

**Title: Jeffrey C. Sachs, Is There Really a Free Speech Crisis?**

**Episode: 49**

**Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy**

### Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** Are we facing a free speech crisis in higher education today? According to my guest on today's episode, Jeffrey A. Sachs, professor at Acadia University, the answer is mostly no. Jeff published the "Campus Free Speech Crisis is a Myth. Here Are the Facts" on the Washington Post monthly page blog in March 2018 and more recently the campus free speech crisis ended last year on Niskanen Center block in January of this year. He joins me today to talk about this argument about whether there is in fact a free speech crisis.

So let's start by talking about self-censorship as an indicator of a free speech crisis. Do you think self-censorship by students, whether it's self-reported or observed by other students, like assumed by other students to be going on, whether that's an indicator of a free speech crisis so to speak?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** I think it can be an indicator and it can be an excellent indicator. What it depends on is the reasons for the self-censorship. There are all kinds of reasons that students offer for why they self-censor, why they're in the self-censor whether in the classroom or outside of it, elsewhere on campus, that we might consider benign. Students, like all of us, want to fit in. They want to make friends. They might not want to appear foolish in front of people they want to impress and students also sometimes don't have the right answer to a question or they fear that they might have the wrong answer.

When you look at some of the surveys that various organizations have put out including Heterodox's surveys as well and FIRE's surveys, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, these surveys show that students offer a variety of reasons for why they self-censor. Some of them I think are no more objectionable than I thought I might have the wrong answer to a question. So I declined to say anything in class.

I'm not certain whether those are the kinds of reasons to self-censor that we necessarily should be alarmed by or should view as problems.

**Chris Martin:** When it comes to a breakdown by political affiliation now and surveys like the Knight and Gallup Foundation, we do see that students believe that conservative students need to self-censor their opinions much more than liberals do on college campuses. So there is some element of political ideology there being an issue.

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Right. I think that's right. The Knight Foundation Gallup survey that you're referring to doesn't focus on classrooms in particular. They ask a broader question about declining on campus and whether it inhibits student expression.

So that kind of broader question. It certainly does show that there is a power of something we might call political correctness or certain kinds of expectations about speech that do inhibit students from expressing themselves and that it impacts conservative and republican students more than it impacts liberal and democratic students and just by the way, those same partisan ideological skews are present to greater or lesser degrees in the classroom in FIRE's survey as well.

So I do fully acknowledge. Of course there is this partisan and ideological skew and I do think that that is something that we should pay attention to, what we should think about. Again, I am very interested however in the reasons for self-censorship. Students by and large are liberal. We have many decades – well, decades now of survey data from the Higher Education Research Institute out of UCLA showing the dominance of liberalism among students and increasingly the growing dominance of liberalism among students.

So if we were to look purely at the role of peer pressure and socialization shaping willingness to speak on campus, we would expect liberals I would think to be more comfortable expressing themselves and democrats expressing themselves on campus than we would republicans and conservatives.

Now I'm not – again, I don't want listeners to get the wrong impression that this doesn't make me uncomfortable or that I think that this is entirely unproblematic.

I just think that when we hear the term “self-censorship,” our mind leaps to a very worrying possibility of control and suppression of ideas and I think we need to think a bit more carefully about what kinds of reasons for students withholding their opinions were seeing and whether or not those are reasons that should be indicative of a free speech crisis.

**Chris Martin:** So in your opinion, what's a good survey question to use here or should we use something other than survey questions?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Well, I think self-censorship is very hard to spot and measure and survey but surveys do probably the best that we can do. By its nature, self-censorship is the kind of animal difficult to spot in the wild. So I think FIRE actually does have some very intelligent survey questions. They ask students, “Do you self-censor in the classroom?” and a certain percentage – I can't quite recall what it is – do report based on censoring.

It's something about 50 odd percent or a bit higher than that. The vast majority of students report feeling comfortable speaking in the classroom but a significant majority also do report that they have self-censored in the past.

FIRE then follows that up with another question. Why do you self-censor? And it gives them a couple of different options that they can choose from.

By and large again, the reasons that are given are issues of socialization. I wanted to look smart. I didn't want to offend my peers. I didn't want to seem dumb. I was shy. But a smaller

percentage, just about 20 percent, do give an answer, which I do think is a problem and does indicate an issue that we should care about.

That is the students who say, “I self-censored in the past in the classroom because I was worried that my professor would give me a worse grade.” I think about that statistic a lot. When I first saw that finding, my eyebrows shot up. Not with incredulity because unfortunately, I cannot imagine students thinking that. But – of dismay. I think that’s a real problem.

There’s no reason why a student should believe that just because they have a certain opinion, if they voice it in the classroom setting, they’re going to lose points. Not unless it’s a kind of speech that is so disruptive, that it merits some kind of disciplinary action or something like that.

But outside of those extremes, students shouldn’t feel like they can’t express themselves because they might be punished by the professor in their mark. So I think FIRE very intelligently has this follow-up question where they ask these things and that reason offered by 20 percent of students, offered disproportionately by conservative and very conservative students. That does make me concerned.

Heterodox does have its Campus Expression Survey, which I think the last iteration of that survey that I’ve seen on your website, Heterodox’s website, was in 2017 I think, in July of 2017.

That survey does attempt to ask and replicate some of the same kinds of questions that FIRE asks related to self-censorship. So it does for instance ask – you know, do you self-censor because you fear you might receive a worse grade from your professor? And also I think very intelligently Heterodox’s survey asks the reasons. Like what kind of topics might motivate you to self-censor the most? And there – about what? I’m sure listeners will expect. It’s issues like race, gender, politics that – especially among conservative students seem to trigger the most reports of self-censorship.

Those findings definitely make sense to me and I think that the fact that they replicate more or less the findings of the FIRE survey lend them a great deal of credence.

Heterodox’s campus survey, as it acknowledges, is not representative of the country as a whole. It’s a representative sample. So I’m a bit cautious about using that data.

**Chris Martin:** As far as the question of whether the change occurred somewhere between 2012 and 2017, that’s one point that I think both Jon and Sean Stevens have made and my indirect experience from looking at campus editorials suggests that’s also the case. I guess I’ve been fortunate. I haven’t – not until like my ability to express myself either as a student or as an instructor has been affected. But the key point they’re making there is that 2012 or so was the turning point. In your experience, was there any of it in [0:09:56] *[Indiscernible]* to that? I mean I know you’ve been a critic of that.

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Yeah. I’m a bit skeptical of the idea of this shift. So what can we say about this, the idea of the shift? I think that student activism seems to be more intense over the last three or four years than perhaps it was in 2011, 2010. Maybe one of the reasons I guess I’m a bit

skeptical to be perfectly frank is because of my own experiences being an undergraduate during the run-up to and course of the Iraq War after 9/11 and also my own specialization is in Islam and Middle Eastern history and politics and working in that space, you could see very clearly a lot of the same dynamics that Jon and Sean and many others in Heterodox point to today.

Pressures to self-censor. In this case, pressure to self-censor or in the case of the Iraq War, pressure to self-censor if you were opposed to the war or maybe pressure to – or skepticism or dissatisfaction with certain kinds of activism as being aligned with terrorism or aligned with America's enemies or so forth. There was a lot of pressure and a lot of the same dynamics back then that we see now and I would – I guess my intuition and I'm still thinking through, but my intuition is that we see a lot more continuity than we do notable disruption.

**Chris Martin:** OK. Which campuses did you collect this data from?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** No, no. This is – well, this is anecdotal data. I'm referring to my own experiences at – in my undergraduate at University of Rochester and then my master's at University of Chicago.

**Chris Martin:** OK. So there do appear to be a few other problems. For example, if you're an academic, people sometimes assume you're a liberal and they assume that you elevate social justice above other priorities and in reality, people still have various priorities.

Lee Jussim for example has a book chapter and in his book, the book that he edited with Jarret Crawford, I think that chapter has about 14 co-authors, some of which are centrists, some are liberal, some are conservative and their experiences say that – you're often assumed to have liberal opinions if you're in academia and slightly stigmatized if you're – if it turns out you're a centrist or a libertarian or conservative. So do you think that's also not a new problem?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Well, I can't say if it's a new problem. I wouldn't be surprised if it's a problem that has gotten worse. I think that we will be foolish if we did not assume that if you're an academic, you are a liberal. If you look at the survey data, the vast majority – there's clear ideological and political imbalance among the American professoriate.

I certainly don't dispute that there is a strong liberal lean and leftward lean to the academy. Now Lee's argument, if I had said it properly, is that this damages the quality of research, that it distorts research agenda. It shapes the kinds of questions that are asked, the kinds of funding that is distributed, the kinds of manuscripts that are supported and promoted and Jon has contributed to that debate. I believe Sean has also contributed to that debate.

There's a large body of work and Heterodox is at the center of it that makes the case for viewpoint diversity precisely on the grounds that the liberal lean is a problem because it distorts research.

That's not an issue that I know much about and so I'm very hesitant to kind of inject myself in that kind of debate. I guess I'm a bit more focused on the outcomes for students and the learning experience. But I can certainly understand that when it comes to faculty research and also public

support for the academy, the absence of strong conservative voices might indeed produce a problem.

**Chris Martin:** When it comes to the situation in Canada specifically, there was a conference on campus free speech and academic freedom in Canada. Can you tell me a bit about what happened there?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Sure. This was a conference that happened just last week in Toronto. It was organized by the Canadian Association of University Teachers, which is one of our major faculty unions here in Canada. It was a conference focused exclusively on the issue of campus free speech and academic freedom in Canada.

Just like in America, this is a very live issue up here, may – perhaps all the more acute in recent months with the decision by the government of Ontario where most or certainly a plurality of the universities are located. A decision by that government to require all colleges and universities in the province to adopt a free speech policy, one that would ensure that students and faculty have the ability to say and express themselves however they wish within the limits of the law, with certain accepted time, place and reason – manner of limitations.

Then this is also tied to provincial funding. Institutions that fail to protect free speech on campus can find their provincial funding cut, which – because all our institutions are public. It's quite a powerful threat. So it's a very live issue here.

This conference was trying to explore first of all whether or not there is a crisis of campus free speech and academic freedom, whether it's a problem. Is it the kind of problem that government can meaningfully address and are there ways of thinking about this issue that maybe are being neglected because they don't comport to what political actors and media seem to be interested in?

I think one of the really interesting things about this conference is that the language of crisis might be the wrong way to think about it or at least the narrative of crisis might be distracting us from thinking intelligently about the issue.

What really blew my mind, really impressed me about this conference were all the ways that free speech on campus might be compromised or threatened that we don't typically talk about.

So for instance, there was some fantastic work that was presented on faculty intellectual property rights and how the loss of faculty control over the syllabus through kind of standardization of a pedagogy via MOOCs and the digitization of a campus – of pedagogy, how this kind of – how that might reduce the ability of faculty to control how they take students.

**Chris Martin:** So you're talking there about peer pressure from MOOCs or standardization MOOC videos that everyone has to use.

**Jeffrey Sachs:** No. I'm referring here to – for instance, we have a problem here of the explosion of contingent faculty where faculty have to – people with very little preparation have to swoop in

and teach a course and how as a result, they often take advantage of a pre – already prepared course outlines and lecture modules and so forth.

Often they face pressure from the department to adopt a certain kind of standard way of teaching and how this can erode the academic freedom of faculty. Fortunately I'm not speaking from personal experience here but it is something that seems to be a problem on some campuses. That's just one example I think of a kind of potential threat to academic freedom on Canadian campuses at least that I don't see talked about very much and I found very fascinating.

**Chris Martin:** OK. So was there anyone representing sort of Lee Jussim's perspective there, the perspective that research is being affected or was it mostly about teaching?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** We certainly had multiple faculty and speakers talk I think more about what Lee Jussim describes as the liberal or PC lean to, to the academy. So an example, one speaker from I think University of Montreal, described how in the requirements for receiving federal funding for certain kinds of research, you are expected to consult with stakeholders when they – with whom you do research and to give – to afford them the opportunity to review and to help you interpret the research that's being produced.

This kind of stipulation that is described was created specifically for researchers who are conducting research on indigenous and First Nations Canadians and if you're doing anthropological or archeological or social science research on these communities, there was – there's a goal in mind of giving them a role to play not just as passive objects of research but also as active partners in the research venture and we had a faculty member, a professor at this conference who pointed out that's the kind of concession that we would never think to afford to a corporation, that if somebody was doing research on let's say genetically modified crops and they were investigating Monsanto.

We would never offer Monsanto the opportunity to review and offer interpretations of data that a researcher collects and we will be shocked if somebody announced that they had done so for all kinds of perfectly valid reasons and this faculty member was making the point, the speaker made the point that we should be more consistent he says and these sorts of things. So I think that's the kind of [0:21:09] *[Indiscernible]* some of your listeners might recognize is a debate that we might have here or you might have in America as well regarding the power of the influence of “political correctness” over the research process.

**Chris Martin:** Right. I mean that issue is not one that comes up a lot in social psychology but it definitely comes up in anthropology in my experience because I think anthropologists are very concerned about the effects of colonialism but at the same time have to account for the fact that when you interview people, they're almost always saying things that are in their self-interest or trying to flatter themselves.

So if they have the ability to censor your research or ask you not to publish them, I think it's probably because it's not in their self-interest. So that's attention.

**Jeffrey Sachs:** That's right and certainly I think just to be clear so that no one has any confusion, there's nothing in these guidelines, these funding guidelines I just mentioned that – let's now give anybody a veto over – in the publication process other than the author him or herself. But it gestures towards this principle of giving stakeholders and I think implicitly indigenous stakeholders this kind of role in the process.

**Chris Martin:** On the issue of disinvitations now, jumping to a slightly different issue, some people think that's an indicator and I actually have mixed feelings myself because many disinvitations are either for someone very provocative like Milo whose – doesn't have a scholarly background at all or disinvitations for commencement speakers and that's a situation where someone is also being honored. So it's not simply a situation of whether they can speak but whether they deserve to be honored.

So I have mixed feelings about that. But I don't know what the situation is like in Canada and what your opinion is on what we should do about disinvitation attempts.

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Yeah. Well, that's a good question. I mean more broadly I guess we will just quickly – disinvitation attempts encompass I think what we typically refer to as de-platforming but it also encompasses many other more banal things as well.

FIRE for instance has a database of disinvitation attempts in the United States and it includes accounts and includes Milo being chased off campus by a mob and it also includes cases like that at Ave Maria College where 30 alumni signed a petition asking the university to disinvite Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education, from a speech. Those 30 alumni count as a disinvitation attempt the same way Milo counts. So I think it's important for listeners to understand the enormous variety of what constitutes a disinvitation attempt in these databases.

Now that said, you might think that any kind of attempt regardless of how large or small as you believe reprehensible and that's certainly one perspective. In Canada, we have no such database. We have a couple of different websites operated by organizations that attempt to look at some of these same dynamics. I don't put any real confidence in these databases and these websites. I think that they are much more partisan and ideological than fire is. So I'm a bit skeptical of them.

But I think – again this is anecdote but hopefully an intelligently derived one. Canada does not have the same number and frequency of disinvitation attempts that America does and even America, they're not very common. In Canada, they're even less common. We have had our incidents.

People might be familiar with for instance Jordan Peterson's attempt to give a talk at Queen's University about a year ago or year and a half ago and an enormous protest gathered outside the building, pounding on the windows. I believe one protester is alleged to have even had a garrote, to strangle somebody with in her hands. Really just incredible things and we've had other incidents as well. So they do have it here in Canada. They are much, much, much less common even when you account for our smaller student population size.

I think for listeners who are interested in this phenomenon of de-platforming disinvitations, that is interesting, right? Canada is a great comparison to make. We have a broadly similar student culture. All the same forces that are often identified as triggering this, PC culture, the culture of safetyism, victimhood culture, whatever you want to call it, different terms, different phenomena, they all I think probably can be said to exist in Canada as well, to the extent that they exist anywhere.

If we have much less of this disinvitation – disinvitation that’s happening here, that is a question mark. Why is that the case? I have a theory, Chris.

My theory is political polarization. My theory is so straightforward and boring. My theory is that this – what we saw in 2016 and 2017, this rash of disinvitation attempts and these big controversies is much less about these broad cultural trends, which obtain equally well here in Canada and are much more about the incredibly high levels of political polarization in the United States that are absent here in Canada and I think that might help us to inform the debate a bit about where this phenomenon is coming from and what might bring it to an end.

**Chris Martin:** Now if I understand correctly though, Canada also doesn’t have think tanks that are funded by large conservative donors. So there’s not this industry of scholarship that’s maybe somewhat reliable and somewhat not reliable. Is that correct?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Just so – so that Canada – you’re asking if we have conservative funded think tanks?

**Chris Martin:** Yeah. I mean in the US we have the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. So part of the situation here is it’s because those institutes – well, especially the American Enterprise Institute sometimes come to campus and that’s kind of a mixed bag because some of the people who do work there like Norm Ornstein for example really do great scholarship but then the institute itself was founded specifically to produce scholarship or white papers that have conservative conclusions. Do you have something similar to that in Canada?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Oh, certainly. We have – I mean like everything else that America has, we have it, only with less money and fewer in number. So we have for instance the Fraser Institute, which is based out of Vancouver. It often partners with Cato. Listeners might want to think about it as a bit more conservative version of Cato and its libertarian conservative fusion thinking.

We have other institutes as well. We have our own conservative think tanks here as well. What’s missing is their engagement in the culture of war in quite the same way. I do want to make one quick – maybe just to disagree with you a little bit about the American Enterprise Institute, I guess I don’t see the American Enterprise Institute as one of the primary agents for this kind of thing we’re talking about.

In fact I was very pleased to see the AEI write a piece just not too long ago, maybe about seven months ago, trying to persuade conservative students on US campuses from inviting provocative speakers. I identify the problem much more as organizations like Young America’s Foundation, which is where you will be able to book –it’s a speaking bureau for people like Ben Shapiro and

associated speakers or Turning Point USA which does kind of a – offers a similar kind of menu of speakers.

Those are the organizations that have a very sophisticated outreach to students, whether conservative, libertarian or just middle finger to the libs provocateur student groups.

They're the ones that are reaching out and trying to get their people in front of college students and also ideally in front of the camera where they can trigger an outburst.

I'm not trying to make excuses for the outburst. I'm just trying to – I think that's where the source lies. That's what we're missing in Canada. We don't have our own Turning Point USA organization. We don't have Turning Point Canada. We don't have Young Canada Foundation with our own Ben Shapiro or Candace Owens.

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Jeffrey Sachs:** So I think that's what's missing and partly that's this absence of political polarization and – or at least less political polarization and it's also because the university has not yet been identified or sucked into the culture of war, to the extent that it exists here in Canada.

**Chris Martin:** Do you have any closing thoughts?

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Oh, no. I mean I hope – while I'm not a member of Heterodox Academy, I do think quite highly of much of what the organization does and I certainly do – I don't want listeners to think that I'm dismissing or ignoring the difficulties that conservative students or other students might face on campus when it comes to expressing themselves.

But I think it's so easy to overreact and it's so easy to make bad policy during an overreaction that we need to be very, very cautious with how we proceed and I think all too often we don't see that level of caution.

**Chris Martin:** Well, thanks for joining us in the show. It has been great having you.

**Jeffrey Sachs:** Thanks Chris. It was a lot of fun for me too.

[Music]

**Chris Martin:** Toward the end when we were talking about the American Enterprise Institute, I wanted to bring up the AEI's firing of David Frum. I didn't bring that up because I wanted to move on to another topic but Jeff and I chatted about it afterwards.

The firing was on my mind partly because David Frum is also from Canada but mainly because David just appeared on an episode of the Bulwark Podcast where he talked about that firing.

If you haven't heard of the Bulwark, it's an online journal that's the home for many writers who formerly worked at the Weekly Standard including William Kristol. The Bulwark Podcast is hosted by Charlie Sykes, who is the contributing editor at the Weekly Standard.

My next interview is with the clinical psychologist **Katie Gordon** [0:32:52] [*Phonetic*] and we will be talking about whether political expression can or cannot cause trauma in listeners. As always, if you have comments about today's episode, you can contact me at [podcast@heterodoxacademy.org](mailto:podcast@heterodoxacademy.org) or tag me on Twitter, @ChrisMartin76 and if you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps other people find out about the show. Thanks for listening.

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