

Title: Stop Disparaging Working-Class Students

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Transcript

Jonathan Zimmerman

We are not going to learn more about the world, about the country, about ourselves, if we are simply exposed to people who agree with us. So this is why, every night, I watch Fox News, because I know if I watch MSNBC or CNN that my entire worldview will be confirmed. And by that I mean it's not going to get me more learning, more wisdom, more understanding.

Zach Rausch

Jonathan Zimmerman on Heterodox Out Loud. I'm Zach Rausch. Today, John helps us expose and explode myths held about the beliefs and attitudes of working-class students. We discuss why social class is one of the last acceptable prejudices in many academic circles and what we can do about it. Our guest today is Jonathan Zimmerman, professor of History of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. John has written numerous books, including "The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America and Free Speech" and "Why You Should Give a Damn." He has also written for the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Chronicle of Higher Education, New York Review of Books, and The Atlantic. John's work examines how education practices and policies have developed in recent years and the myths that often cloud our understanding of teaching and learning. He has a special interest in how political and social movements shape education. Before we chat, here's John's blog post.

The full blog post can be found on our website here: [Listening to Our Working-Class Students](#)

Zach Rausch

John, thank you so much for coming on to Heterodox Out Loud. I'm so excited to get to talk to you.

Jonathan Zimmerman

It's my pleasure. It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Zach Rausch

I'd love to just for you to give us some context about yourself and how you ended up coming and becoming involved with Heterodox Academy.

Jonathan Zimmerman

Well, I'm a historian and most of all I'm a teacher. And although this is going to sound very pedestrian, the way I became involved in Heterodox Academy was through my own classroom because one of the things that I noticed was that there were a lot of questions and a lot of theories that had essentially been placed out of bounds because people either didn't know about them or were afraid to talk about them. And that is not good for human learning. My job as an educator is to help my students learn more. And I felt that for a whole variety of reasons that the classrooms had become quite stilted, quite univocal, and that that wasn't good for people's learning or their development.

Zach Rausch

You've written a number of pieces, not just for us, on issues of social class and higher ed. Why is this a topic you care about and where does this fit in?

Jonathan Zimmerman

Well, it's a topic I care about in part because we have such a hard time talking about it. When I was coming up as a historian in the late 80s, early 90s, that's when I was in graduate school, there was this burst of something called The New Social History and the New Social History was an attempt to draw our attention to the triad that became known as race, class, gender. And I have to say, Zach, that almost sounds antiquarian now because it's race, gender... class, for the most part, fell out of our purview of discussion. Not entirely, but it didn't have the same place as a leg in the triad. And I think there are all kinds of reasons for that, including, frankly, the very salutary new attention to matters of race. Look, I think this thing called the racial reckoning, however you're defining it, I mean, that's one of the greatest things that's happened in America, the fact that we're now taking a much more serious account of the role of race and racism in our society.

Zach Rausch

So let's talk a little bit more about what you see as the biggest issues around social class in higher education today.

Jonathan Zimmerman

I think the biggest issue is the kind of contradiction that I probe in the piece. And the piece begins with a discussion that I had with one of my students, one of my all time favorite students, actually just a fantastic guy who was in my first year seminar three years ago and just graduated. And I asked him, I said, what have you learned about college since our course? And his answer, I thought, was really revealing. He said, "What I learned is how much privilege you need to have in order to deny the American dream," he said, "Some of us are actually living that dream." But one of the things that happens at elite universities is you're encouraged to, in a very real sense, deny it. Especially in the humanities and social sciences. America is depicted as a highly stratified, highly unequal place, which it is. That's not wrong. Right? But I think the point here is that those aren't totalizing restrictions. People do move between classes, and indeed, this student's own experience was an illustration of that. His story is in many ways a counter to this kind of dominant paradigm of negativity that runs through much of what we do.

He couldn't find his own story and the stories he was hearing in the classroom.

Zach Rausch

It seems like you're saying that there is the paradigm of race, class, and gender, and it's just become race and gender. But in some ways, it really does sound like there is a narrative around class. It's just quite limited.

Jonathan Zimmerman

It is quite limited. And I also think and I think there's survey data showing this, that despite the paradigm of social determinism that runs through so much of what we do when it comes to social class, we're actually more comfortable with blaming people for their own circumstance. This is what's so ironic about the way all of this works. A good-hearted liberal in American academy would never blame a poor African American for, say, living in a neighborhood where there's lots of gun violence. We would say, no, that isn't the fault certainly not of the kid like god forbid, right? And nobody should have to live in circumstances like that. And that's all true. I believe all of that, right? But the majority of working class and the majority of poor people in this country are not people of

color. They're white. And it's much more likely that they'll be poor if they live in rural environments rather than in urban ones. These are all facts as well. And yet, ironically, and sadly, I think we're more likely to blame somebody who grows up, say, in rural Kentucky, in a community decimated by both the industrialization and opioids.

We're more likely to blame that human being for their circumstances than an urban person of color.

Zach Rausch

To you, like, what are the leading causes for this disconnect, of this willingness to be more prejudicial towards those groups of people? And is it just that we have less interaction at elite universities? We just are kind of ignorant?

Jonathan Zimmerman

I think the simplest explanations in these things are generally the best ones, right? Like, how many poor, rural white people go to the University of Pennsylvania? To be clear, there are some. I've taught them very few. And of course, this also has to do with the way that we cut the affirmative action pie. So when you find working class kids at a place like Penn, they're almost always people of color.

Zach Rausch

We're starting to talk about the connection between class and viewpoint diversity and kind of the connection to Heterodox Academy. So what is the relationship between the two? And to what extent is social class viewpoint diversity really useful for universities to help further their mission?

Jonathan Zimmerman

How could you look at the past six years of political history and conclude anything other than we have radically segregated ourselves into ideological bubbles? The elite universities are at the heart of that problem. They are themselves ideological bubbles. This is why so many of us were surprised by the Trump phenomenon, and this is why so many of us still struggle to understand it, because we're not around enough Trump voters. And the Trump voters are overwhelmingly come from these communities. Great predictor of whether you voted for Trump was rurality, whether you lived in a rural place, and also whether you had formal education, which has become the prime marker of

social class in this nation. This is why Trump said, I love uneducated people. And like so many things that Trump said, there was wisdom in the madness, right? A lot of us heard that and said, aren't you sort of making a brief for ignorance? And I think that's one way to read it. Another way to read it is just actually, I think, an honest assessment of the way that we've divided ourselves as a culture. And so if you're talking about the ideas of Heterodox Academy, which, as I understand them at the most pedestrian level, is to expose all of us to a wider range of viewpoints so that we all learn more which, by the way, is the rationale of affirmative action too, just saying, then you need more Trumpers. I can't put it any other way. We're not going to learn from each other, right? If we're just reading about Trumpers in the paper.

Zach Rausch

As you discussed in the post, many lower income Americans are less likely to hold a lot of the values that liberal progressive Americans hold. And so if you were to try to convince or talk to somebody who is a professor who holds progressive viewpoints, make the case for why it's valuable to invite those perspectives.

Jonathan Zimmerman

Look, this is the whole raison d'etre of HxA. Let me begin my answer, Zach, by saying, I am a progressive professor. If you go on to Americans for Democratic Action, you take their test about how democratic you are, by the way, with a capital D. I'm like 97%. Like pro gun control, like pro environmental regulation, pro choice. Come on, I'm Jewish. I have a PhD. I'm like a caricature of a liberal democrat. That's what I am, Zack. I'm a cartoon, okay? So I'm no different in that way for my colleagues, right, in terms of, let's just say my fundamental political beliefs, except for one of them, and the one where we differ, is that all of us will learn more if we're exposed to people that are not like us. We are not going to learn more about the world, about the country, about ourselves, if we are simply exposed to people who agree with us. So this is why every night I watch Fox News, because I know if I watch MSNBC or CNN that my entire world view will be confirmed. It's not going to get me more learning, more wisdom, more understanding.

Zach Rausch

So what do you think are the most important steps that I guess we could start at the university level or at the level of the professor to improve this disconnect between more elite universities and our working class students.

Jonathan Zimmerman

So one of the things I did after 2016 at Penn, I was so distraught by the lack of real discussion about the election. We partnered with Cairn University, formerly Philadelphia Bible College, and we brought a bunch of Penn students out to Cairn and we brought a bunch of Cairn students to Penn and filled up the Bible College. Obviously, as per the name, it's historically a mission university. It's an evangelical university. It has a very different political profile than Penn, and especially now where it's so much easier to connect on the Internet. We have no excuse for not doing this. One of the things that I've tried to do is just bring in as many different voices to my classroom as I possibly can. Every theory of learning that I've ever seen, every credible one, would indicate that people will learn much more if they do just what I described than if they remain in their bubbles. I've never seen a credible theory of learning that suggests otherwise. We know that. We just don't have the political will to it. I mean, here's the great contradiction that's run through my work. That activity that I just described, speaking across our differences and trying to learn more about views that we don't necessarily share, critiquing the other team and ourselves.

That's what I call democratic education with a small D. Democratic education is what we need to prepare ourselves as citizens in a democracy. And it involves learning about each other and learning to communicate with each other.

Zach Rausch

Bottom line. What do you want our audience to take away from your work on this topic and of what you've been saying today?

Jonathan Zimmerman

Well, I think the first thing is exposing yourself more deeply, more rigorously and more empathetically to the 74 million people that voted differently from you. More human beings than voted ever for a sitting president, voted for Donald Trump. It's just that Biden got more because the turnout was so high. That's a huge swath of your country women and country men. My appeal to you is do more for yourself, for your family, for your students, to expose yourself to that so that you can understand it. If you don't do that, I do believe that you're not being true to what I understand as the goal of both the humanities in particular and the university in general. There's a reason it's

called the university. It's supposed to be universal, the ideal going back to the ancients nothing that's human is alien to me. Nothing. And if it is, I'm not doing my job.

Zach Rausch

For those who feel either disempowered or extremely frustrated with people who classify themselves as anti woke kind of crowd, right, what would you say to them in this context?

Jonathan Zimmerman

I would say that don't caricature liberal progressives at the academy, because that's a mirror image, right, of the way that we have caricatured you. It is true that there are some super doctrinaire, super orthodox, super indoctrinating, liberal progressives in the academy. The anti woke people are not wrong about that. They are right. But that doesn't describe all of us. There are plenty of liberal progressives that are deeply dissatisfied with the tone of politics and culture on our campuses that want to change it, to admit more viewpoints. So I would say to the antiwoke people, look, I hear you and you've identified a real problem, but don't exaggerate the problem, don't totalize it. And most of all, don't make blanket assumptions about people like me. Because again, if you looked at my CV and you looked at my background, you would say there's like a woke professor that wants to indoctrinate wokeness. One of the enduring hurdles and obstacles of our time is our kneejerk caricaturing of each other. And I do believe that some of the anti woke people are engaged in a similar project.

Zach Rausch

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Jonathan Zimmerman

And thanks to you, Zach, for everything that you're doing. I deeply appreciate it.

Zach Rausch

Jonathan Zimmerman on Heterodox Out Loud. If you enjoyed this episode, find more and listen at our website, HeterodoxAcademy.org. Thanks to Davies content for producing this podcast, and to Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch. Until next time.