

Title: Intersectionality Is a Political Football—Here's Why It Doesn't Have to Be

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Transcript

Chris Martin

Sometimes, if you are skeptical of social justice activists and you hear them throwing around the word intersectionality a lot, you might think, "Oh, this is just a bunk idea," but, in reality, there's more to it than you think.

Zach Rausch

Chris Martin with us on Heterodox Out Loud. Today's show is our second episode about intersectionality, an academic theory that began with important facts but slowly began turning into an unhelpful ideology. I'm Zach Rausch. This episode is meant for both academics on the progressive left and those on the political right. Our guest, Chris Martin, is an HxA co-founder and a psychologist at Oglethorpe University. He argues that the academic theory, intersectionality, if understood properly, can help us understand true and valuable aspects of social life. But to understand properly, it will require those on the left and the right to concede a few critical points. Chris's blog is called "Intersectionality is a Political Football: Here's Why It Doesn't Have to Be."

The full blog post can be found on our website here:

[Intersectionality Is a Political Football—Here's Why it Doesn't Have to Be](#)

Zach Rausch

Now, our interview with Chris Martin.

Chris, thank you so much for coming onto Heterodox Out Loud.

Chris Martin

Thank you for having me.

Zach Rausch

You have a long history with Heterodox Academy. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you decided to co-found HxA?

Chris Martin

One reason I ended up being involved in it was that I've had somewhat unorthodox opinions on political issues, and some of that comes from my international upbringing. I lived in Saudi Arabia for the first ten years of my life because my father worked there, and then I lived in my home country of India for eight years, and after that I moved to the US for College. And I suppose I ended up incorporating ideas from several cultures, as well as being somewhat skeptical of ideas from any given culture, because I've been exposed to so many, and especially in Saudi Arabia. I actually was not that exposed to Arab culture, but rather all the other expats that were living there. So, I was fairly heterodox from the beginning, so it was an interest of mine. I ended up writing a paper on it for a class that I didn't expect to publish, but I ended up publishing it in *The American Sociologist*. I forwarded it to Jon Haidt, who saw it, and that's how we and a group of other people were connected in 2015. And that's when we started Heterodox Academy.

Zach Rausch

Well, that's great. So let's dive into this particular blog post. Can you tell us why you decided to write about this topic?

Chris Martin

I think the topic of intersectionality gets muddy, and also some people seem to have pre-formed opinions about it without actually knowing where it comes from. And I wanted, first, people to just understand what the term originally was supposed to mean. And second, I wanted people to understand that it's perspective, that even though it's associated with progressive causes, it's not intrinsically progressive or conservative or centrist or anything. It's a perspective that's important to take if you want to understand the world regardless of your political orientation. And if you understand the term well, then you can understand why it matters regardless of your political orientation. So my goal is first to just explain where it comes from. It's a legal term. It comes from a case that anyone can understand.

Zach Rausch

I want to transition just a little bit over to looking at the relationship between something that's often talked about almost hand in hand with intersectionality, which is critical race theory. And what is the relationship between the two?

Chris Martin

Well, I think people who tend to find intersectionality interesting also tend to find CRT quite interesting. CRT is actually a bit more of a psychological theory. It comes from the idea well, it comes from critical theory, which has its roots to some degree in Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, who said that our cognition is shaped by our self-interest. So sometimes we believe certain things are true, not because we have enough evidence, but because it's convenient for our self-interest. So we're not really reliable perceivers of the world. We're not even reliable thinkers. When it comes to critical race theory, I think one point that critical race theorists tend to make is that sometimes this is in the US context, white Americans perceive themselves or classify themselves as not racist because they don't notice the ways in which they are being racist. So they pass laws that on the surface look like they're fair but actually still have some racist implications. And I think you can take any CRT article and consider its merits on its own. So you may or may not disagree, but I think we all know at least one case where a politician or a law states something in a way that seems to be superficially fair.

But in reality, a lot of cases slip under the cracks and the system is unfair. I think all of us have been part of a system where we weren't protected by laws that were supposed to protect us. CRT is really focused on that issue, and it's a perspective that is interesting to people who are concerned with discrimination, especially race and sex discrimination. And intersectionality is also a perspective or a worldview that's of interest to people who are interested in issues like discrimination. But I don't think you necessarily have to find one of the theories valid or one of the perspectives valid to be interested in the other. So I think the two issues are non-overlapping, and some people really just have an interest in one of them.

Zach Rausch

That's really fascinating. I don't think that is something that I've really heard ever. I also had not heard of CRT being originated from Friedrich Nietzsche, which I think is a really interesting point and how it's fundamentally about we're not really rational thinkers and we're biased towards ourselves

and our own group interests, and that can cause problems when developing laws and other ideas. One of the other issues that has come up around intersectionality and CRT is how in a K-12 context, how are these things being taught? And is it possible to teach concepts like intersectionality in a way that is not overly simplistic?

Chris Martin

I really don't know what's happening in the K-8 level at all, to be honest. But in high school, all over the world, high school textbooks don't really do a good job. History textbooks don't really do a good job of covering the recent past. I think part of the movement to get the issue of racism into high school textbooks is to have some recent developments, more recent history just put into the books. And I don't think many of the people doing that are familiar with critical race theory. I think what's going on is that some activists, like Christopher Rufo, are using the term critical race theory, just slapping that label onto anything involving doing a better job about educating students about the history of racism in the United States, and that history does tend to be shaped by people who are relatively Liberal, I would say, although if you look at historians and academic departments and there are some conservative ones now, it's just agreed upon, regardless of whether you're conservative or centrist or Liberal, that racism has just been a major force in US history, you can't really push that aside. So I think what educators are trying to do is just incorporate that history better in textbooks.

Zach Rausch

And so within higher Ed, you are a sociologist, and do you teach these concepts in school?

Chris Martin

Well, I'm both a sociologist and psychologist at the moment. I'm in a Psych Department, so if students have questions about those topics, I talk about them. And intersectionality, like I wrote about in the blog post, is almost synonymous with the study of interaction effects. So if at some future point, I'm going to teach research methods, I'm going to talk about how interaction effects really are the basis of intersectionality, but statistically, they're also kind of hard to understand, which is why sometimes you don't learn about how to do the statistics until you're in graduate school when you're doing a master's program. It really depends on what I teach, because I could potentially teach Intro to Sociology, but at the moment, no, I don't really talk to students about either of these perspectives. If you think about one aspect of critical theory, which is we tend to

deceive ourselves in ways that are flattering to ourselves, in my happiness class, I do talk about that topic, because there are many ways in which we distort our past and our present so that we have more flattering reputations in our own minds. So in a very loose sense, I talk about deception for the sake of one's self interest, but that's about it.

Zach Rausch

What do you think is the best way forward? As you said, we should find value in these theories as it explains real and important effects. But how do we remove some of the ideological spin that has overtaken the theories and move back on focusing on those core type of principles such as these are interaction effects that are real and valuable to study?

Chris Martin

Well, I think we need to just need to pay more attention to the issues that I pointed out in the blog post. So I pointed to exceptions. I pointed to how sometimes even a single axis can be more complex than you think. I pointed to how the intersection of being black and gay, for example, or black and male can be in certain situations to our advantage. So when it comes to textbooks or lectures, I think you should have an obligation as an author or speaker to point out these complexities and not brush over them. Sometimes people do that. So I'd say as an educator, just pay attention to the published, peer reviewed research that's out there that actually shows that sometimes the intersectional effect can be positive. Sometimes an axis is just more complicated than you think. This is pretty mainstream research. It's out there. Just be aware of it and teach your students about it.

Zach Rausch

Is there anything else that we didn't get to touch on that you would like to make sure our listeners take from your blog post?

Chris Martin

I would say just try to not stereotype topics. I think the topic of intersectionality has been stereotyped a bit, then the topic of CRT has been stereotyped a bit. And CRT really is, in my opinion, a theory better suited to the legal world. But intersectionality, I just feel like people stereotype that word. They stereotype any word that is used a lot by social justice activists and sometimes those

activists pull a word that scholars have started using and don't understand it very well, because sometimes if you are skeptical of social justice activists and you hear them throwing around the word intersectionality a lot, you might think, "Oh, this is just a bunk idea," but in reality there's more to it than you think. So, just be Heterodox actually be open to a new perspective. Be open to the idea that there might be more to this idea, more to a concept than you think.

Zach Rausch

Chris Martin on Heterodox Out Loud. Before you go, subscribe and download us wherever you listen to your podcast. Davies content produced this show. Thanks, as always, to Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch. Until next time.