” and you see that a fair bit in the classroom.

The last one is what has been called the “relativity of wrongness” or “wronger than wrong,” which is that treating all forms of inaccuracy or all forms of having something wrong as similarly equal.

So there was a time when we all thought the earth was flat or most people did and that wasn’t true and – but it also is in a sphere. It’s sort of a squeezed non-sphere and it was Isaac Asimov who talked most about this idea of sort of a false equivalence that’s dangerous, this relativity of wrong or wronger than wrongness where if you think that it’s just as wrong to think the earth is a sphere than to think that the earth is flat, then your view of that is wronger than both of those wrong things put together.

That’s really, really important in academia, that concept, because the one kind of wrongness is complete ignorance and the other kind is scientific progress and sort of incomplete scientific inquiry and it’s that habit of mind that scientific inquiry or academic inquiry that can get us to sort of better answers and answers that come into roughly the ballpark that we want to talk about in academic spaces as opposed to sort of flailing or conjecture or groundless things.

Chris Martin: So was there a certain point at which you started seeing this problem or has it been a consistent problem?

Lara Schwartz: So I began teaching fulltime in 2014 and I wouldn’t say that the media landscape or the information landscape is very radically different in 2019 versus 2014. I see some changes.

I will say that it’s a radically different landscape of information and input and regard for the media for example than from when I went to school in the 80s and 90s.

The difference being – the broad difference being partly in the input the types of information that people have access to and then a fairly reduced trust in information sources like media both at this current time in 2019 and as well for this current generation that most of our undergraduates are.

So a peer research report came out actually today or at least the report – the news of it that I heard actually today that this generation, 18 to 29-year-olds, which is the bulk of college students right now is much less trusting for example of media and journalists than the oldest people.

That plays into this false equivalence question because the idea of what kinds of information if any is reliable. Is there such a thing as stable truth? There’s a bit of a generational difference in regard for that concept. It would be hard for me to measure though let’s say between 2014 and 2019, although I do think there’s a – this has been a creeping change and our current students are more aware for example of the impact of actual organizations attempting to infuse misinformation for example into our politics than previously. This is the first generation of

college students that will remember people trying to misinform voters on mass broad scale in an election.

Chris Martin: Right, that's a good point. So this problem of false equivalence does affect academic debates because you do want to encourage academic debates when there really is evidence on multiple sides of a question and a debate has been ensuing among the most informed people. The very first episode of this podcast was with John Zimmerman and we talked about a similar issue about when experts are – when the most informed experts in a field are having a debate about an issue, then that's a contentious issue that you should bring up as contentious in a classroom whereas something like evolution is pretty settled when it comes to the most informed people.

So how do you communicate to students that to be successful in an academic debate or in a classroom or the economic enterprise as a whole, it's important to discern where you're creeping into false equivalence?

Lara Schwartz: So I think there are a few things. One thing is so I'm a teacher and for teachers listening, for professors or teachers listening, I think our learning objectives for any given course, the things that we say in our syllabus on the first day, what is it we're all trying to accomplish together are almost always going to inform – going to support that we're going to have to be resisting false equivalence.

So if our goal is to know together what would be an economic policy, what would be in a class like mine an education policy, that would lead to more people having access to workforce preparedness, something like that.

We're going to have to avoid kind of worthless items if we're going to meet our learning objective. Then as well, thinking about the objectives of a university. What is a university for? Is it for the same purpose as an internet forum, as a social media forum where people communicate back and forth just what they're feeling in that moment or is a university a place where we get better at understanding certain things or get better at discerning which ideas work within a discipline?

The answer is the latter. So it's worthwhile getting students invested in the idea. There is a rich tradition within universities of speaking and listening, hearing ideas that feel difficult or controversial. But it isn't a free-for-all. It's not *Lord of the Flies*. Like I've got the conk, so I get to say whatever I want.

What we're doing here, universities aren't about all ideas matter. They're actually about discipline-specific ways of – for judging concepts and seeing if they work.

So the students have to get in touch with that habit of mind. You're going to think as an economist might think. You're going to think as a political scientist might think, as a lawyer might think, and measure these ideas being introduced into this space the way people in these disciplines would through objective standards.

So we have to be really explicit about those things though from the beginning that we're – what we're not in is an unregulated marketplace like Twitter of ideas. We're in a space where actually the only stuff on the shelves has gotten there because it has met some basic standard.

Chris Martin: Is that a point you make at the beginning of each semester and how do you phrase that or how do you frame that in a way that's persuasive?

Lara Schwartz: So I do frame that at the beginning of the semester. In one class that I have that's really the intro survey class for our multidisciplinary government major, we actually go into looking at the standards that various disciplines use and applying them ourselves.

So we do an exercise regarding what are the standards that journalistic outlets are supposed to use that are the hallmarks of a non-biased and a sort of credible journalistic outlet.

Do they have a separation between the people who pay them and the people who create the content? You know, the editorial. Do they correct misinformation quickly and transparently? What do they have in place?

And I have an exercise with a fictitious Springfield West Dakota Post-Gazette newspaper where I then have them apply those same standards and they read a segment of Bernays' *Propaganda* as well to learn those sort of rich cultural context of this and unpack. Hey, does a newspaper exist to kind of give us the party line of what's good for us or is it delivering truth in a certain way? How do we hold that accountable?

I introduce students to the concepts of bias and conflict of interest that exists in multiple fields. So a conflict of interest for an attorney and a conflict of interest for example for an academic who has funding to do a study on some issue of economics or some issue relating to healthcare, these are different questions. Some of them overlap. But we look at what constitutes conflict of interest. What types of things make certain forms of information more suspect? What should you do as a consumer of information to exercise the kind of skepticism that isn't everybody is biased, everybody is corrupt? But that applies objective standards that says there is a possibility of stable truth in certain fields and here's what they are for academics, for scientists, for journalists, for attorneys, for politicians.

We look at the ethics rules that apply to everyone from House of Representative staffers to lobbyists, to lawyers, to jurors. The concept of bias infuses students, current students a sense of all things. I've noticed a real change that most students believe there's no such thing as an unbiased conclusion.

We work hard to define bias and to assess out the difference between a person with an orientation. Let's say a Nobel-winning economist who has over time developed a sense of what does constitute the right labor practice. What is a good policy based on her understanding of economics? So we work on what constitutes bias and objectivity.

Chris Martin: I mean I see what students mean when – to some degree, what they mean when they say nothing is completely unbiased. There's no perfect test for evaluating whether

something is completely unbiased. So I think it's fine if students want to believe that everything is a tiny bit – at least a tiny, tiny bit biased as long as you know the size of the bias that's there.

So do you feel like students are approaching it that way or do you think students are saying everything has a substantial amount of bias?

Lara Schwartz: Well, I think what it comes down to is yes, it's actually – I don't think many people believe that it's possible for any human being to completely remove him or herself from whatever type of inquiry they're delivering and that there's someone out there who's almost a human super computer that just exists free of any influence.

In fact, one of the things that we look at in one of my courses is that times when people have tried to develop computer replacements, they tend to have some of the same biases that we have.

So for example an algorithm that's supposed to protect future reoffending – whether criminals will offend again has demonstrated some racial bias, right?

Chris Martin: Right.

Lara Schwartz: Human beings wrote it. So there you go. It's understanding the differences in types of bias orientation. So an example would be I could have – let's say I'm trying to solve a problem. For example, I want to know if my city should raise the minimum wage and I'm trying to assemble and I do this as an exercise in one of my classes. I actually have people, that various potential witnesses for the city council hearing and see whether they meet standards of sort of usefulness, relevance. Are there reasons to be suspicious of them?

Let's take an economist, right? One economist is funded by a big foundation run by big box stores, which might potentially want to have a lower wage for their workers. That's a kind of bias potentially in a form of financial conflict of interest, right?

Hopefully that's a very baseline red flag that any student would say, you know, this witness could be problematic in this one way, right? But on the other hand, every single economist has potentially the bias that they've chosen to focus for example on certain – on economics as opposed to asking an environmentalist or asking someone who's going to – you know, a child development expert. If all of the parents are working outside of the house, what will happen?

So there's a form of bias just in the form of look, the orientation of your discipline in itself is going to lead you to potentially value different answers or approach the answer in a different way and then the fact to that you're older and more distant from having had worked a job like this could affect you.

But these are very different types of biases one might potentially be sort of disqualifying or suspect and one is kind of baked in and calls for us to say let's make sure we have balance, we ask more people, we round this out. That's what I would like students to be drawing.

There are differences between having an established orientation or having a particular disciplinary focus and being a partisan, being conflicted out, being a person who has a track record of getting it wrong in the past and to recognize that we can't take the human factor. We always are going to be coming with some orientation and bring it to zero. But there are certain kinds of information that are more suspicious and for the purpose of them in an academic space, not treating expertise or extensive experience the same as bias. That these are two different things that they want to tease out.

Chris Martin: Right. Yeah. Clifford Geertz actually has a quote that a lot of sociologists use which is that we know that a surgical room can't be completely antiseptic but that doesn't mean you throw your hands in the air and just conduct surgery in a sewer and similarly, as an anthropologist or sociologist, you know your research is not going to be completely objective. But that doesn't mean you throw away the attempt to be objective at all.

Lara Schwartz: Yeah, of course. So there's a big difference between understanding that identifying a stable truth is very challenging and rejecting a concept that there is a stable truth.

Chris Martin: Right. So another thing that you're involved with and that you direct is the Project on Civil Discourse. Does that – does your work in that area connect in some way to this work on educating people about bias and false equivalence?

Lara Schwartz: Absolutely. So one of the important things about civil discourse is that it comprehends not only speaking. I think if you say discourse, nine times out of ten, people will say that you mean speech. But discourse is a community activity and it's an interactive activity.

So it comprehends listening. It comprehends learning and it comprehends those decisions of where do I get my information. Who do I share my information with? What am I – what kinds of information, what kinds of listening and learning am I doing in developing my opinions and orientations as a learner in my career?

So part of this I think is a bit like the heterodoxy concept of opening one's mind saying, "How do I inquire? How do I look?"

Part of it though is actually trying to do the tough work of figuring out when is enough. When is your mind closed? So how do I become much more knowledgeable about public health and keep my mind open to that without gobbling up a bunch of my time for instance consuming a vaccine skeptic's rants. How do I make that decision about what I'm going to learn to get better at things?

Chris Martin: Right.

Lara Schwartz: And not – right? Because the ideas that we're – particularly learning law and government I teach at the School of Public Affairs, the ideas to become sort of wiser governors make good policy, be good decision makers or even voters.

Chris Martin: Right, and time is also scarce. So – especially as you proceed up the academic ladder. You have to know what’s worth reading and what’s not worth reading because your time is scarce.

Lara Schwartz: You do and everything from knowing what should go into my paper. You know, what I need to know in order to write – to answer this question for my honors thesis or my final paper and to know when I’ve read enough, to know the line between open-mindedness to make sure that I’m not being – kind of clinging to preconceived notions, but not opening the floodgates to really sort of consuming garbage and then incorporating it into what I’ve written.

So it’s really important and in this – and at the same time, even in conversations, knowing what the line is between I want to be exposed to new ideas in an intellectually diverse and otherwise diverse learning community and saying, well, that probably stops at vaccine denial or that stops at people talking about the Holocaust didn’t happen, something like that.

Understanding how to be deeply, deeply inquiring and having enough like of inquiry and finding new ideas to challenge yourself with, but coming up with some objective standard that doesn’t bring you to what I – I actually would call it the “troll syllabus”. It’s like you’ve heard the heckler’s veto is the idea in First Amendment that the government would shut down speech or maybe a university would shut down speech out of concern that it would rile people up so much, that they would misbehave and a great example of that would be the old like flag burning laws that were struck down by the supreme court.

Well, I have an idea of the reverse idea of the troll syllabus that you would develop some syllabus or some – limited classroom conversation. You would burn it up with – you know, if some person was enough of a troll to introduce some idea in, an Alex Jones type of conspiracy theorist, that suddenly we would have to burn classroom time on it in the interest of not being close-minded.

We actually couldn’t have an education if the troll syllabus is the flipside, the evil flipside of the coin of the heckler’s veto. So teaching students how it is that the syllabi that we actually have, the conversations that we actually have are somewhat close-minded to certain things that are really useless to them without being sort of biased or close-minded in the ways that we don’t want to be. Teaching them the elements of what makes something sort of worth bringing in to the conversation and what they can really ignore. I think we all have to be pretty explicit about that and transparent.

Chris Martin: Right. Now one of the things I’ve done in some of my classes is assign a chapter from Mann and Ornstein’s book *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*. The main reason for assigning that is so that students understand recent political history.

Lara Schwartz: Sure.

Chris Martin: But another reason is that book addresses bothsidesism in media coverage in America and why it’s a problem. The book is mainly an attempt to deal with bothsidesism. Have

you ever assigned chapters from that book or any – about any other Mann and Ornstein books? Can you talk about that?

Lara Schwartz: So I've taught *It's Even Worse Than It Looks* back and I used to do a class called "Congress and Legislative Behavior" and it felt really important to introduce that.

I haven't taught that book since then. Students really, really liked it. I have introduced – they've written some shorter pieces on asymmetrical polarization that I think are really important for students to see.

It offers an opportunity to reorient students away from the idea that will measure open-mindedness and sort of heterodoxy by partisanship and reorient it toward other measures, like whether something meets neutral academic principles because I do think that's really important.

I don't think we should have a false equivalence between bipartisanship and open and rigorous intellectual inquiry in academics because it might be the case at times that one party or some leaders in one party stray further from our neutral principles that we use for academic ideas. Like are they verified? We could shorthand it as the windmill cancer phenomenon. It might be the case in a political moment when one party has strayed further from how people in classes grapple with ideas or a leader of one party has done so.

The answer isn't to demand of students and their professors that they adjust the syllabus or they adjust the academic discourse to capture whatever the middle point is in those parties. It's to keep holding fast. Ulysses bound to the mast, to these ideas of how do we verify and vet information and statements. And if windmill cancer happens, you know, in the conversation, it's unfortunate. It's unfortunate that maybe a member of one party or a leader of one party has drifted farther from us. But we're going to keep our eyes on the prize and keep doing things as we do them and vet everybody's ideas – you know, like students do and scholars do and not like people trying to win elections do.

Chris Martin: Right. Yeah, I like to define bipartisanship as – or being non-partisan as applying the same standards to every party or all parties rather than commenting to reaching the same conclusions about the goodness or badness of each party in advance and then twisting your arguments to make sure you've reached that conclusion.

Lara Schwartz: You know, that's really important what you said and I think that today's students are very conscious. They see false statements being made in politics and social media and mainstream media, other places and they say, "We really don't want to do that. We understand we're supposed to support our claims with evidence," and I ask students to set goals for themselves around their learning and very often first year students will say, you know, I really have this goal to support my opinions with evidence more, to back up what I'm saying and I say that's great and actually what you need to do is you need to start with the evidence and start with the information and the data and the learning and build your opinions from there.

They might shift. It's better to back up what you're saying, right? With evidence than not to. But we can of course with Google, we can find something to support what we're saying very, very

easily and I think that's the difference between just pure sort of – an ethic of balance or an ethic of bipartisanship and an ethic of inquiry.

Let's start by not knowing and start by looking and let's hold off on having answers until we've really, really explored the questions in a certain way.

What I find, when we do that, is that more students come to embrace views or preferences that might not 100 percent align with their favorite elected official and that's a good thing I think. I wonder if elected officials try to – how that would go.

Chris Martin: I wonder – yeah. Anyway, before we run out of time, try to jump back to the Project on Civil Discourse. What sort of activities is that project doing in this year and in upcoming years?

Lara Schwartz: Sure. So we have basically three categories of what we're doing. We have some public events and we have a YouTube channel. So if people would like to look at past videos, all of which are close-captioned, people have come to AU and talked about issues from whether free speech can truly be progressive to the importance of authenticity and political discourse, a variety.

Free Speech on Campus will be doing an event on the paradox of tolerance this coming October, that I'm excited about. So we have those. We have student-led facilitated conversations on topics relating to discourse, everything from what is an apology really. What makes an apology real and true and valuable to can you be friends with your burn-feeling roommate when you want to make America great again to more – you know, where meaning comes from to what place if any for example debunked science or sort of hateful people have on campus discourse if any?

And then I and our student leaders sort of support other professors and groups by offering resources around civil discourse and political communication including in my case support with pedagogical tips and tricks and concepts that people can use in developing – in having tough conversations in their classrooms or developing productive, truthful, challenging, fun discourse in their programs or in their classrooms.

Chris Martin: Well, I will definitely include a link to the YouTube channel in the show notes for this and it sounds like you're doing great work at the project. So I'm glad you were able to come to this year's Heterodox Academy Conference. Thank you for joining us on the show.

Lara Schwartz: Thanks for having me.

Chris Martin: You can find a link to the Youtube channel of The Project for Civil Discourse in today's show notes along with articles related to the topic of false equivalence or balance as bias. My next guest on the show is Charlie Sykes former conservative radio show host and current host of the Bulwark podcast. He's also editor-at-large along with William Kristol of the Bulwark online, where you can find some of his columns. If you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps other people find out about the show and you can reach me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or on Twitter, @Chrismartin76.

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