

Title: Ilana Redstone, Heterodox Sociology
Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy
Episode: 73

Transcript

Chris Martin: Ilana Redstone is my guest today. She is a professor of sociology at the University of Illinois where she teaches a course called *Bigots and Snowflakes: Living in a World Where Everyone Else is Wrong*. We will be talking about that course in today's episode. She is also a research fellow at Heterodox Academy where she manages the HX Disciplines Group on Sociology.

Some of you may have seen here at the Heterodox Academy Conference in the summer of 2019. She also spoke at the FIRE Conference this year.

Hi, Ilana. Thanks for joining us on the show.

Ilana Redstone: Thanks. Thanks for having me.

Chris Martin: You teach a course SOC 396 at your university called *Bigots and Snowflakes: Living in a World Where Everyone Else is Wrong* and it's part of the curriculum now so you're teaching it at least one more time, probably several more times. Tell me a bit about the genesis of that course.

Ilana Redstone: Yeah. So I taught that course for the first time in the spring of 2019 and it's slotted again for the spring 2020. It doesn't have a regular course number so it's a special topic for us so it's hard to foresee at this point how long – how many times it will be offered. But it's definitely going to be offered again in the spring of 2020.

And that was something that I just started to think about I guess the year – in the spring of 2018 so essentially the year before I taught it the first time, really just in response to a lot of what I was seeing on campus and what I was hearing and it just seemed like a good way to just address all of those things head on. Like what is going on and what's breaking down and where and why and just really sort of just diving right in. So that was where that came from.

And the title was actually – came out of a conversation with my brother. So ...

Chris Martin: So what's on the syllabus for that course?

Ilana Redstone: So on that syllabus, so when I taught it last time, actually we did use Jon Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*. It was sort of an anchor point for that book. And so, I will probably do that again but I will probably add more to it. And so, we also read some Thomas Sowell's so we read parts of *Discrimination and Disparities* and we read a lot of other articles. So, just sort of popular media articles but those that have an intellectual contribution so whether it's from the Atlantic or the New York Time Magazine, so a lot of different sources like that.

We also spend – I would also have the students go – so when we are talking about various controversial issues that came up like if you take something like the James Moor memo or something like that. I would have them – part of what they would have to do is go and read that – read the original memo, which is go read – just go read it.

And then also – once they read the original then you can add on, OK, well, here is somebody who is sort of analyzing it saying that they don't like it. Here is somebody sort of making an argument about why they think it's a reasonable – what decisions had been fired for. And then they have the foundation to sort of how to inform conversation about that.

So yeah, so there's a fair amount of that as well, sort of going to original – whether it was original writing or sometimes original videos that became controversial and just saying, "OK, well, what do we think about this and how would you respond and what do you think the right response should be and why do you think people responded the way that they did." And you can have that conversation.

Chris Martin: And you are also teaching social problems which is a foundational social course in a lot of departments around the country, what you generally required course. Tell me a bit about how you've changed that course. So we've talked a bit about this offline but you've changed it a bit so people are aware of some controversies that they wouldn't normally be aware of if you just use the canon, the modern canon. So talk about that a little.

Iana Redstone: Yeah. So the social problems class is actually an interesting – it's interesting in a different way in a sense that just as you said, it is sort of a more core class and it does that – it will be taught for years to come without – I think there's little doubt that that would be the case.

And so the way that course is usually taught is there is sort of a brief sketching of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology which are symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, I don't need to go into these, and conflict theory. And so, the details about those don't really matter. But basically what it starts out with is presenting those in a sort of light manner, those theoretical frameworks and then looking around and you essentially – a lot of times, they will use a book that where each chapter is a different topic.

So one chapter might be general and equality, one chapter might be health and equality, something else might be just on poverty. And you could have 15 chapters of that in 15 weeks of the semester and then there's your semester. And it would basically be taking those theories, primarily conflict theory and applying it to these different social problems.

And so what I've done is I talk about – so I approach it from – explicitly and it's written into the syllabus and also I talk about it in sort of – I'm very upfront about how I'm going to teach the class starting from the very first day about incorporating multiple perspectives, multiple political perspectives, pointing out to students where – asking them about what they sort of know or they think they know already about different topics and not necessarily telling them it's wrong but just presenting a different way of seeing things.

And sort of my goal is to just get them to see that these things aren't that simple. It's not to change minds or to persuade people of my own – whatever my own position is. It's just – I really just like them to come out with an appreciation that the answers are not that simple. The problems are not that simple.

So I ended up adapting a fair number of positions in the class that I don't necessarily – wouldn't necessarily back in other settings.

Chris Martin: What's an example of that?

Ilana Redstone: Well, I mean just – so what would be an example about that? Well, I mean here's an – this is sort of an indirect answer to your question. I actually had a student come up to me yesterday from that class and she was saying – she said that she had been reading – she had come across a couple of blog posts. I don't think she called them blog posts. She said articles but when I looked at them, they were actually blog posts. And she was saying that she was struggling to figure out how to understand the author's perspective in these blog posts. And she was saying that – she was asking me. She basically was saying, "Can I send you the links and you look at them and you – because I'm struggling to understand this person's perspective and I would like to understand it? Can you look at them and basically, can you argue?" She was basically asking—and it turned out to be sort of funny like she was sort of saying, "Can you argue this side of it?"

And so – which was – and so I felt like – I was like, I feel like it can be a challenge of dual here like can I rise ...?

Chris Martin: Well, what was the topic of it? Was it gender-based or something like that?

Ilana Redstone: So the topic was – so it actually turned out, it was fairly funny in a sense that the links that she sent were just an absolute rant. I mean there was nothing – and so it was sort of funny in a sense that she has so internal, I mean which is great in a way like she has so internalized this idea of trying to understand where the other person is coming from that she was applying it to this situation where most reasonable would read this and just – I mean it was profanity-laden like there was no intellectual argument to it. It was not supported with any empirical evidence. It was just – but here she was, taking what we've been talking about in the class, which raised some – on the one hand, this example was sort of extreme because it was just – it really was just a rant.

But on the other hand, she was taking what we've been talking about and really asking important questions about where is the line? Like I can sit here and say, "Well, this is a rant."

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Ilana Redstone: And – but where is that – I mean just – I could tell you, the topics of what she sent, she sent two articles, two links, one was called 5 Reasons Why Shouldn't Date Indian Girls

and the other one was called something about why you should shun girls, and they did use the term girls, why you should shun girls who support abortion or something like that.

And so it was like – I mean really, it was just not really defensible from any sort of position that would require reason.

Chris Martin: Right.

Ilana Redstone: But her broader question is – what I said to her in response, but her broader question of where is the line and what somebody thinks is – well, I guess – and so here’s another answer to your question.

So we were talking about and I think we did – you and I talked about this offline, but we talked about, a couple of weeks ago, we talked about this difference between politeness and political correctness. So we’ve talked about that a fair bit in the class. And one of the – we watched a short video where somebody makes this distinction and we can at least have a conversation about what we agree with or don’t agree with about the video and the distinctions that the person makes. And so, one ...

Chris Martin: That video was from a right-leaning think tank?

Ilana Redstone: Actually, libertarian. It was from the Foundation for Economic Education.

Chris Martin: OK.

Ilana Redstone: That was the short video that I found there.

Chris Martin: OK.

Ilana Redstone: And so that video – so it was maybe 5 minutes. And so in that video, the person who makes it and I don’t remember their name, but he says – he is talking about how if you want to make the argument that different groups are being threatened and that those with language and with words and that those threats can lead to actual violence and this whole link between words and violence. And he was saying, “Why aren’t we looking at groups like veterans who have posttraumatic stress disorder? And the way we talk about war and the way we talk about US Military action, I mean these things could be very triggering for this population. They have higher suicide rates than the regular population. Why aren’t we making that connection? Why does that connection not seem to get as much as traction?”

And so that was one example that he gave. And so there was a student in the class who said – she was basically making a point. She was just saying, “But I don’t think the link is as clear as it is for, for instance trans, the trans population.” This was her argument.

And so, in terms of adapting all kind of positions, so I’ll say to her, “One could easily push back against what you are saying just because the veterans, particularly if they are white, they don’t

sort of check the right boxes for you. And so you are just – you are less sympathetic because they are not – again, they are just sort of not falling into the right categories that you tend to be more sympathetic to.” And she was open to sort of hearing that. I mean she was – I don’t think – she doesn’t seem to be put off by that argument.

So again, so just trying to constantly challenge in a gentle way but trying to challenge some of the assumptions and some of the answers that I think that they are – that first come to mind for a lot of the students.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I mean one of the contrasts that people have pointed out between conservatives and liberals of whom they considered to be victims, and I think conservatives tend to consider people who protected the social order but are unappreciated like veterans or police officers to be the core victims in society. And so, they are very protective of those groups. So even though they may say they are not in favor of political correctness, they actually are sensitive to insults to those groups.

Ilana Redstone: No, that’s actually an interesting distinction, protecting the social order. Yeah. No, that’s interesting.

Chris Martin: Yeah. So we are burning the flag for example.

Ilana Redstone: Right.

Chris Martin: We wouldn’t call that a real banning – the burning of the flag would not be called political correctness but it really is a form of political correctness.

Ilana Redstone: Right.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Ilana Redstone: Yeah, it’s interesting.

Chris Martin: Yeah. So you touched on race in that and we talked offline about this too. That’s a very controversial topic. So tell me what tips do you have for younger instructors who are just getting into sociology or any kind of social science and trying to address different perspectives on race?

Ilana Redstone: Yeah. I mean we spend a lot of time talking about racism. I mean just I would say the scales are tipped in terms of the number of hours in the classroom. The scales are definitely tipped towards racism in terms of what we talked about.

And so – and I also – the class is in terms of the gender balance, it is more women than men. So it’s more female students than male students. There are male students but it’s definitely tipped towards women.

And in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, it is a very racially and ethnically diverse class. I don't know the numbers but it's just – it's very diverse.

And so, so we do talk a lot about race and we talk about – I guess I try to thread that needle between recognizing people's sensitivities and recognizing what's important to people but also pointing out what happens sometimes when all we focus on is race.

And I could give you an example. So there was a day a couple of weeks ago when in that class, and we've talked about sort of the choices that we make in terms of how we think about identity. And so a couple of weeks ago, one of the days we were talking about racism and a number of the African-American students in the class were saying – so there was one student who was talking about – they were telling stories about – not stories, but sort of experiences that they've had with people saying things that were just really sort of cringe-worthy, made them feel bad.

And so for instance, one young student said something like when she was talking about when somebody had told her, "You're pretty for a black girl."

And another student was talking about how she – when she was in high school, she was on the dance team and I think she was the only black female – black woman on the dance team and they did support her at the end of the year. And so she would always get best hip hop and so she was just sort of like, "Well, why am I – is there a reason other than the fact that I'm black that I'm getting this support?"

Chris Martin: Right.

Iana Redstone: And then there was a man in the class who was talking about how he had been – when he was in middle school, I think middle school or high school, he had been at a friend's house playing video games or something and the friend said something to the effect of – something expressing surprise like, "You're really cool. I didn't think you or your people ..." something along those lines, like expressing surprise that he was both black and cool.

And so, listening to these things which was – I mean heartbreaking frankly to hear. And when you are listening to this – but the broader point that I tried to make was the last – one of the last students to give an example was this another student class and she was talking about how – before I go into that example, I'll just say that while these students were talking about this during this one day, there was a clear mind in the class in terms of who could contribute to the conversation and who couldn't like none of the white students had anything to say. And the students who were talking were some members of various underrepresented groups. So most of them – whether they were black or Latino or whatever, but none of the white students. I mean what were they going to say?

And so, that was something that was noticeable. So at one point, there was this one student who said that she has gotten the comment when she wears her hair pulled back and she wears hoop earrings that she gets the comments sometimes that she is – like, "Way to keep it real," or like something about keeping it real, which when I heard it, again, I understand what it means now.

At the time, I was like, “I don’t know what that means.” I was like, “Someone is going to have to explain that to me because that makes no sense to me.” And I will come back to that – I could come back to that in a second.

But the point – what I pointed out to the class leader was that when she said that, everyone in the class understood exactly what she was talking about, because that was the lang – that was just a vernacular that they understood. And so afterwards I said – after it was explained to me, I said, “OK, but did you see what happens? We started out having this conversation about race and people telling this really painful experience, talking about these really painful experiences and the line is by race like who is contributing to that conversation and who is not?”

She comes up with this one example and like that, it’s age or generation, right? Because they all know what – they all understand this reference. I don’t. And so, they all can sort of share a laugh. Do you know what I mean?

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Ilana Redstone: A turn on a dime in terms of what was unifying people and what wasn’t. So the keeping it real thing was that – the idea was that she was being sort of true to looking more ethnic when she had her hair pulled back in a bun and was wearing these hoopy earrings. She was looking more ethnic and that when she doesn’t look that way, when she is not making her appearance that way, she is trying to look not ethnic.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I guess the gist of it is that it’s being unpretentious. Keeping it real is I think being unpretentious.

Ilana Redstone: Right. Right. But the point that I was making to them was just – so in terms of these conversations about trace was let’s just take a moment to think about like what are we missing, what are those experiences? Scale that up. What are the experiences that you’re missing if you focus on race all the time? And so that was – so I think that that was – hopefully that was a useful – something useful to point out.

Chris Martin: So when it comes to more touchy issues though like say, affirmative action, I mean you assigned Thomas Sowell. He has perspectives on affirmative action that are relatively conservative.

Ilana Redstone: Yeah.

Chris Martin: Do you have students who are afraid to talk about that issue all together?

Ilana Redstone: I think they are to a certain extent. I think there are a few that would sort of push back gently but I think that – which is why I’ll adapt to any position. This doesn’t matter to me. And so, I’ll start pushing those questions.

Earlier, you asked about in terms of advice, I mean I really think – so I guess a couple of thoughts on advice. I mean I think there is a piece of it where there's trust building that happens over the course of the semester. I think that what you can say in week 8 may not be the same thing that you can say in week 1. So I think that there's that something to keep in mind.

And then the other thing I think is just to be – I think that most instructors would be pleasantly surprised at how much – they may not agree but students can – they are willing to listen a bit of thing that they don't agree with as long as it doesn't – as long as it's sort of in way that it feels respectful and feels like they are afraid to say what they want.

And at some level, you have to start somewhere to have these conversations. But we definitely have covered affirmative action in terms of why people are opposed to it and sort of different ideas of fairness and different idea – we've talked about different definitions of equality of opportunity, those two different definitions there and also making the distinction between equality of outcome and how again, how people think about fairness and what that means and fair to whom.

So we have talked about all of that stuff. I haven't – and we actually did in terms – and even things like policing in minority communities. I had a lieutenant from the Urbana Champaign police department come in a couple of weeks into the semester and she was talking – because actually, that was because the students wanted to have someone come in because I said, "I'm not an expert on law enforcement," so the experience of being a law enforcement officer, and so they wanted to have someone come in.

And she was great. She was someone who had had a lot of experience outside Urbana-Champaign. She had worked for the FBI and sort of had a lot of different experiences. And they were very clear with their questions about her and their concerns and she responded. And you could – and it was a good way to sort of see where the conversation breaks down even though there wasn't – there was no hostility. There was nothing like that. But there were examples during her – when she was there, when that lieutenant was there where you could see where the conversation – where things start to break apart.

Chris Martin: Right. I think it might be different in public and private universities because there was that famous incident at Brown University where there was a small riot of sorts when a Police Chief of the New York Police Department gave a talk.

Ilana Redstone: Right.

Chris Martin: That was 8 or 9 years ago now I think.

Ilana Redstone: Right. No, I do. I remember reading about that. Yeah.

Chris Martin: Yeah. That's interesting.

Ilana Redstone: I mean again, this was sort of – but again, this was something that they asked for and this is someone local.

Chris Martin: Right.

Ilana Redstone: And they did ask her. Like there was a student who said – who basically said, not rudely but she just said, “Why should we ...” and she was saying we, members of minority communities, “Why should we trust you?” meaning you, the law enforcement. And so, she just asked that question and then the woman had an answer and they just – I mean I don’t know that they necessarily came to an agreement but there was at least a conversation.

Chris Martin: Right. Did the police officer talk about the need to shoot in self-defense if you are a police officer?

Ilana Redstone: She – no, that specific case of shooting in self-defense didn’t come up. But there were questions about – someone did ask at the end of the time that she was there, they asked something about what is your advice or something to be safe? And she said – or what is your advice in terms of improving these relationships between the communities and some of these communities and law enforcement?

And her answer was I thought reasonable but certainly something that some people might find offensive. Her answer was mutual respect. There has to be mutual respect. If you are stopped, again, I’m sort of channeling her, “If you are stopped by the police, you should not be questioning what they are saying. You should be doing what they are telling you to do, not talking about, and they will in all likelihood respond in kind.”

Again, a controversial position but that was – but it was a useful conversation. And it led to a lot of other conversation.

Chris Martin: That’s good. That’s good. So when it comes to intersectionality, that’s also a popular topic in sociology courses, how do you treat that topic in this course?

Ilana Redstone: Yeah. So intersectionality, we hadn’t talked about it a ton but I’ve talked about it in a sense of it’s often an example that comes up and this is actually in the paper, in the FIRE Conference paper which I can send or maybe you can post a link for, whatever.

Chris Martin: Right. And for people who aren’t familiar with FIRE, it’s the Foundation for Individual Rights and Education.

Ilana Redstone: Right. And so their annual faculty conference was a couple of weeks ago and so there’s a paper that I presented there where it’s called – they actually came up with a clever title which was The Silent Crisis in the Classroom, so I can’t claim credit for that title.

Chris Martin: Yeah. There will be a link for that in the show notes.

Ilana Redstone: OK. So in that paper, so I use this example, and this is an example I use in the class as well about intersectionality which is, if you ask student because it is absolutely a topic that – it’s a word that the majority of them, not all, but the majority are familiar with. And so if you ask them and you say, “OK, well, what is intersectionality?” They will – many of them will give you a reasonable working definition like they will show a general familiarity with what it means. Some of them will even talk about the legal case originated that started – where the term originally came from, from the Ford, I think it was from Ford.

And so, some of them will – but if you ask them and you say – if you ask them – you lead to these other questions about well, what can you tell me about the ideological underpinnings or the sort of political ideology that’s tied to intersectionality? And they can’t tell – if you ask that question, what I found is that they don’t know. They don’t have – there’s no understanding that this is actually – this is a politically motivated perspective. It’s not that it’s invalid.

But it is – it’s not objective. It doesn’t – it’s not truth in any way that is sort of universally accepted. It is just a way of understanding the world and of understanding the relationships between different groups. There is nothing – it’s unfalsifiable. There’s nothing that makes it a hundred percent true more than some other interpretation of the world. And so that, they don’t know. And so, that’s what I talk about a bunch in the paper.

Chris Martin: So how do you introduce – because my perspective on intersectionality and I read a blog post for Heterodox Academy about this is that originally ...

Ilana Redstone: Was that the one about interactionism?

Chris Martin: Yeah, interaction effects. So when Kimberle Crenshaw, the legal scholar, started to write about intersectionality. She was talking about what social science just call interaction effects.

Ilana Redstone: Right.

Chris Martin: And she had evidence for a clear interaction effect of being both black and female at a company. So then maybe 10 years later, the word intersectionality started to expand. I’m not even sure what the definition is right now.

Ilana Redstone: That’s a really good question. I don’t – I mean I sort of have a sense of how it’s used but in terms of a clear definition, one thing that’s certainly clear is that the original usage, what it has become is far, far bigger and more expensive than the original usage with whatever – which I think actually had – made an interesting point about how these black women couldn’t they weren’t eligible to file these discrimination lawsuits because they weren’t the right groups.

And so I mean it seems like it really came from a place that was – it started out as something that was incredibly useful. But what it has become is just a way of thinking about the world that is just in terms of different identity groups and the level of victimization that they experienced

which gives you higher moral claims to truth and reality. It sort of almost imposes the hierarchy in that sense.

I know Bari Weiss in her new book, she talks about this and she says that it basically takes the traditional hierarchy where white men or white – she might have specified, white, attractive men but white men are sort of at the top and then you can kind of go down from there and basically flips it. And so you can argue whether that's a useful way of thinking about it or not but it's certainly interesting.

But yeah, so I don't – I think that the fact that they don't question it, I would say intersectionality in terms of students, the fact that they are not taught again that it's an ideology, that they don't question it. Those to me are problems.

I would say the same thing about the other pervasive topic where that has come up is about colorblind racism, which I think you and I talked about briefly as well. So I mean – and this relates to – I mean I know the very popular book that's out now, Ibram Kendi's book, he is a professor at American University.

Chris Martin: Right. And I think he is on the New York Times bestseller list, *How To Be an Antiracist*.

Ilana Redstone: Yup. I haven't read it but I mean I've read about it and I've read other things that he has written. But this idea – but that's similar – I mean in sociology, we have – there's a book, *Racism Without Racists* which is by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and he was a past president of the American Sociological Association although it would be hard for us to remember right now what year – it might have been 2017.

Chris Martin: It was about three years ago.

Ilana Redstone: Yeah, 2016 maybe.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Ilana Redstone: And so he – so they are making a similar argument in a sense that and I am going to oversimplify it, but that you have to focus on race all the time. And that if you are denying the importance of race and if race is not the prism through which you see everything then that is racist. And so, this is what students are taught really like – which is – and there's not – frankly, there's nothing wrong with it. To me, it's a way to understand the world. It's a way to think about race.

But if that's the only thing that they are being taught and they are not taught that, “Well actually, there are principal reasons why people would object to this.” The only thing that they know is if somebody objects to this or they don't get in line behind him, they are themselves racists, that's kind of a scary thing to me.

Chris Martin: Right. Well, it's a loaded word. So John McWhorter, who himself is African-American, has pointed out that calling someone racist is a bit like calling someone a child molester in today's world.

Ilana Redstone: You can't defend yourself.

Chris Martin: Yeah. So it's in a way would be nice if we were not loaded because I think we might be able to have more rational discussions. But because it is, it's kind of hostile if you are saying, "If you don't follow my philosophy or my sociological theory then you're a racist." Because you're using – you might be trying to use the less loaded social science definition of racism. But it's kind of equivalent to calling someone a child molester if they don't agree with you.

Ilana Redstone: Right. Right.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Ilana Redstone: Yeah, it's a good but scary analogy but yes. Yes, that makes – I mean how are you supposed to get off from behind that? I mean what does it sound – if somebody calls you a child molester, you say, "No, I'm not a child molester." And then they will say, "Well, that's exactly what a child molester would say." You know what I mean? OK. Well ...

Chris Martin: Yeah, it's very loaded. Anyway, we are out of time. There were other things I wanted to discuss but it looks like we're out of time. Any closing thoughts or I guess you should probably talk just for a minute about HX Sociology and the Facebook group.

Ilana Redstone: Yeah. So the HX Sociology which I guess is turning to HX Communities and it will be a community of sociology but for right now, it's still HX Sociology. There's a Facebook group which there's a Google form that you can fill out to join the Facebook group. That's open to graduate students and faculty and instructors from – we cast a pretty wide net there in terms of their ties to sociology.

And then there's also a Google group. And so if you want to – if you are interested in either of those, you can – the Sociology Facebook group is describable on Facebook or you can just email me.

Chris Martin: Great. Great. Well, thank you for joining us.

Ilana Redstone: Yeah. No, thank you.

Chris Martin: You can follow Ilana on Twitter @irakresh. You can also learn about her consulting firm at Diverse Perspectives Consulting.com.

As always, if you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps other people find out about the show. You can reach me at Podcast@HeterodoxAcademy.org and you can follow me on Twitter [@Chrismartin76](https://twitter.com/Chrismartin76). Thanks for listening.

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