

Title: Meghan Daum, Woke Me When It's Over
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Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives.]

Cory Clark: My name is Cory Clark. I'm the Director of Academic Engagement for Heterodox Academy and I'm hosting today's episode with guest, Meghan Daum. Meghan is a columnist for Medium, an Adjunct Faculty in the MFA Writing Program at Columbia University School of the Arts, and author of five books, one of which we will be discussing today, *The Problem with Everything*.

I think I can also designate Meghan the Queen of one liners, the book has a lot of good ones. And Heterodox Academy read *The Problem with Everything* for a recent book club. So now, we have Meghan here to discuss the book and I will include some questions from our book club participants in the interview.

Hi, Meghan. Welcome to the show.

Meghan Daum: Hi, Cory. Thanks for having me.

Cory Clark: Our pleasure. So we are talking about problems here today. The book is a bit of left on left criticism, a reflection on how modern liberalism or progressivism even from the perspective of a committed liberal seems to have perhaps gotten a bit extreme. But the main criticism is of contemporary feminism. So what is the problem if there is one main problem with modern feminism? And you described it as wave 4, and particularly, in contrast to more old school feminism.

Meghan Daum: This is very much my own problem with the book is that it's many things. But at its root, it's really a self-interrogation. It's not a polemic. I'm trying to figure all of this stuff out. I'm trying to figure all of this stuff out and invite my reader to think alongside me as I sort through these generational divides and the various conflicts of the present moment.

The problem with fourth-wave feminism to me is the way it has become more a series of memes than a set of coherent ideas. And I knew that's like easy for me to say as a Gen Xer. I was – I grew up with second-wave feminism. My mother was like a '70s feminist. And then I came of age in the '80s and the '90s and there was this kind of like riot girl kind of post-punk sort of aesthetic around feminism.

So it may be that I am bringing a kind of older person's eye into all of this. And when I look at social media and I look at the way a lot of these ideas have sort of metabolized, I am seeing a lot of like just snarky retorts and really just glib ways of talking about things instead of substance sort of ideas.

And unfortunately, a lot of it has gotten boiled down to punching off at men and assuming that criticizing men and talking about things like toxic masculinity and complaining about things like mansplaining and manspreading is okay because men are by default more powerful than women and so therefore, it's okay to kind of slam them as if we are automatically of a lower class. And that to me seems inherently paradoxical and inherently contradictory.

And so, what was really driving a lot of my inquiry around feminism in the book is looking at these contradictions and a lot of the hypocrisies in terms of the way women talk about their own power and own up to their own agency.

Cory Clark: Yeah. So this is related to I think throughout the book, you mentioned a couple of places that women in some way seem sort of desirous of victimhood status or they are like sort of being viewed as children instead of women. And I'm curious, what do you see at the primary motivation here if women are desiring to be seen as victims? What are they getting from this?

Meghan Daum: The question of what are we getting from this is one that I ask myself every day. I really don't know. And I do want to be careful about speaking in these generalizations. I mean you start talking about, not you, but one starts talking about victim culture and grievance culture and that sort of thing and it's very easy to start to sound like somebody on the right or somebody who is making very reductive criticisms and generalities about this whole sort of gestalt.

But it's funny because I grew up like I said in the '70s and '80s and I at no time as a little girl, as a teenager, saw myself as anything other than equal to boys. If anything, the boys were doing better than the boys. The girls got better grades. If the boys were getting called on more in class, I always thought it was because the teacher was like so grateful for any boy raising his hand at all or not raising his hand that she would sort of like just kind of give him all the space that he needed.

So by the time I got to college, there were more women going to college than men. There were slightly more women in law school. When I got to be a young adult, there were more women buying real estate, more men were living with their parents, this sort of thing.

So fast forward a couple of decades, probably right about 2014 or so, I started to notice that at the very moment when women had so clearly surpassed men in so many spheres, not at the very, very top, I'm not talking about CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, I'm not talking about tech billionaires and Silicon Valley, but by and large, women had just surpassed men on every level. And that coincided with this sort of default premise in the conversation about how men had all this power and women were suddenly more oppressed than ever and endangered and being spoken over and being overlooked. And I thought, "That's curious like it doesn't make any sense."

So I wanted to ponder that. The question of what we are getting out of it, all I keep coming back to is a sense of solidarity, a sense of affiliation. I think people are lonely and seeking connection

and for whatever reason, social media makes it really easy to align ourselves around complaints and grievances. And so, here we are.

Cory Clark: Yeah, and if that's how you get support and that's how you get like responses and clicks and followers then I suppose you would want to do something like that. So if modern feminism is sort of choosing the wrong battles in a way, where do you see a place for feminism today? What would be the worthy causes of feminism in modern society?

Meghan Daum: Well, our job is not done yet. There are lots of ways that women's rights are still not what they should be. I mean reproductive rights are in peril in many, many states and people are fighting that. That's certainly not like a battleground that has been forgotten. But I think that's a really good example.

This whole question of women's rights overseas and just sort of civil rights, humanitarian issues more broadly, that's really run into conflict with this kind of cultural appropriation conversations. So are we allowed to criticize women being veiled? Are we allowed to criticize things like female genital mutilation? Because doing so is asserting our sort of western imperialism and that's therefore that's not right.

So I think that like people who are sensitive to these issues and people who 20 years ago would have been approaching some of these things from a primarily feminist point of view are now having to reckon with kind of critical race theory approaches to these topics and it just becomes really, really muddled.

But one thing I keep coming back to just in my life and I certainly came back to in the book is this idea like men – if so much of what I see women complaining about in terms of men, it's just men being stupid and silly and not having any power at all. And so it seems to me that the way that we sort of put men in their place and put ourselves in our own rightful place is to laugh at them and to shame them, make them see how stupid they look when they don't take women seriously. And instead, I think too often we sort of don't take ourselves seriously. So that kind of bothers me.

Cory Clark: One thing I think you kind of mentioned is that a lot of the times, these aren't systemic problems. They are just individual males that are causing problems. And so to point the finger at society as a whole might be missing the target in some cases.

Meghan Daum: Yeah. There's this whole idea of toxic masculinity. And I have a section in the book that's pretty controversial. I think it pissed a lot of people off. I mean a lot of the book pissed a lot of people off but this section perhaps specifically, where I talk about the idea of toxic femininity. So if we are going to have a whole sort of dialectic or a whole kind of ecosystem around this idea of what men do that are inherently – what are inherently male qualities that are also inherently toxic qualities, we have to be able to talk that way about women. I mean when it comes to emotional manipulation, gaslighting, that's a term that has risen over the last couple of years, women tend to be much more adept at that sort of stuff than men.

I talk in the book how I had a student, I was teaching grad students, the term gaslighting came up and we sort of said like, well, what does that mean? This was maybe three years ago. And a young woman, a very bright young woman who I really adored as a student said, “Oh, well, gaslighting, that’s that thing that men do to women.” And to her, that was the definition of the word. And I just thought, my gosh! When it comes to being devious and manipulative and sort of operating on a whole sort of cognitive emotional level that a lot of men can’t hear, women are so much better at that. Women are much better gaslighters than men. But for some reason, we are not able to own that.

Cory Clark: Yeah. So there are some double standards there in terms of what you can criticize. And really, I think there are double standards in terms of like who is allowed to do the criticizing. So you describe in the introduction a friend advising you to write about feminism saying, “Write about feminism because as a straight, cisgendered, able-bodied, heteronormative, white chick, it’s the only thing available to you anyway.”

And I think the invocation here is that perhaps only women are allowed to criticize feminism or things like the MeToo Movement or at least they are the only ones who can get away with it. So I’m wondering what do you think of the cause and benefits of like either excluding men from these kinds of conversations or requiring them to tread very lightly if they are trying to talk about these sorts of things?

Meghan Daum: This is this whole standpoint epistemology, right? Especially over the last few years, this is something that I’m sure you know has been prevalent in academia for decades but has come into the mainstream in the last couple of years. So the premise is that you are not allowed to critique anything or have an opinion about anything unless you are part of the group.

Cory Clark: Nothing about me without me.

Meghan Daum: Oh really? Oh, that’s good. So yeah, I did not feel that I was really able to speak about anything other feminism. Although look, I think we should just back up for a second for here because in terms of this particular book, I would just – I can’t emphasize this enough. I’m not an academic. I’m not like a policy wonk. I’m an essayist. I’m an observer of the world and I’m a sort of observer of my own experience.

And so what I wanted to do was really, really write a book that on every page was wrestling with these ideas. There’s nothing conclusive here. It’s about my own cognitive dissonance and the cognitive dissonance that I think a lot of people feel. So I have to say, I started to notice this kind of meme-ification of feminism around 2014, 2015 or so. This was around the time that Emma Sakowitz at Columbia University was carrying her mattress around protesting the fact that her – the student she accused of sexually assaulting her had not been expelled.

And so, there was just suddenly a lot of female rage being expressed on social media, on digital media platforms like Jezebel, places – online magazines like Slate and even the mainstream publications that had once been sort of reliably in the middle were defaulting to the left in a really noticeable way.

So I started to notice that and I started to notice it mostly around feminism. And this was well before anybody was thinking about Donald Trump. By the time I started writing the book, I think I officially started writing it in like early 2016. I assumed that Hillary Clinton would be the next president. I thought that like the world could handle a sort of gentle razing of third and fourth-wave feminism. And it was really going to be about the generational divides. It was going to be a Gen Xer tries to sort of look at the differences between her mother's version of feminism and younger women's version of it. So that happened.

So I wrote a version of this book and it was going to be called *You Are Not a Badass*, because this notion of the badass was everywhere. And again, this gets to your earlier question like what is it about this kind of self-infantilization like I noticed that the badass moniker would be applied to anybody – any woman who sort of got out of bed every morning and went to work and did her job and paid the rent on time. The idea was that it's such a struggle to be a woman in this world and face down the patriarchy at every turn that just doing the bare minimum makes you a badass. So the book was going to be called *You Are Not a Badass*.

And then we all know what happened. Hillary Clinton lost the election and there was suddenly this whole sort of phenomenon of outrage had broken open. It was not just about women. It was about race. It was about power, power hierarchies. And it was really convoluted in a lot of ways but it was also so much broader than just the women question.

And I really started to notice that what was happening was that there was a conversation chokehold in the culture. We could not – there were certain things, certain questions that were really we were not allowed to ponder because they were sort of too nuance or too complicated and too easily hijacked by the wrong side. We needed all hands on deck to fight Trump as a #Resistance was really the only path to be on but nobody really could agree with what that meant.

So I noticed that there was something much bigger going on than the question of like women being silly on social media. There was just a much larger refusal to engage with ideas in an intellectually honest way. So the book really became more about that. And that's why it is *The Problem with Everything*. It's not just the problem with feminism.

Cory Clark: Right. I think this is a good time to talk about Title IX and the restoration of due process and campus proceedings and cases of sexual misconduct. And you talked about it a little bit in your book but this is now relevant today even more so. So I'm wondering if you are – it's your view that because this is happening under the Trump Administration that liberals will not be on board with these changes. And if so, is there a progressive case to be made for these Title IX changes?

Meghan Daum: Is there a progressive case to be made for the rollbacks of the ...

Cory Clark: For yeah, restoring due process.

Meghan Daum: Yeah. Well, I think there is. I'm not a fan of Betsy DeVos but a broken clock is right twice a day. And in this case, I think she was absolutely right to roll back those policies. That was a – so I mean I'm assuming a lot of our listeners know this, but in case they don't, in 2011 the Obama Administration sent out this infamous Dear Colleague Letter to all the universities that were receiving federal funding, which is most of them, private or public, saying that if in cases where a complaint of sexual assault or misconduct is made, you have to follow these certain guidelines or you're going to risk losing your federal funding.

And those guidelines were really – they favored the accuser to a degree that it was as if due process had been obliterated in a lot of ways. And they were followed sort of haphazardly. Every institution sort of ended up making up its own rules in a way. Anyway, we don't have to get really terribly in the weeds on that.

But it's interesting that that happened during not only a democratic administration but the administration of a beloved president. I mean somebody that liberals, it wasn't just that he was on their side. Obama was a hero. And so, I think that it's an example of something that really nobody looked at very closely because they just assumed that it was the right thing.

And so, when Betsy DeVos comes in as Education Secretary under Trump, she says, "Well, I'm looking at this and I'm going to roll this back. These are not – this violates every sort of due process principle we have as a country." And there was notice-and-comment period and there was a lot of discussion around it. And she ended up doing just that.

And I think that if it had been reversed and if the original policy had come from a conservative administration, all the liberals would have screamed and then would have been happy when a democrat came and rolled it back. It's an example of a refusal to be intellectually honest. Like instead of actually looking at what was going on, the way these rules were being misapplied and really there unintended consequences that were pretty severe, they just assumed that it was all politicized and that the left was right about it and the right was wrong about it. And in this case, I don't agree.

Cory Clark: Yeah, it's unfortunately sort of impossible counterfactual to imagine. How would you have felt about this if this was happening during Obama and like the scripts were reversed? But you just can't run that thought experiment where people have a hard time running it anyway.

Meghan Daum: And it's amazing that the ACLU in recent months and years has come out against DeVos' rollbacks. They have come out in favor of these often Draconian policies and it just – it flies in the face of everything the ACLU has stood for and Nadine Strossen who was Head of the ACLU for a long, long time has publicly said that she disagrees with the current position but in a more – the ACLU that most of us know and love or grew up respecting would never in a million years support the kind of policies that the Obama Administration set forth.

And by the way, Joe Biden was hugely instrumental in that. So ...

Cory Clark: A little bit of irony.

Meghan Daum: Yeah. So – and again, so much of it to me – it almost felt like virtue signaling. I mean I loved Obama as much as anybody and I hate to say it but there was a lot of virtue signaling going on in that administration and we just didn't happen to use the term virtue signaling at that time.

Cory Clark: Even good leaders can make mistakes too.

Meghan Daum: Yeah, and even good leaders can just be sort of shallow about things and get away with it. It's because we love them.

Cory Clark: So question from one of our book club participants was that you signal you're a feminist throughout your book by stating your support for abortion as a right. And what do you think of pro-life feminists and their place in the new culture were?

Meghan Daum: Well, I think that the pro-life position is entirely understandable on an intellectual level. If you think that abortion is murder, it would make sense to fight tooth and nail to keep it illegal, to make it not available.

Again, it's really – in the same that it bothered me that the Women's March in the wake of the Trump election was so much centered around women. It was as if like well, only women are upset that Trump has been elected. Like only women are worried about the state of the world and somehow Trump is only a threat to women. He is not a threat to the entire world and social norms and everybody. So in the same way, it sort of bothered me that Trump resistance got wrapped in women's rights and women's oppression. It bothers me that kind of the women – the discussion around feminism is so often wrapped up in reproductive rights.

But I also think it's really important to distinguish reproductive rights from abortion because I think that a lot of people who are pro-life are not necessarily anti-birth control or anti very easy access to birth control. But unfortunately, because it gets so politicized, we are not even allowed to have like a nuance discussion or we are not even allowed to sort of slice these things into the finely-tuned categories that they are.

So yeah, but I again, I guess what I would say is that well, I know this is what I would say that women are not a monolith. We are not a community. It's kind of like every time you say something like, "Whoa! The Black community or the gay community or the trans community," that's so insulting because identity or innate biological characteristics or immutable traits, it's not a political position. So I think we really have to sort of get away from the idea of women's issues and just really try to see ourselves as whole individuals.

But I think with social media, there's so little incentive for just getting away from identity categories and there's huge incentive for reinforcing them. So that would be a big ask in this moment.

Cory Clark: A related question to that and maybe this is also related to how a lot of people got angry with you, I noticed that you, throughout the book, you often mention, “I’m a liberal but X,” or “Of course sexual harassment is a huge problem but why?” And this is something I noticed on left on left criticism where people sort of signal their identity, “I’m one of the team. I’m a liberal as well.” But I think maybe we’ve gone a little too far here. So I’m kind of curious what you think of this as a sort of argumentative strategy to try to get liberals to listen? And do you feel like it has been successful for you or are people still angry? And then also like, is there a side effect of potentially implying that if you weren’t liberal then you wouldn’t have a right to be speaking about some of these things?

Meghan Daum: Yeah. So I was a newspaper columnist for over 10 years. I was an opinion columnist with the Los Angeles Times. And there’s a thing in opinion writing called the “to be sure paragraph,” where you have your argument. You probably opened up with some kind of example from the news, from the headlines or some sort of anecdote and then you start to make your point, try to make the argument. And then there’s always a paragraph where you say, “To be sure, there are many ways in which I am wrong and you could say this, you could say that. Here are all the ways you could ding me. That said, I am now going to carry on and submit my argument.”

Cory Clark: Which is hard to do with 700 words.

Meghan Daum: Well, right. But I mean it’s – so if you are trying to do it in a book, there is that tendency to sort of acquit – try to acquit yourself all the time. I will say this book had – it had a complicated journey. It had a couple of different editors. It had – I was told ...

Cory Clark: For like political reasons or just ...?

Meghan Daum: Partly.

Cory Clark: Yeah.

Meghan Daum: Everything is fine like everything – there’s no – I have no animosity toward anyone. There’s nothing like secret about this or there’s no – it’s all – I started the book – I set out to write a very different book than I ended up writing. It was going to be a book about fourth-wave feminism from the point of view of a Gen Xer in the dawn of the Hillary Clinton Administration. So by definition, that book was not written.

But yeah, I definitely was getting a lot of people saying like, “You’ve got to make very clear that you’re a feminist and you’ve got to keep saying it.” And I have to say there were definitely – there are a lot of pages that came out of this book. I’ve said this for every page that ended up in the book, there were probably 20 that got thrown out. I probably wrote 800 pages worth of material, this is a really short book in the end. So ...

Cory Clark: So don’t write a book.

Meghan Daum: ... it's very, very hard. What's that?

Cory Clark: I said, so don't write a book. [Laughs]

Meghan Daum: Well, it was a really, really hard book to write. And I just think by definition when you are trying to write about the moment that you're still in and that moment is really confusing, it's not – the book is going to be a little bit messy. I mean I would be the first to tell you that. But that's actually by design. I think it would be dishonest to say, "Here's what's happening in the world. Here's what I think. Here's what needs to happen. This is the problem with everything. This is how we fix it. The end." That – I wouldn't write that kind of book. I really wanted a book that was going to be wrestling with my own sense of inner conflict on every page.

In terms of like saying again and again that I'm a feminist, I probably wouldn't do that this time. But I'm not sure that that's the only reason people are mad at me. People have been mad at me my whole career. I've been writing. I've been publishing for 25 years and they've always gotten mad. But it's interesting because now they get mad without actually reading what I wrote and they used to get mad after having read something.

Cory Clark: [Laughs] Yeah, you said I think somewhere even that you're not necessarily particularly seeking truth but rather nuance. And I sort of like that because I mean I think as an academic, I think about these things in terms of like, "Oh, we are trying to reach the truth," but so often, the truth is it's impossible now if not forever and whatever the truth is, it's going to be really complicated and not something that you can state in a sort of straightforward fact. So I think the idea of trying to just seek nuance or at least openness to discussing pros and cons of various things, if everyone were more willing to do it, it would be really helpful for discourse.

Meghan Daum: Yeah. They say there are two sides to every story. That's actually not true. There are four sides. There are eight sides. There are infinite numbers of sides. So I think all we can do is encourage some kind of honest debate. And one of the things that has really struck me, I've been writing controversial pieces since the early mid-1990s and it used to be that that was the job. So you would write something and it was maybe a little provocative, not gratuitously so, but it was – I'm inviting my reader to think of something in a new way.

I really think of essays, I think of this sort of book which is not a collection of essays but this kind of book, it is a suggestion. That's really what it is. It's not – I'm not like laying down the truth. I'm making a suggestion. What if we look at it this way? I'm inviting my reader to think with me.

So I would do that early in my career and people would get angry. They would be angry whether it's to the editor or I would maybe see them, maybe I wouldn't. They would be published in the magazine 6 weeks later, whatever, and I would be on to the next thing. And actually, making readers sort of agitated was the job, that that was what got me another assignment.

And something has happened in the last 5 or 6 years where it's almost like the job of the journalist is just to appease her audience and to sort of make everybody – remind her audience again and again that we are still on the same side and I'm just going to repeat the obvious thing. And to me, that's boring. That's not what I got into the business. So to the extent that people say like, "Oh well, you've changed and we used to love you and look up to you but now you've betrayed us." That doesn't actually make any sense to me because I'm not doing anything differently than I ever did. In fact, I'm doing a lot more of the "to be sure" stuff and I'm bending over backwards a lot harder than I even used to just because of this moment that we're in. So it's a very curious thing.

Cory Clark: Yeah, it is interesting. Kind of like either agree with us one hundred percent or you lose our support. You cannot deviate even a little bit from my own personal views.

Meghan Daum: Yeah. And it's – I think the justification would be, well, the stakes are so high. The world is so terrible. There are babies in cages. Trans people are dying. People are being deported. And it's like well, those things are true but there are also – they are worthy of discussion in an honest way and those – and actually, those things have always been true. Those things have always been true. We just didn't hear about them around the clock and we did not have video of every single thing that happened. We did not – every terrible thing in the world that happened, we were much less likely to see, not that we see every terrible thing now.

And there's a lot of good that comes from the fact that we know so much more than we used to. I would be the last one to sit here and say like, "Oh, we are much better when people couldn't – without their cell phone cameras." But it was also – in a lot of ways, it was a lot better when people couldn't whip out their cell phone cameras. There's really like – there are going to be unintended consequences of progress. So I don't know.

But yeah, the idea that we can't afford to have honest dialogue about complicated topics because the stakes are too high or people are suffering or communities are being harmed, that to me is like bad faith reasoning.

Cory Clark: Let me bring in a sort of practical question from one of our members that's related to that. So this was from one of our book club participants regarding your overarching theme of the generational divide. How can we, whether we are instructors or researchers or perhaps public intellectuals, how can we acknowledge that young people are living in a different time with different perceived threats or perhaps those threats seem so much bigger because they are actually in our faces? How can we acknowledge that while also fostering an understanding that societal gains have been made and that things are actually pretty good today?

Meghan Daum: Well, I think that the way question was phrased gets pretty close to the answer. There are a lot of issues on which I've really come around. I mean something like these questions around sexual consent, affirmative consent, these kinds of topics, there was a time maybe several years ago where I was much more cavalier about things like affirmative consent, oh, that's silly. If you have to ask, "Can I kiss you now? Can I touch you here?" every five

seconds, that shows some sort of lack of sophistication. I think that stuff is very easy to make fun of. It's not nearly – I don't think it's quite as extreme as a lot of older people seem to think.

But in thinking about all this stuff and reporting and talking to a lot of young people, it has become clear to me that they are dealing with an entire set of conditions on the sexual and social kind of in those spheres that my generation didn't have to at all. We didn't have ubiquitous online pornography. We did not have sexual expectations that have been set in place by really extreme just totally unrealistic depictions of bodies or desire. We did not have – we did not assume that everyone we met romantically we were going to meet online or on an app. We had a kind of intuitive sense of social interaction. We knew what it was like to talk to somebody in real life. And there's nothing more – nothing requires more sort of unspoken intuition than negotiating an in-person sexual encounter.

But if you've grown up on mostly communicating via screens, you're not going to have those tools necessarily. So something like affirmative consent may make sense. And so, that's an example of something where I've sort of come around. I'm not going to sit here and say, "Well, you guys just have to grow up. That's stupid." It's not really for me to say. And I think some of the conversations around what is assault and what is not, I think that that – we do need to have some more discipline and kind of coherence around that.

But yeah, I don't think a lot of people my age teach in college for instance, maybe they don't really think hard enough about the fact that like these kids are meeting strangers on Tinder and then having sexual experiences with them. I didn't really think of it until my students started describing this to me. And that that would be like they are young, that's a very early sexual experience. It's not like they are in their 40s and doing this. They are 18. So I think it's worth thinking about.

Cory Clark: Yeah. So maybe just a little bit of taking their perspective on these issues and then I guess, how do you – how can you take their perspective but then also get them to see yours in some ways?

Meghan Daum: Well, I mean they have to see mine because I'm the teacher [Laughs] so they have to.

Cory Clark: Power.

Meghan Daum: Yes. I mean the other thing too and I do I think this is germane probably to a lot of the audience here is that I teach writing and I'm always telling my students, "You have to take risks. You have to say unpopular thing. Otherwise, why are you doing it? It's your job as a writer to articulate the things that people are either unwilling or unable to articulate."

Okay. But then my students will say to me, "Well, that's easy for you to say because you have established yourself in the time before social media. You're not going to get cancelled on Twitter straight out of the gate." And I think that that's a very good point.

It was a tremendous gift to me as a sort of public thinker, as a writer, as a person being published, it was a tremendous gift to not have to be looking over my shoulder constantly when I was a young writer and figuring things out. I mean I wrote some – I published some pieces that like didn't make a lot of sense early in my career. Most of them did because I had great editors and there was real editing going on at that time and I was lucky enough to be writing for publications that had absolute top of the line editing and fact-checking and they didn't want to look stupid so they didn't want their writers to look stupid. But I had some misfires. And I didn't pay nearly the price that I would pay today for that kind of misfire.

I mean you can have your life wrecked over a tweet. Imagine telling your student, "Well, don't worry about that. Go and write a 5000-word essay that's going to provoke people and get over yourself."

Cory Clark: Yeah.

Meghan Daum: That's a tall order.

Cory Clark: Yeah, that is a really good point. It is much riskier today than it probably was 20 years ago. I wondered is it possible to say anything or write anything of consequence where people are going to like you or maybe be moved by something you said without also pissing people off? Like can you only get positive feedback and not also trigger a lot of negative feedback?

Meghan Daum: That's a great question. I often say nobody will love you unless somebody hates you.

Cory Clark: [Laughs] Yeah.

Meghan Daum: So I think you can write something nice and it's fine and people would not like it. I mean people will like it. Sorry. That was a phrase. But people would not care. I guess is what I'm trying. They would not remember it.

But I have found that really you're not going to make a difference to readers if you don't take some risks. And the thing is like, people read because they want to feel less alone. They want to feel connected to that author. They want that moment where they are like, "Oh my God! I think that too. I thought I was the only one."

And you can't achieve that unless you are being honest. And you can't be honest unless you are saying things that are not going to go down smoothly with everybody. So no, I mean you have to take your hits. That's the job of the writer.

And this gets into – I have such a problem with the term brave like you see this all the time especially in the personal essay arena. It's like, "Oh, what a brave author. Oh, she said this. It's so bold of her." And I always say like, it's not brave. It's actually your job. Stop calling it brave because all you are doing is intimidating yourself. You're sort of setting yourself up to be afraid

of this very thing you are saying if you have decided that saying such a thing makes you brave. How about saying such a thing and showing up to work that day and doing your job as a writer? So I think some reframing might be in order on that score.

Cory Clark: Yeah, I like that. So we are running out of time but I will throw one more question in there for you. You said I think toward the end of the book that you can't fight tribalism with a tribe. And this is something I wondered about for a long time. Could you have a tribe that isn't united over an ideology and instead over some of the things you are talking about, so a desire for nuance, humility, giving people the benefit of the doubt?

And of course, I'm thinking about the Heterodox Academy and similar organizations or groups. But if you have those kinds of groups, does that sort of inevitably lead to a kind of tribe where you can only view your group as good and the opposing groups as bad? And if that is the case, if that happens sort of necessarily, is fighting against tribalism basically a losing battle because you're just going to have a bunch of solo individuals trying to take down the sort of organized beast of people who are all supporting one another and have each other's backs?

Meghan Daum: Yeah, that is a really important question and I think you put it really well. I think Heterodox Academy is a great example of fighting that fight. I think that it's – you are fighting ideological tribalism. You are for ideological diversity. And that's – calling for diversity of thought is I think by definition not tribal. But if you are an organization or a group of people saying, "Our mission is diversity of thought," then I guess you could make the argument that that in and of itself is a group.

So I mean this really turns into like just a sort of semantic math problem, right? I guess what I would hope is that we are going to get past this moment of really, really damaging social media pile-ons and mob mentalities. I mean it's interesting. So we are talking now from the what, second or third month of this pandemic. I mean I'm noticing just in the last week or so the vitriol on Twitter especially, social media generally, but especially on Twitter has just reached peak. People are just blood-thirsty. They are – every day there's a new victim.

Cory Clark: I'm bored. Is that a problem? [Laughs]

Meghan Daum: They are bored. They are frustrated. We are doing – I mean I'm guilty of it like I could go outside and take a walk but why am I just scrolling on Twitter? It's pathetic. The shot in Florida, the reveling and seeing other people go down. I mean I've been dragged on Twitter a couple of times over the last few months over just silly things. And like – and I noticed it in myself like I'll see something happen to somebody else and I'll say, "Oh my gosh! Well, at least that wasn't me."

And so I guess what I'm saying is that I think – I hope that things will get so bad that everyone kind of realizes that it's not sustainable and that we can't live in a culture where the reward system is such that saying the obvious thing will not only give you a dopamine hit but improve your career, get you more likes, get you more followers, get you more fame, potentially get you a job.

If that is rewarded more than saying the honest thing or the necessary thing and in fact saying the necessary thing is penalized, we are not going to solve like really urgent problems. I don't think we can have – I'm not even sure we can solve the health crisis without – actually, I know we can. We can't – we are not going to actually come out of this even we can't have honest conversations about how to handle it, where it came from, how to keep it from happening again.

And a lot of people don't even want those conversations to happen because they can too easily like drift into something that will look on some level like xenophobia or giving too much leverage to the enemy sort of thing. And that's just – as Eric Weinstein says, "Let me know when you are ready to sit at the grown-ups table." That's just not a sophisticated way of analyzing reality or talking about reality.

And so, I'm hoping that people will realize that the current mode of discourse is just not sustainable. It's not only damaging to us emotionally as a culture but it's not productive and it's in fact counterproductive.

Cory Clark: All right. Well, thank you very much for coming on today, Meghan.

Meghan Daum: Thank you, Cory. It was fun.

Cory Clark: You can follow Meghan on Twitter @Meghan_Daum. You can find a link to her book in the show notes and our book club discussion guide will be available on Heterodox Academy's tools and resources page. If you have any comments, you can contact me at Clark@HeterodoxAcademy.org or on Twitter @ImHardcory.

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