

Title: Curiosity U – A New Vision for Higher Education

Podcast: Heterodox Out Loud

Episode: 29

Transcript

John Tomasi

I think that the most basic impulse of heterodoxy is curiosity. The most basic impulse of heterodoxy is an openness to questions of the form. What else might be said about this topic? How else can we think about this idea? That's what heterodoxy is all about and that's what curiosity means.

Zach Rausch

John Tomasi with us on Heterodox Out Loud. Today's episode is longer than usual and is all about the purpose of higher education. John is Heterodox Academy's first President and has just started his new role. In his blog, he argues that there exists an unassuming and often neglected value that should become the North Star of educational institutions. He says this value may have the power to heal deep divisions on our campuses and in our classrooms. I'm Zach Rausch. Stay with us. Back in September of 2015, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, law Professor Nicholas Rosencrantz, and sociologist Chris Martin founded Heterodox Academy. Their goal was to study and counter the ideological imbalances in their academic fields to help improve the quality of research being produced. However, what they were up against was much more complex than they originally assumed. In those early months of Heterodox Academy, Jonathan Haidt wrote his essay, "Why Universities Must Choose One Telos: Truth or Social Justice." This addressed some of the problems he saw emerging on College campuses. He ultimately argued that universities can only hold one primary sacred value and that must be truth. Today's blog responds to John's thesis and asks us to consider a new sacred value, one that presupposes both truth and social justice.

The blog "Curiosity U" was written by John Tomasi and is read by Jonathan Todd Ross. We'll speak with John in a few minutes.

The full blog post can be found on our website here: [Curiosity U](#)

Zach Rausch

Jonathan Todd Ross reading John Tomasi's blog "Curiosity U." Now, our interview.

John, it's such a pleasure to have you on Heterodox Out Loud. I'm really excited to have you start as HxA's inaugural President. So to start today for our audience who haven't had a chance to hear from you before, can you tell us a little bit about who you are and how you came to Heterodox Academy?

John Tomasi

Sure. So let me just say first, I'm really happy to be here, and I appreciate you taking the time to interview me. I came to Heterodox Academy via an email that John Haidt sent me, I don't know, six years ago. At the time, I was very involved in building a center of Brown that I started 17 years ago. And so I signed on because I believed in the values and had been practicing them myself for the previous ten years. But I wasn't much involved beyond signing up and lending my name to the effort. And then the board approached me last spring, spring of 2021 to see if I might be interested in getting involved. And we started a conversation that led me to, surprisingly perhaps, leave my tenured position at my beloved University and join John and the rest of the HxA team.

Zach Rausch

Why did you come?

John Tomasi

I believe deeply in the ideal of the University. I believe that the University is one of the miracles of the modern world, not only because it's in the modern world, but because of its roots to previous worlds. I see the University as all of society is being embarked on this long and glorious quest towards understanding and towards justice. And I see HxA as stepping in at a key moment, a key period in the development of the University. We're all aware of the conflicts and the downside of being involved in University life these days. I've been teaching at Brown for 25 years. I've been involved in a lot of the controversies that have happened on the campus. I think that when historians look back on the past 50 years of University life, say in the US, the big story is going to be the story about integration, the story about how these historically exclusive universities and I mean historically, as in forever. If you go back to Bologna, if you go back to Oxford, Harvard, the first one in the US, William and Mary, you name it. Any University has until very recently been a male, a white male bastion of power.

We embark on this overdue project to make our universities more inclusive, say, 50 years ago, admitting women, for example, to the top universities. Michigan was a leader in that effort. Kind of interestingly. And we're still integrating. And the big question in front of us is, well, can we integrate and finally become a just University? Finally, for the first time in history, have universities that are genuinely inclusive of people, regardless of their race or sexual orientation or their gender or their political or their religious viewpoints. For the first time in history, have universities constructed and populated in that inclusive way, while yet retaining the beauty and the marvel and the joy of research and teaching. And we're not there, obviously, I think we're suffering as a University system, as people who care about universities, but it's not surprising that we're suffering think what we're trying to do. We're trying to create a University that the world has never seen, a University that's at once integrated finally. And it is also still committed to taking that integration, taking the benefits of these new opportunities of new perspectives and fully building them into our research programs and our teaching programs.

So the opportunity in front of us, this thing that we're this process that we're in the middle of right now, which to me has a lot of the feel of a childbirth without any drugs. And it's painful and it's sometimes I'm sorry for the metaphor, but it's bloody and it's not fun for any of us in a whole bunch of different ways. And yet I see beauty in it. I see beauty in what we're trying to achieve. And I'm not surprised that we don't know what we're doing. I'm not surprised that we're battling with each other and it's no surprise that people understand this process we're in very different ways in ways that lead some people to question should we be involved in truth at all or should we be only about social justice, or should we be involved in social justice at all should be only about truth. It's not surprising we're confused and HxA is playing this incredible role of the doula that is the one helping to give birth, seeing the way, seeing the bigger picture, looking to what we might achieve, say, 25 years from now, if we do it right, and if you love the right way, and if we're smart and strategic about this birthing procedure, and also, most importantly, if we're kind and gentle with each other while insisting on the possibility of a University that's truly integrated and truly committed to tracking truth.

Zach Rausch

It seems like you're saying that over the past 50 years, we have seen an enormous amount of change in University life with increasing diversity. And where does curiosity fit into this story? And it

does seem like you're centering social justice in a way that is a little bit different from people who prioritize the thinking of the University's sacred value as being truth. How does curiosity fit in here?

John Tomasi

So I'd love to talk about social justice, but let me put that aside just for a moment. I'll just tell you just sort of straight up why I started thinking about curiosity in the context of HxA. So when I came on the scene and started studying the organization and thinking about where HxA was and what did it become? Since I joined five years ago, I was really struck by that, by John Haidt's Duke talk that a lot of us talk about at HxA. What's the Telos of the University? Is it truth or social justice? Everybody's got to choose one or the other. I was struck by it in part because, as you may recall, at the end of that lecture, John gives an example of universities that are doing the right way and the wrong way and the exemplar of the University doing it the right way. Pursuing truth is the University of Chicago. And the exemplar that John chose at the University doing the wrong way, the University committed to social justice and therefore abandoning truth is my University, Brown University. And I love Brown University. And I know what he means. I know, especially from the outside, that it looks like we're pursuing social justice.

But working and living on this campus for as long as I have, I'm well aware that a Brown people are focused on truth. There's great research being done on all kinds of important topics. And I know that people it's true, as John said, that people do care about social justice, too. And so I was just thinking to myself, well, that truth versus social justice dichotomy as powerful as it is and as useful as it is, it does kind of set us up, set HxA up to be seen as being for truth and therefore being against social justice. It's not a good look. It's worse than not a good look. It's not a conceptually, well thought out position. So when I saw this dichotomy truth versus social Justice, I started thinking to myself, well, is that what I think universities are really about? And I realized that what universities are really about. And from my own experience, my interior experience, the most exciting moments is when I'm curious about something, when someone says something that surprises me and interests me. That's when scholarship is at its best. I walk around the campus some time at Brown and I look at these buildings and I think to myself, think of the people right now inside these buildings, in those offices and what they're doing in their brains.

Think about the range of bizarre stuff that those people that are sitting behind their desks are thinking about: Egyptology, a piece of papyrus, a long lost piece of history, a new way of thinking about justice. All the different crazy things. My strange colleagues, these weird creatures in the Zoo of the University, in our disciplinary cages, scrolling around, pacing back and forth, thinking about

what we're like, what we could be like, what this world is, what it was before, what it will be in the future. This is the crazy stuff of life. This is insanity. In some ways we have this. It's insanity with beauty just infused through it. But what drives it all? It's curiosity that sparks the fire that keeps universities warm. It's curiosity that brings the light, that makes the University beautiful places, places worth wandering around, places worth cherishing. I think curiosity is the core of University life. But it's also worth noticing that curiosity has some features that could be very useful if you think about HxA going about its mission of healing and helping universities become what they could be first. Curiosity. Unlike the search for truth, and unlike the search for social justice, curiosity is a fundamentally connective idea.

A student asks a question, I don't understand this, or why don't we think of it this way? Or a colleague comes to your door and says, hey, have you heard about this new idea? It's something we do together. So curiosity is not something that one does often by one's own toughening up and searching for truth. No matter how hard it's going to be, it's something that we do with one another in the most intimate way. There's something beautifully connective about curiosity. And yet at the same time, curiosity is the ultimate transgressor of boundaries, disciplinary boundaries, ideological boundaries. Curiosity cares not for them. Curiosity goes where it wants to go. Curiosity takes us places where others may not want us to be. I think that the most basic impulse of heterodoxy is curiosity. The most basic impulse of heterodoxy is an openness to questions of the form. What else might be said about this topic. How else can we think about this idea? That's what heterodoxy is all about. I didn't mean to be saying here's the truth versus social justice paradigm. I'm going to propose a third champion to take them both out. I actually think we need to pursue truth.

Obviously, John is dead right about that. I think there are real dangers and real costs to pursuing social justice in certain kinds of ways that we see on campuses. But I also think the University has a very important role to play in the quest for social justice. It's central to who we are. That's why we're integrating, it's because of justice. We know it was wrong for universities to keep women out, to keep Jews out, to keep Blacks out, to keep Asians out, frankly, Italians and Catholics out because it's unjust and it's correcting that injustice. That's central to who we are now. We all know that. So denying social justice as a role of the University, that's just silly. It's fundamental to us. Of course it has to be. We're one of the central institutions, one of the central organs of a free society, a free Democratic society. Of course, we're part of the justice project, but curiosity is another topic that I think lies beneath both, and I think it's a concept that is built true to academia, and it's also a concept that we could rally around.

Zach Rausch

Can you tell me a little bit about what does it look like to center curiosity in the classroom and how did you actually do that in your time at Brown?

John Tomasi

I did it by accident. I did it by caring about them. I did it by noticing and then increasingly calling their attention to the fact that minds work in very different ways. I do this especially in my seminars, the small classes that I teach. I call students' attention to this idea that you can see your participation in a seminar in two different ways. One way is in a seminar you read a bunch of stuff during the week and you show up in the classroom and you talk about the stuff you read that week. That's one conception of what a seminar is. It's not completely wrong, but another way to think about a seminar, the way that I think about seminars and the way that I encourage my students to think about seminar, is more like we're building a team. We're entering going on to the field on their Friday in the first week of a long season. We're not going to be very good the very first week we meet. But we're there to get better. We're there to get better as a team. We're there to get better in part by learning each other, by observing each other, by seeing who's in this room, by figuring out what assets do we have?

Where are we strong? Where are we weak? This one person over there who talks a lot is there a way to have to encourage her to talk a little bit less so she should be a better teammate? This person over there who hardly says a word, but when she does, it's really cool. How can we get her to be involved a little bit more? That person who plays too fast or talks too fast, how do you slow them down so they participate better? That's the first level stuff, but I try to call people's attention to the idea that a seminar could be seen in that first simple way, read some stuff, show up, talk about it, go home, or it can be seen in a different way. We're part of a team and trying to get better together. Getting better together, beyond the sort of first level stuff about how long you speak and how fast you speak is really a matter of trying to understand who is in the room with you. Intellectually, what are their minds like? How do they see the world? Entering into other people's minds in a lively way is an incredible way to learn.

And so that's a really great classroom, in my opinion, especially in a seminar setting, is one where people are intensely focused not just on the readings, but on the readings as a way to get to each other's minds. So I think of classrooms in that way, and I try to build classrooms that way.

Zach Rausch

How do we scale this up to the University level? Do you want to say anything more on that?

John Tomasi

I have a lot to say about that, but I'm also still learning. It's not clear yet, but I will say this. You asked me before about Heterodox Academy and why I decided to join, and what really strikes me about Heterodox Academy, and it won't be a surprise, is the membership, you know, 5000 plus members. At present, I think that most of the members are isolated and alone, and many of them are uncertain as to what they can do, what they might do to make their universities better. In fact, many of them don't even think they can make the University better, I'm afraid to say. Hunkered down and afraid. The first decision I made as HxA's incoming President was to make public the names of our membership. You may know that for a variety of historical reasons, HxA, until this week has not published the names and institutional affiliations of our members. There's a bunch of reasons for that. When I decided to join HxA and take this on, the reason why I joined, the fundamental reason I joined is because I saw the possibility of activating the 5,000, growing the number, but I don't mind if it shrinks for a bit at first so we can grow from a really strong, truly strong base.

And when I made the decision to require that our members, if they want to be members, let us publicize their names, I expected we would get some melt in our membership. But I was okay with that because I want to grow the membership from a strong base. But activating the 5000 is my central idea for HxA.

Zach Rausch

A number of people would say something like, don't you really see how crazy universities have become in recent years? Ongoing cancellations, de-platforming, and then there's data showing that things have been getting worse on that front recently. What do you have to say to people who hold that view, and what hope is there for universities?

John Tomasi

Yeah, I'm very sympathetic to people who have those worries because I live it, and I guess I won't repeat what I said, but I really do think we're giving birth. I think we're suffering together because

we're doing this thing that's never been done before. I think people don't recognize the historic nature of what we're doing at this moment, this period. And it's really worth emphasizing, I think, that if you see how important and unlikely and difficult and necessary this project is, you might think differently about the cancellations and some of the bullying and some of the warfare and some of the arguments. We look at each other sometimes on campuses, different groups look at each other on College campuses just with incomprehension. We can't understand how each other can see the things the way they see them think the thoughts they think about University life. We look at each other just with incomprehension. But that's not surprising if you step back and understand what we're trying to do and reflect on what we're trying to accomplish. We're trying to accomplish something that's never been seen in the history of humanity. We're trying to achieve a truly integrated, non exclusive University system which is still a University system, a system which gets the benefits of pluralism.

Finally, for the first time ever, finally, it's clear to me that no University has ever had the opportunity to seek truth in a genuine way. Why is that? Heterodox Academy believes that viewpoint diversity is essential to seeking truth. And the less viewpoint diversity you have, the more hindered you are in your ability to truly seek the truth about a whole range of topics, including the truth about justice. And if you have universities populated only by, let's say, white males of a certain class and religion often, how can we think that's diverse? How's that viewpoint diversity? We need more viewpoints. We need more different kinds of people, not only as a matter of justice, but in the service of science.

Zach Rausch

You've touched on this, but where does Heterodox Academy fit into really helping build this kind of collaborative project of universities? How are we helping?

John Tomasi

I see HxA as occupying a distinctive space that's really necessary. Broadly speaking, when I think about social construction and social change, I think there's sort of two broad strategies for social change. One is what I think of as fighting bad things, and the other was building good things. HxA is fortunate to have some powerful allies working in this space alongside us. And, for example, FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and the AFA, the Academic Freedom Alliance, they're both involved in this extremely important process with us. They're playing a different role than HxA does. Both Fire and the AFA, the Academic Freedom Alliance, they are focused on doing this extremely important work, of fighting bad things. And there are lots of threats on universities to

free speech, and there are lots of threats about due process that professors face that intimidate them and keep our universities from being in the great places they should be. And yet, even if you have free speech rights fully enforced and respected, even if you have due process procedures up on campuses and running appropriately, that doesn't give you what you need for a University. You also need a positive, constructive project.

You need someone, and this is HxA, you need an organization who's going to work directly with students and professors to improve the quality of teaching and research within those rights of free speech. The free speech gives you the opportunity to build something beautiful and important. HxA has the lovely task of building something good by attempting to reach directly out to the universities, reach directly onto campuses to encourage professors and students to have faith during these difficult times, to not turn their backs on their universities, to not just walk away, to not to give up, even though the pain of this birthing process is intense and difficult and unfair that it's given to us. We don't want to drink this cup. We just want to do our academic work. Why do we, as this generation, have to be embroiled in these brutal battles about race and about justice? Take this cup from me. Let me go back and do my Egyptology. And yet this is the cup our generation has been given. HxA accepts that. HxA understands that. And we understand how difficult it is to drink this cup. But we also see how important it is and what an incredible opportunity we have if we can do this to make our parts of the Academy what they might be in this new context of diversity. That's an incredibly inspiring opportunity.

And I think even pointy headed academics like me, who in our hearts of hearts prefer to go to our office and close the door and read our books and write our bizarre things, even we can be stirred to open up our doors and open up our windows and become part of this historic process. Activation in a positive way. That's the name of the game from you at HxA. Activating the faculty, activating the students, activating administrators, and alums, too. And now that I'm beginning my presidency and just starting my term, I'm looking at the possibilities and thinking to myself, okay, activation as an ideal. Great. But how do we actually do it? And what I want to do, what we're actively exploring. Now, more than actively, we're actually starting to make some concrete plans. We're finding ways to bring people together on College campuses to do new kinds of things. I'm interested in the idea of building campus chapters for faculty and very likely campus chapters for students too, who can bring new things to their campuses. I'm interested in a different idea. I'm interested in the idea of bringing events to campuses that show people what HxA's values are.

Events Like I built a Brown where we have more than one speaker brought into a conversation structured in a certain way that for as long as the speaker speak in total, the same amount of time is reserved for students to ask questions. Students and faculty to ask questions. Events that are set up with more than one speaker not to have debates, not to have Gladiators in combat. That's not the HxA Way. Rather, events that are set up and speakers who are primed to truly listen to each other, to explore with humility the viewpoints of their interlocutor. One of my ideas to start giving events to our members to bring to their own campuses as gifts to their campuses that show the HxA way in action. My experience and observation has been that if you create events that are beautiful, that are constructed on these kind of HxA-like values, students and faculty will see the beauty before they even understand what principles are at work, before they understand what principles are making them beautiful. But if they come and they see the beauty and they will come, by the way, if you do it right, they'll come in in the hundreds.

If they do come and see the beauty, it's natural then to start explaining. This is why we did it this way. This is why it's not a debate. This is why we didn't set it up for winners and losers. This is why you're not voting at the end about who won. And then, of course, once we're showing people, we start to tell them and then we ask them, did you like that event? Does that strike you as what the University should be like? Is that what you thought you were going to get when you stepped on campus as a College freshman that fall day not so long ago? Do you see that? Maybe you just got it? Do you see that this is actually happening on your campus now? Do you see that? Maybe, just maybe, there could be more of this still? Do you see this, this organization saying to you, do you hear them saying to you, "Hey, you, person individually, do you want to join us to make this happen? Do you want to join this team, you faculty member? Do you want to come out from your dusty office to help us grow this thing on your campus and around the country too?"

That's activation. It's not just: Know your friends with the principles, see if they agree, most people do, tape it outside your door. Okay. That's nice. It's a reason to get beyond fear, to get beyond loneliness, to get beyond intimidation. Because one goes straight to pride. One goes straight to pride for a good reason. Pride because you're involved with bringing events to campus that are truly beautiful, that truly show the HxA way. I see us quietly engaged on a project of incredible historical importance. It can only be done quietly. We can't bang tin pans and make posters and flags and parade around campus and make this change happen. The very nature of the thing we're trying to do requires humility and gentleness and openness. I think we need to recognize that we're engaged in a historical moment that the world has never seen before. And of course, it's going to be hard to live through this moment, but think if we can do it together.

Zach Rausch

Yeah. I think you're a voice in the darkness, and I think it really comes out in this message of being able to bring in justice and kindness and humility to solving a problem. I don't have the words for it, but I think it's a really interesting approach that you're bringing to Heterodox Academy.

John Tomasi

Where should HxA position itself? We're in a world on campuses and in our wider society of extremes, letting HxA see itself or I'm interested in having HxA declare itself as occupying the reasonable middle ground where the real estate is very cheap right now, by the way. And by the middle ground, I don't mean some compromise, wishy washy place. I mean the great center of Liberal Democratic societies, a center where people who believe deeply in democracy. Democracy means interacting with people who see the world differently than you do. But insisting that you want to build a better world together with them. Democracy is fundamentally opposed to this different set of views, these antidemocratic views, views that say there's the role that composed of good people and bad people. The good people are my tribe. Typically, that's why they're good. And the bad people are irredeemable. They're unreachable. And to achieve social progress or achieve social justice that they sometimes falsely declare themselves to be defending, they say the good needs to vanquish the bad. They need to silence them. That's an antidemocratic view. It's a tribal view. It's a certain view about getting towards justice. But notice how low it aims.

I think HxA should be occupying that ground, that common ground of the truly Democratic ground that insists that social progress is something we do only when we do it all together. It sees our fellow citizens not as divided between tribes of good and evil ones. It sees all of us mixed in terms of our goodness and our evil, in terms of our good intentions and our weaknesses and our failings. But essentially, it sees all of our fellow citizens as in some basic way, beings with a mind, beings with a conscience, beings who can, in some sense, in principle, at least be reachable. And if they're reachable, then we approach progress and progressives in a different way. We insist on progressivism done democratically. That means we insist upon bringing our fellow citizens along with us through reason, through argumentation, through respecting their dignity, through including people, to being sensitive to our own biases, explicit biases and our implicit biases. Working hard to become more open, to be more inclusive because we're committed not just to ferreting out, identifying, and tagging the good versus the evil so we know who to fight and denounce, but rather because we're aiming higher together.

So in the field of conflict on universities, HxA needs to be a progressive voice. In the field of conflict and universities, HxA needs to recognize itself as the Premier progressive voice. We are the voice of progressivism, the true voice of progressivism because we are the true voice of Democratic deliberation. We're the true voice that says progress in social justice is something that citizens do together. They don't force it down each other's throat. Democracy is not easy, but democracy is inclusive. It's stubbornly inclusive. We're not going to write people off no matter what they say. And I have colleagues and friends on the campus who see the world so differently than I do. Who they write me off sometimes, and I write them off sometimes in the heat of the moment. But when cooler moments arrive, we recognize they see the world in a certain way. I see the world in a certain way. They're biased. I'm biased. Can we get together in some way and learn from each other? Can we overcome these biases? Can we balance our biases and move together towards a more just University in a more socially just world? That's HxA's opportunity.

That's why I'm so happy and I'm so proud and worried and nervous to be taking over this organization now. But when I wonder whether we can do it or whether I'm the right person to be doing it, the thing that gives me the most hope is thinking about our membership. It's the membership out there, all those incredibly talented people who share these ideals, people, many of whom have been more involved in HxA than I have been in the past, since its birth, six years ago. I wanted HxA to be a lived part of the experience of professors and students all around the world. And that's something that I don't yet know how to do exactly. But I do have faith in the membership, that I can learn from them. They can show us. Together, we'll find a way.

Zach Rausch

Thank you so much, John. It was a real pleasure to talk to you, sincerely.

John Tomasi

Thank you very much for that.

Zach Rausch

John Tomasi on Heterodox Out Loud. He began his new role at Heterodox Academy days ago on January 1. You can learn more about him at heterodoxacademy.org/team. Subscribe and download Heterodox Out Loud wherever you listen to your podcast. Davies Content produced this show.

Thanks to Kara Boyer on our communications team and Lexi Polikoff for the beautiful artwork associated with each of our blogs. I'm Zach Rausch. Until next time.