

Bradley Jackson:

Jonathan Marks, welcome to Higher Ed Now. Thank you so much for being here with us.

Jonathan Marks:

Thanks for having me. Good to see you, Brad.

Bradley Jackson:

Yeah, we're really, really excited to have you here today, to talk about higher education, free speech on campus, civic education, and all the things that you've been studying, and thinking so much about over the years.

But before jumping into some of those contemporary topics, I wanted to introduce our audience to you a little bit more, give them some of your background. And I thought we could start with the time that you spent at the University of Chicago.

You got both your bachelor's, and your master's, and your PhD at the University of Chicago, and here at ACTA we've always been a big fan of the quality of education that it's possible to get at Chicago.

So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your experience there, and what that education meant to you?

Jonathan Marks:

Well, the real lifers also attend the University of Chicago Lab School K through 12, so I can't regard myself as a full knower of the University of Chicago, but the University of Chicago was a place where I learned to take books really seriously that pervades the university. I think it pervades university still.

My son attends there. And it's still the case that you take a common core class in social sciences, there's a pretty good chance you're going to end up reading John Locke, Thomas Hobbs, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that kind of thing.

And it was also at the University of Chicago where I got to meet Allan Bloom. I had been a philosophy major at the time. In fact, I finished as a philosophy major, and that was a wonderful department to study in, but it was the case in philosophy, as in lots of other places in the university, that work was fairly specialized, so a lot of what you ended up talking about related to some fundamental question. Say, what's the basis for morality, but was five, or six levels removed? What is contemporary philosopher X's take in this piece of the argument about that question? I learned from Bloom that, though it's good to know one thing, or one thing, or you can also refresh yourself at the well of really fundamental questions.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed. And you were at Chicago during a time, as you allude to, when Allan Bloom was there, and so many other faculty members who have written classic books, and are well-beloved. Do you have any other faculty that you studied with that were particularly influential on you?

Jonathan Marks:

Well, I studied closely with Nathan Tarkov, who is, I think, close to retirement at the University of Chicago, but he still teaches there. Just a wonderful, careful reader of books. He paired very nicely with

Bloom, who certainly was good with the details, but was something of a showman, so he really was wonderful at drawing in undergraduates.

Nathan Tarkov was an award-winning undergraduate instructor. He did win the Quantrell Award, but it was often quite hard to figure out what he thought about things. He really had you into the details of a text such that in some ways he seemed to disappear.

So that would be another instructor, Ralph Lerner, from who I took a lot of classes in American political thought. When I had to teach American political thought at Michigan State, those were some classes I was pretty glad that I had taken.

And I studied with Karl Weintraub, a terrific cultural historian. He too was a very careful reader of texts, but he was a historian, which meant that he took really seriously the idea that what you were trying to gather for reading and text was the beauty of particulars in a lot of ways. So he understood that different cultures are addressing in a lot of ways the same questions, because human beings have common experiences, but he, nonetheless, focused on the particular moment, and that that's a useful thing to learn how to do as well.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed. So you've mentioned a couple of times already, the importance of carefully reading texts, and you have spent the majority of your career teaching at Ursinus College, a liberal arts school, and mostly teaching texts. Could you say a little bit about why it's so important to have firsthand experience with these great books, rather than just reading summaries of them, or reading excerpts of them? Why do you teach books, and why do you want students to read these primary materials?

Jonathan Marks:

Well, I think that, in a lot of ways, liberal education is a way of correcting for, our narrownesses of various kinds. John Locke, educational theorist, as well as a great political philosopher, says, "We see, but in part, and we know, but in part, and therefore it's no wonder we conclude, not right, from our partial views."

And one of our most limiting circumstances, because we don't have time machines, is that we're stuck in our time. You can't just go on a trip, and live someplace else to find out what the limitations of the ways of thought characteristic of a time period are, and you find those in books, and reading books is the only way of conversing with the best thought available of the past. And it seems obvious that it's better to attempt to read them directly than to filter them through a textbook, or a summary, or something like that, because wouldn't you rather converse with the real McCoy?

Bradley Jackson:

And what are some of the things the students can learn from these older thinkers? We hear so often that older thinkers just have more prejudices, they have less scientific knowledge, they live in a benighted time, and we'd be better off focusing on our contemporaries who know so much more than people in the past.

So what are these lessons that you can learn from old books?

Jonathan Marks:

Well, and first of all, I'd say that there's something to the objection, as to say, I think that it has to be taken seriously. There are some kinds of studies you might want to undertake, particularly studies involve measurement, for example, with respect to which probably a pretty good graduate student would know more than Aristotle will be likely to know about the matter at hand.

But it seems to me that, I started out by saying there are some limits to the ways of thinking characteristic of particular times, and places, so I think that the general thing you get out of them, is just different lenses with which to look at political problems.

To give you an example, when I teach Plato's Republic, that contains a famous criticism of music education. Music education in the broadest sense that has anything having to do with the muses, so poetry, and so on, but also musical education having to do with rhythm meter, and all the rest of that.

And I asked my students, I said, "Well, you've taken courses on politics, because I often teach people in my own department, the politics part?"

They say, "Yes."

"You took a class in American government, right?"

They say, "Yes."

And I say, "Well, was there a chapter on music in it?"

They say, "No."

And yet it's not hard to think of ways in which activists have associated musical changes with political changes. The 1960s, it's the most obvious case in which a musical revolution, self-consciously goes along with a political revolution.

And it's not just Plato, but also Rousseau, Nietzsche, and others who thought quite seriously about the relationship between music and politics. That's not a thought that that naturally comes to mind for people studying politics today.

So I think that's one example of a thought that is at least easier to reach, via a reading a play to a Rousseau and Nietzsche, than it is from an American government textbook written more recently.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed, indeed. So I would like to dive in a little bit more to a theme that you've already raised for us, which is the finitude of our individual minds. We are limited by our time, and place that we've lived. We're limited by our culture in some way, and this makes us fundamentally imperfect as thinkers. We need correction by others in order to think.

And this brings us to your first book, which was on Rousseau, which is called, *The Perfection and Disharmony in the Thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, and it's a really fascinating book in which you make this claim that human beings are, as you put it, naturally, but are nonetheless capable of some sort of natural perfection.

So I'm wondering if you could dive into this just a little bit for us, and talk about why Rousseau believes that we are naturally disharmonious, and what sort of perfection we might be capable of anyway. This is especially interesting to me, because Rousseau is such a complex thinker. People on the left, and the right, are polarized about him, meaning that I know people on the left who hate him, and love him, people on the right who hate him, and love him.

So what is happening with Rousseau, and what were you trying to do with him in this book?

Jonathan Marks:

Well, this was an expansion on my graduate thesis. So a lot of graduate thesis, it was inspired by debates within the Rousseau literature. And as you mentioned, Rousseau is this famously perplexing figure, sometimes appearing to lend a certain kind of weight to something that looks almost like totalitarianism, and some critics of Rousseau have blamed him in some respects for totalitarianism, then, also as a kind of radical individualist, so that some people complain that Rousseau is a romantic who's unmindful of the needs of the polity.

And you find both Rousseau's prominent in, for example, the social contract, and others more prominent in the work of his, call it, *The Discourse on Inequality*, so I started out trying to understand a little bit better, how it is that Rousseau can appear to be both of those things.

And I ended up getting interested in the way in which you see different figures that that Rousseau is impressed by. The citizen in the social contract, for example, Roman citizenship, or this kind of savage that you find toward the middle of the second discourse, and it seemed to me that these figures tended to oscillate between different dimensions of human experience.

So in Rousseau's political writings, there are places which you find a character, like Fabricius, who goes, and serves in politics, and the returns to the farm, isn't constantly engaged in politics, but said swings between a political life, and a life that's closer to a life of self-sufficiency.

And this savage, who is engaged in singing, and dancing, and all these delightful seeming romantic things with his fellows, but also goes off into the woods alone, and plays, and not very advanced for music lovers, flute.

So it's swinging back, and forth, not experiencing both at the same time, because from Rousseau's perspective, there is always the danger that these two, not even just two, but these polar things that human beings want, self-consciousness, and reflection, and absorption in the moment, individuality, and sociality were something that borders on collectivism, they're in danger of undermining each other, so that he thinks of modern figures as caught between, for example, a character he describes as the bourgeois, who's simultaneously too social, and too individualistic.

Bloom people, already mentioned, describes this bourgeois, who I think looks a lot like us in a lot of ways, who, when he is thinking about others is always thinking about himself, but when he is thinking about himself, he's always thinking about others, and what they think of him.

So this bourgeois is caught between, and I think a lot of the trouble of Rousseau's thought is how you have these different goods that the bourgeois wants in such a way that they're not undermining each other. And as educational work, *The Mule* for example, is an attempt to produce somebody who's both a human being, and a citizen, who's has vast reserves of self-sufficiency, but still capable of serving the polity when needed.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed. And that I think really does get to a deep strata of your thought and career, which is the importance of getting education in order to create the possibilities of human happiness.

Rousseau is showing us that the human soul is very complex, has different parts, they may pull against each other in different ways, and if anything, we need to be aware of the complexity of human nature, if we're going to have any hope, or prayer of getting ourselves in order, and learning how to function in the world, and make ourselves happy.

Jonathan Marks:

That's one thing that you learned from reading Rousseau, or Locke, and I did have the pleasure of reading both while I was a parent, is that it's very easy to go disastrously wrong when you're trying to educate.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed, indeed. And having spent so much time in education, I wonder if we can start talking a little bit about the ways in which it's possible to inculcate some of these ideas into students.

As a way to get into that topic, I wanted to ask you about a edited volume that you worked on with Christopher Lynch, which is called Principle and Prudence in Western Political Thought.

And it seems to me that principle and prudence are two like cornerstone notions that help us to find our path forward in life, particularly this notion of prudence, and learning how to make practically wise decisions in life.

So I wonder if you could say a little bit about this volume that you edited, and why you thought it was important to spotlight these topics of principle and prudence for your readers?

Jonathan Marks:

It was delightful to work with Chris Lynch on that volume. In a lot of ways, that volume was an homage to Nathan Tarkov, who already mentioned too, who has written extensively on that subject, so many of his colleagues, and former students came together to write essays for that volume. And it's more on the strength of the contributors than on the strength of our editing. I think Chris would agree that it's a marvelous volume covering a lot of ground.

But how to put this, I remember that I'm going to show my extraordinary age, and talk about the moment when George Bush, that is George Herbert Walker Bush, Bush One, was the anointed successor of Ronald Reagan, but the complaint about him was that he lacked vision somehow or another. And I remember he was ridiculed for saying something to the effect of, "Yeah, he's not so great at the vision thing," as I seem to remember he put it, and he would sometimes say, it's hard now to distinguish between what he actually said in certain life sketches of him, but that it wouldn't be prudent to do this, or that.

And so, there's a division in one's mind about politics between people of vision who have principles of some kind, or another, that they're very good at articulating, and people who are prudent, these people are just great at solving practical problems.

And it seems obvious, in a way, that that's not a coherent way of dividing up the way we should think about politics, because as Nathan Tarkov says, I think we quoted in the volume, "Clearly principles don't apply themselves." And so, you need some capacity to get as much as you can of whatever principle you're hoping to advance in the world, given the circumstances that you face, and what kinds of circumstances are those?

Maybe, your power is pretty limited as a nation, for example, or maybe, you are a democratic polity, and the people aren't quite ready to go along with something that you'd like to do. So principles don't apply themselves, and in order to apply them, you need a facility, a scale, a faculty, whatever you want to call it, prudence in order to make principles go, so to speak.

And at the same time, prudence doesn't guide itself. If prudence is a way of attempting to get something done, well, what is that something that's going to guide your practice as a politician, certainly right, as a statesman?

And so, that volume gets at questions like, I mean, there is an essay on LinkedIn, although it's not in this particular matter, about things like to what extent was it possible to apply anti-slavery principles, prior to the outset of the Civil War, and how does somebody Lincoln try to think through the limits of the constitution, the limits of the public mind, or of public opinion, and what he is able to do under those circumstances?

Questions like that. Trying to understand a person like Lincoln, or for that matter, a person like Frederick Douglass who's not in a position of governmental leadership, but is nonetheless trying to steer a movement, the abolitionist movement, and trying to understand how it can go about accomplishing anti-slavery principles given the circumstances, is for example, the strategy of staying out of politics, and trying for moral suasion, is that the best way of going about it? Is it important to join a political party? When is violence justified in order to advance such principles? And by the way, how do you advance those principles, the atmosphere in which many people are hostile to Black people, even if they're against slavery?

So questions like that, looking at both classical thinkers, like Thucydides, and more modern thinkers, like Locke, like Rousseau, and so on, looking at that question of principle and prudence, is what the volume's about?

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed, and this idea that prudence is for applying principles to practice. Another translation of this Greek word Phronesis that we sometimes see often translated prudence, but can also be translated as practical wisdom.

And so, it's the place where practical things in the world, the pragma, in Greek, the things meet wisdom, and intellectual virtue. Prudence is an intellectual virtue according to Aristotle.

And in the light of that, I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about your views regarding the place of higher education today, in inculcating prudence in students, we have a lot of interest in higher education, and the practical, and in work study, and internships, and things like this. And clearly there's also a lot of the purely intellectual in higher education, but what can be done to help students put those together, and to become not merely educated, but prudent?

Jonathan Marks:

Thank you. Yeah, let me say a little bit to get at that question about how I think of liberal education, because I think it does have a dimension that addresses the question that you asked. I think that liberal education is about shaping reasonable people.

And what I mean by shaping reasonable people, is people who are equipped, and also, inclined to ground their ideas, to ground their actions on the best arguments, the best evidence that's available to them, and when the evidence available to them isn't adequate to proceed with humility, to proceed with caution, to proceed with a sense that one is uncertain, and may, insofar as it's possible, continue to investigate even as one is engaging, and the world of action as a person has to.

That is an emphatically practical education, because to round your thoughts and actions on the best arguments and evidence available to you, is not to develop some great things you can say at cocktail

parties, of Plato, Aristotle, bits to avoid avoidable stupidity, to avoid avoidable blindness, to avoid avoidable hubris, excessive.

And I think somebody who thinks that we necessarily, for example, let's say that I'm pursuing some kind of civic engagement work. A lot of colleges do civic engagement sometimes in the form of service learning, sometimes in broader ways.

But when you're doing civic engagement work, it's not enough just to be fervently dedicated to it, although that helps you get out of bed in the morning, but if civic engagement is in part about actually helping people, you need to ask yourself, on the one hand, what principles can help me do that? What's a good society? What's human flourishing? These are big questions that, in a way, you need to ask, even if you can't answer them entirely to your satisfaction in order to be of help to anybody.

At the same time, even once you've developed an idea of what you think human flourishing is, or what a good society is, you have to think about how you might make your way in that direction given the particulars of the situation you find yourself in.

What resources do you have? What about the people you're trying to help? Do you know them? What are they like? Are they prepared to participate in the kind of work that you're hoping to do with them, and so, on?

So I think that, when you think of what you're trying to accomplish in higher education as routing your thoughts, and actions, in the best argument evidence available to you, and recognizing when you know really don't know something as much as you'd like to, that helps a student be prudent.

Yeah, I think it guards them against certain sources of a potential, so for example, it's pretty easy at college to grab onto some sort of explanation of everything, whether say it's Marxism, or it's psychoanalysis, and these ways of looking at things can pretty easily become close circles.

So with respect to psychoanalysis, right, if you say something that the therapist doesn't think is quite right, the therapist can think, "Well, they're, they're just trying to resist my therapy, because of their unconscious motivations."

And if you are objecting to Marxism, it's easy in a Marxist framework to dismiss objections as, "Well, they're in the grips of bourgeois delusions, and they're unlike me, they're incapable of getting outside of it."

And so, pretty soon you're able to fend off any kind of object, without thinking too much about, and you've got this ready way, and way just analyzing absolutely everything, without paying much attention to the particulars of the situation. I think that that liberal education understood, in the way that I've described, can help guard against that quite natural tendency to want some way of making sense of the world around us.

And there's nothing wrong with indulging that wish, but I think that liberal education, as I understand it, involves at least avoiding indulging that wish to the extent that you lose your grip on the limitations of your own knowledge.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed. So that brings us, I think, to your most recent book, which is published in 2021, called *Let's Be Reasonable, A Conservative Case for Liberal Education*, available in paperback, now, on Amazon. And as you were just saying, you were argue in this book about the importance of shaping reasonable students about the importance in general of being reasonable.

But I wonder if you could say a little bit about what drove you to write that book? Is it that we're not being sufficiently reasonable today in higher ed, and if that's the case, in what ways are we failing to be reasonable?

Jonathan Marks:

Well, let me say a little bit about what drove me write the book.

But the first thing I want to say is that Let's Be Reasonable is, I mean, it does define an aspiration that I think is typically unmet. That is to say that people in higher education are not unusual in failing to meet that aspiration. So when I say, "Let's be reasonable," I don't mean learn symbolic logic, avoid logical fallacies, although all those things are important.

I mean, something more try to treat reason as a kind of authority. Sometimes people who are extremely skilled at reasoning, or are skilled mainly at poking holes in the arguments of people whose views they dislike, and very bad at turning reason on their own arguments. And we see these people, like pundits yelling at each other on TV, for example, or if you ever spent any time on Twitter, you can see a lot of that going on Twitter, where the problem is not so much that the people in question aren't really intelligent, that they're not in command of logic, but instead, they're interested in making their side prevail, or in winning some kind of glory, or for that matter, clicks.

Is there any difference between cliques, and glory? I'm not sure, but the reasonable person, reasonable people say to themselves, "Let's get serious. Let's stop trying to hawk our wares. Let's stop trying to make our point of view triumph at all costs. Let's stop trying to puff ourselves up, and let's look as if they really mattered." Again, at the best arguments, and evidence we have available to us to work through questions of common interest."

But why did I write the book? Well, I guess, in some sense, it was born out of frustration, though not necessarily simply with unreason, the universities. But as far as the universities are concerned, I'd say I had had three different concerns, right? Three negatives, and one positive I'll give you.

Okay, so one negative concerns, let's call it for the sake of simplicity, the camp is left, and these concerns I think will be familiar, certainly familiar to you, probably to a lot of your listeners, and they have to do with the politicization of colleges, and universities, the extent to which some faculty, and also administrators, are really eager to adopt a standpoint in the political arena, which I think is quite different from inquire into questions whose answers aren't yet settled for us.

So that's one frustration. But there's a frustration with conservatives who I think in recent years, and not just in recent years, but more, and more in recent years, I think, have given up on colleges, universities, I think that they're hopelessly in a way taken over by the left in a way that doesn't jibe, either with my own experience in my own career, or what I'm able to ascertain about what's going on in other places. I think that, oftentimes, and there's a cottage industry in this, conservative present an exaggerated portrait of just how bad things at our college and universities are.

So by analogy, there's this outfit called campus reform, which I'm sure you're familiar with, which can spit five stories a day in your feed about how awful things are at colleges, and universities. Indeed, they do so, if you follow them on Twitter.

I could start a website called medical malpractice, which I could put many more than five stories a day into your feed about malpractice cases actually settled for money, let alone your accusations of malpractice would make you afraid to walk into a hospital. I think there's a lot of that, yeah, I don't think would be wrong to call it anti-university propaganda out there, and I'd find that to be quite frustrating, even though my criticism will love to suggest there's an element of truth to these complaints as well.



And then, finally, there are the people who are in a way charged with defending liberal education, outfits like the American Association of Colleges, and Universities, which actually have a journal called Liberal Education, but what you get out of there is pretty uninspiring.

It seems like liberal education, like higher education, in general, is its interdisciplinary, and it's going to prepare you for the global world, at the same time it's going to get you jobs, jobs, jobs, will prevent your children from doing the January 6th, and it's just a grab-bag of, what would you like us to be, exactly?

And so, I think the frustration about what I consider, not an absence, because there are, as I acknowledge in the book, good defense is a local education out there, but relative paucity of such defenses.

And the positive thing, is we talked about my education at the University of Chicago. I felt like I got a liberal education, and it'd be nice to be able to try to inspire others to seek it, to be interested in it, to attempt to provide it, and so on.

I mean, think there are actually lots, and lots of people at colleges, and universities who subscribe to liberal education as I've just described it, which doesn't apply, by the way, merely to people like me who are spend most of our time reading musty old books, but also to folks in natural sciences, and mathematics who, generally speaking, do regard themselves as people who are looking to examine the best arguments and evidence available to them in order to draw conclusions about which they ought to be humble, until they have enough arguments and evidence to get to a level of certainty that would make them less humble.

I think that there's that element already in college, university life, all over college and universities. It's a question of better articulating it, and tapping into it.

Bradley Jackson:

One of the chapters in your book uses the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement as a case study for some of these ideas. Could you say a little bit about that movement, and the way in which you use it in the book?

Jonathan Marks:

Yeah, I'd be happy to. It's still very much still around. Still in the news. Yeah. Goes by BDS for short.

And so, this is a movement that you can trace its roots back at least a couple of decades, maybe, back to 2001, when there's a conference on racism in Durban, and alongside that conference, there's a meeting of non-governmental organizations, and there there's a big call to isolate South Africa, like apartheid state.

And after that conference in 2002, you already see drives on campus to divest from Israel, simply meaning that especially at a place like Harvard, you've got a lot of investment money invested, and so, you should divest as a way of making a statement that Israel ought not to be tolerated. In 2005, a call, purportedly from Palestinian civil society, went out insisting that boycotting, say, certain businesses that were engaged in work with Israel, divesting, which I just described to you, sanctions as attempting to get outfits like the European Union to sanction Israel in various ways, that those ought to be continued until Israel ceases to occupy all Arab lands, until Israel confers equal rights on Israeli Arabs, and until Israel allows all refugees to return.

I just want to say a quick word about the meaning of that call. I don't want to get too much into it, but all Arab lands, that means Israel. It means that Israel should seek to occupy Israel. That is to say that

there should not be a Jewish state in the Middle East. Respecting the equal rights of Israeli Arabs, sounds about right.

What could be wrong with that? Except that the BDS is target in particular the right of return, which means that Jews can get citizenship in Israel. They are given preferential treatment by a state that is in part devoted to protecting Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and being a safe haven. So equal rights for Palestinians, means that there shouldn't be such a law of return since it tends to favor, well, does favor Jewish would be citizens of the state, which again, is aimed directly at the character of Israel as a Jewish state in the Middle East. Law of return for Palestinians, the same thing.

Refugees are defined I think as pretty much any descendant of folks who either left, or were driven out of the area in the 1948 war, and that's millions of people, and opening up the right of return would, of that kind, that is for Palestinians, would end the Jewish character of Israel.

So BDS is basically a call to boycott, divest, and sanction, until Israel is no longer, or somehow voluntarily, gives up being a Jewish state.

So that's what it is, and it manifests itself on campus in drives to, say, end study abroad programs in Jewish cities. It manifests itself in attempts, again, to get colleges to divest, get student government associates. Since demand divestment manifests itself in Israeli apartheid week, which goes on many campuses, the sole purpose of which is to isolate a particular state, it manifests itself in academic associations, like the American Studies Association, which issued a statement that it would boycott Israel. Their attempts to get larger associations like the Martin Language Association, the American Historical Association, to practice similar boycotts.

So for scholars, not of the Middle East to get on record on Middle East policies, and to take actions, so it would have an impact on conference going in Israel, would have an impact on the capacity of Israeli scholars to work in their fields.

So that's what it's about. And in my book, I try to explain that the movement really emanates from an attempt to turn universities into sites of struggle, sites of struggle against Israel, and more broadly against American imperialism. So it's part of a larger movement against, not just Israel, but western imperialism, and various western crimes.

So the idea is to turn the university into a site of political struggle. And in the book, I argue, why the university, understood as a place which liberal education is to take place, should be concerned about attempts to turn universities into a site of struggle, and should be reluctant to embrace this kind of thing.

It is a political movement, and there's nothing wrong with political movements in doing what political movements do, which is exaggerating, distorting, pretending that there's something they're not, depending on what audience they're talking to, but all of these things are contrary to the values that an intellectual community is supposed to practice.

So I think universities should be wary about this, they should be working against it, but at the same time, opposition to the BDS movement has sometimes taken the form of simply trying to squelch these ideas in some ways.

So I talked about an instance that happened in Brooklyn College in 2013, which exhibits both sides, this phenomenon. So an academic department, the political science department sponsored what was in effect a recruitment event for BDS. And I think critics properly argued that, while such events could take place on a campus, an academic department ought not to be lending its sponsorship to such an event.

But reaction to it, for example, in the part of New York City councilman, was to say something like, "We respect academic freedom, but it sure would be a shame if we took all your money away from you."

Which seems to me, in a way, fighting anti-university values with more, or less anti university values. In other words, the promise of academic freedom is meaningless, if funding is going to be withdrawn from the city college, because legislators don't like the ideas that are being expressed there. And I think we're dealing with a similar phenomenon now with various forms of state level legislation, which respond to, I think, a genuine problem, in a lot of ways, and a lot of college campuses.

It doesn't take a conservative to concede as many non-conservatives do that there is a progressive bias on college campuses, but I worry when the way of responding to that kind of bias is by attempting to stamp out people who are promulgating progressive ideas, not generally speaking, in my view, in such a way as to attempt to indoctrinate students into them.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed. Very interesting. And this brings us, I think, to your more journalistic work that you've been publishing over the years. Not only have you written the books that we've been discussing in a number of academic articles, but you've also published essays over the years in the Wall Street Journal, Chronicle of Higher Ed, Inside Higher Ed, the Weekly Standard, and over 250 blog posts for Commentary Magazine.

So I wanted to turn to some of your more occasional writings, toward the end of our time here, just to ask about some of these contemporary events, and get your point of view on them.

So for example, last October, actually October of 2021, you wrote a essay called Against Diversity Statements. Diversity statements are still in the news today. They're being banned on the state level in certain states, and I'm wondering if you can just talk a little bit about how these diversity statements are used in higher ed, what the problem with them is, and whether you support some of these legislative attempts to ban them?

Jonathan Marks:

Thanks. So diversity statements are a relatively new phenomenon, and the way they come about more, or less, is that a college, or university reasons, we've adopted as one of our core values, the idea that diversity is really important, and so, all of our employees should be vetted, in a way, to see if they're aligned with that value.

And so, even if you are applying for a position, say in the college of engineering at college, or university X, you might be asked, I'm not sure if it's yet the case that you probably will be asked, but it might be, I mean, a lot of colleges and universities, now, have heard this kind of statements. You might be asked to write a short essay on how you're going to contribute to the value of diversity on campus. Sometimes say, "Specify, tell us how your research is going to do it. Tell us how your teaching is going to do it. Tell us how your service is going to do it."

And when you look at the kind of advice that's going around about how to craft such a statement, it's clear that, at least a lot of people think, that you'll be favored if you can demonstrate that you've engaged in some kind of activism in favor of diversity, and diversity understood in a certain way. In other words, if I say in my diversity statement that I think it's important to treat everybody equally, that's not going to be enough. If I say in my diversity statement that I think the thought of, I don't know, say, Glenn Loury, who writes about diversity, is really compelling, and that we need to make sure that we're treating everybody in a fair way.

It seems like that's the kind of thing where you're going to get, "Well, thanks. Next." And you, you've got that both at the level of hiring, and increasingly in the areas of promotion, and tenure. So basically, what's going on, is that you've got a request to provide an essay, or a statement that, at least in my view, and I'm not alone in this, is asking you to, in effect, pledge allegiance to a relatively narrow and progressive understanding of diversity, equity, inclusion, and all the rest of that, and that creates at least two kinds of problems.

One problem is that, so there is a book that was written a while back by Neil Gross, called something like, *Why Are Professors Liberal, and Why Do Conservatives Care?* And one of the arguments he made in that book is that it's not necessarily discrimination against conservatives that explains why they're relatively few, and there are relatively few conservatives on college university faculties. He says, instead, college and university is a, I forget how he puts it, but let's say, left-typed, in the same way that say nursing is gender-typed.

You might think, as a guy, "Well, maybe, I shouldn't get into nursing, as it seems like it's mostly women who are involved in that profession. Maybe, I shouldn't get involved in elementary school teaching, but it seems like it's mostly women who are doing that kind of thing." And he says, "Similarly conservative might look at what's going on, and say, 'Maybe, I shouldn't get involved in scholarship, or teaching at the university level, because it seems like it's only progressives, who are there, who are welcome there. And diversity statements just contribute this perception of what colleges, and universities are like.'"

So I think that that's one big problem with them. And I think the other big problem with them is that they do discourage any kind of discussion of the university's goal. And I say in my book, for example, even though I have a certain vision of liberal education, that doesn't mean that I wouldn't hire a Marxist, or Freudian on the faculty, even though I suspect their ideas don't really jibe my idea of higher education.

We need to be open to criticism, debate about, even if we decide we're going to adopt diversity, equity, and inclusion as a core value, we need to be open to discussion about what those things are. And I think it really narrows the scope, even if we're the kind of work we want to do, of how well we're going to be able to do that kind of work.

I think, I would prefer that they get addressed at the level of the university. That's to say that, traditionally, boards of private colleges, and boards of governors, or boards of regions, of public university, have been able to exercise power, but by appointing presidents who, in their view, are going to be able to keep the institution to its mission, more, or less.

And so, I prefer that things like hiring practices get handled that way, but I think, nonetheless, I mean, I think that legislatures, they're justified in doing it, as to say that there is a way in which these statements, they encourage discrimination.

They're a fig leaf, potentially, for discrimination. Although, I agree with Neil Gross, I don't think that discrimination is the primary reason you don't see conservatives on campus.

I think that when you poll both liberal, and conservative academics about their willingness to discriminate, how much of a difference would ideology make to you in deciding whether to provide research funding to a project, or whether to hire somebody. Non-trivial minorities? Those people, they say, "Yeah, actually would make a difference. I would be willing to discriminate as it's put." And those diversity statements provide a means of doing it.

So I think it's a big problem, and I think that kind of intervention being conducted by state legislators, legislatures certainly bothers me a good deal less than some other kinds of interventions, even though, again, I prefer that be handled through more traditional means. I think that Board of Governor restraint,

Board of Trustee restraint, it's a good tradition that's protective of academic freedom on campus, so the less that we can get away from that tradition, the better, in my view.

Bradley Jackson:

Very good. So I just have one more question for you, Jonathan, which I think might bring together a few of the themes that we've been discussing today, although, perhaps in a funny way. You teach at Ursinus College, a course in the Department of Politics, called, What Is Love? And I wonder if you can say a little bit about what's that course is for, and what do you hope students learn in a course called, What Is Love, in college? What is the purpose of a course like that for you?

Jonathan Marks:

Yeah, so I mean, let me begin by saying, you mentioned inspirational teachers, and one person I left out, because I didn't actually study with him, is Leon Kass, who's teaching on the Committee on Social Thought at the time, but it was also a really distinguished undergraduate teacher. And my wife, Anna, took courses with Leon Kass, and in particular took a course that he taught with Amy Kass, which is a course, I think it was called, Courtship, right? And the idea of that course seemed to be that one of the most important decisions that we can make in our lives is who we're going to spend the rest of them with, assuming that marriage is something that we want to do, which is I think a question that is taken up in that course, and certainly be taken up in mind.

So What Is Love, is meant to inspire in students, reflection on a matter that is of fundamental importance, not just to students, but even to us old non-students too.

And we talked, as you said, this brings us back to the beginning of the conversation, what can you get out of reading great books? And it seems to me that, and students have sometimes told me as much after taking the course, that you find that even matters that you sometimes think of as well, it can't possibly help to think about this. It's too much about spontaneity, and feeling, and so on, and so forth, that there are rich resources for thinking about it in such a way that your life, again, in one of the most fundamental matters, might just get better.

So that's the purpose of the course, and in it, I acquaint them with works like Plato's Symposium, some of Rousseau's writings on Love, CS Lewis on Love, and Friendship, and some more contemporary works as well. The excuse for having in a politics department, my colleagues are very kind. I'm not sure if this was fully justified, but it is a political issue.

So what you think about love, maybe, if you're a certain kind of feminist, it's a trap of some kind, or another. What's the relationship between love, and equality, and what does living in a democratic political culture have to do with how we pursue love, and whether we're interested in marriage, and if we are interested in marriage, what does marriage mean, and how, if at all, is connected to child-rearing? These are questions I think that anybody can recognize as a question that's really important to them, whereas students are certainly interested in, I also do a course, we're talking about statesmanship on Lincoln Douglass, and Democratic statesmanship, they're sure interested in that, but they're probably not going to become states people, but they've probably already fallen in love.

So I think that that course is an opportunity to help them see how they can get something out of reflecting on older texts, but more broadly, just to get something out of reflecting as such. That's the same in the case of love, in my book, I don't want to discourage sales, but my book, it's pretty unerotic in a lot of ways, because I really do focus on the aspect of liberal education that helps you not be stupid.

And of course, there is a side of liberal education that emphasizes its eroticism, right? Socrates is a really erotic figure, but of course, his eroticism doesn't mean that his work doesn't have to do have something to do with thinking, so this is an opportunity to also make thinking sexy.

Bradley Jackson:

That's a wonderful place to leave the conversation. Jonathan Marks, thank you so much for joining us this week on Higher Ed Now, and we hope to have you back again sometime.

Jonathan Marks:

Thank you, Brad. This was fun.