[Welcome to Half Hour of Heterodoxy, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse perspectives.]

**Cory Clark**: Welcome to Half Hour of Heterodoxy. My name is Cory Clark. I’m the Director of Academic Engagement for Heterodox Academy and I will occasionally be hosting episodes alongside our regular host Chris Martin.

Michael Roth is my guest today. Michael is a historian, the president of Wesleyan University and the author of the book *Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist's Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech, and Political Correctness on College Campuses*.

Heterodox Academy held its first ever Book Club a few weeks back in which we read *Safe Enough Spaces* as our first book and we had a lively debate about it, lively discussion. Not a lot of debate.

Now we have Michael here to discuss the book and we will include a couple of questions from our Book Club participants in this episode as well. So hi Michael. Welcome to the show.

**Michael Roth**: Thank you very much. I’m glad to be here.

**Cory Clark**: The title of your book is *Safe Enough Spaces*. So perhaps the obvious question to start with is, what do you mean by spaces that are safe enough?

**Michael Roth**: Well, it was somewhat of a joke title when I came up with that with the help of my wife, who’s a professor here at Wesleyan also. In the ’50s, the psychoanalysts had this idea of the good enough mother and which evolved into the good enough parent when I guess they realized that the father is a parent too or is supposed to. So the good enough parent was the parent who didn’t make you psychotic and they came up with this designation because in the age of parental advice distributed through mass media, that really takes off with Dr. Spock and subsequent commentators.

There’s, among some folks, a tendency to try to be the perfect parent and the perfect parent is likely to drive their child crazy and likewise, the parent who says, “Well, I’m not going to do anything. I’m just going to let my kid learn the laws of physics by running out in traffic,” that’s a prescription for disaster as well.

So I came up with this idea of the good enough parent which was a parent who didn’t drive for perfection and didn’t try to design the ideal childhood, but also provided an environment in which trust and affection could bloom and a child could thrive.
The safe enough space similarly is an idea that we need places where students and faculty can explore ideas, can confront disagreement and even offensive notions that cut to the core in some cases, but at the same time, they should be spaces where people are free from intimidation and harassment and bullying.

So the idea of a safe enough space was to riff on the much maligned idea of a safe space, which gets a caricature because I think almost everybody agrees that classrooms and other campus spaces should be free of the kind of harassment that used to be endemic to college campuses and I think almost everybody agrees that there should be places where students could learn by growing uncomfortable with ideas that they haven’t yet learned to understand fully.

Cory Clark: Yeah. So I actually have a question, a follow-up question about that. So I agree. Presumably just about everyone agrees that campuses should be safe from physical harm and where you get more pushback from people or where people are more uncomfortable with the concept of safe spaces perhaps is when it comes to psychological and emotional harm.

But I think it’s probably even more complicated than that because there are blurred lines surrounding what constitutes physical safety. So for example, if somebody feels threatened, whether they are threatened or not or people who report being traumatized in some way, which may be – it seems like a kind of physical harm even though it is maybe more emotional.

So when people are maybe experiencing psychological discomfort or emotional discomfort but they’re appealing to physical harm or like reporting that they feel threatened, like they might receive physical harm, how do we draw the line there and how do we adjudicate between disputes where one party intended no physical harm and caused no physical harm but the other party seems to feel as though they are suffering some kind of real harm?

Michael Roth: Yeah, I find puzzling that people who are otherwise quite sophisticated about the mind-body issues rely on this notion of a physical versus psychological harm in talking about issues of speech and learning.

I just don’t understand it. I mean the idea that somehow physical harm is more real than psychological harm? It’s ridiculous. I mean nobody believes today I think that people with psychiatric illnesses or emotional illnesses don’t have real illnesses and don’t suffer – don’t really suffer. I mean the idea that somehow you don’t really suffer if you have anxiety but you really suffer if you have a sprain in the ankle. That’s crazy! Nobody believes that.

So we fall back on that because of some narrow-minded view of free speech that’s – you know, a doctrine of free speech seems silly. I think you have to distinguish between real suffering and moderate discomfort. Well, how do you do that? That’s – yeah, that’s hard. That’s what teachers do all the time. That’s what parents do all the time when their child comes in and says, “Oh my god, I’m dying,” and you say, “No. Actually you stubbed your toe.” You have to just – it’s not about being physical or psychological. It’s about trying to figure out how much harm is – we
should tolerate in order to build resilience and how much harm we should protect our charges from because it actually prevents further development.

That’s a hard thing to do. But there is no formula for it. There’s no formula and if you say physical versus psychological, it doesn’t give you a formula. It just gives you an excuse for not paying attention to emotional distress.

**Cory Clark:** Yeah, I totally agree with you that certain kinds of psychological harm are actually worse than physical harm. The tricky thing is how do we decide which kinds of psychological harm warrant our concern or that we should ban certain kinds of behavior in the classroom because someone else in the classroom is experiencing a certain kind of psychological harm and where we draw the line there.

**Michael Roth:** It sometimes gets very tricky. I think most of the time it isn’t that tricky but sometimes it is and it’s those cases that get a lot of attention rightly so I suppose. But I think it’s – the issue of how we determine when someone is building resilience rather than being broken down in a way that doesn’t build resilience is an important decision to make as a teacher and we make it in all kinds of ways when we’re in the classroom.

You know, most teachers today don’t give grades below a B plus let’s say and places like Wesleyan, below an A minus.

**Cory Clark:** Is that true?

**Michael Roth:** Yeah, it’s true. It’s true at NYU. It’s even worse, I think. It’s true at – you know, I don’t know where your home place is, but it just seems to be the – statistically the case and it – I think what evolves is students who feel that they can’t actually take it if they get – I don’t know – a B minus. Well, they can. They can.

But as a teacher, you have to decide when it’s appropriate to a student to say to the student, “This is really a stupid thing to say,” because that’s how you get their attention, as opposed to, “Why have you taken the point of view you have?”

Those are decisions we’ve always – teachers have always made about how much you push someone because by pushing them to an area where they’re experiencing discomfort, they are going to learn more as opposed to pushing them so far that they are just going to turn off.

Now I do think there is something to be said – perhaps not as generous as they might have been in the book with some of the theories about our young people today are being less resilient and they’re getting coddled and that kind of stuff. I do think there are students who appeal – appeal for protection earlier than they might. But it’s up to the professor then to say, “Nah, I’m sorry. I’m not protecting this.”

But there’s no formula for that and I think you – I tell some stories in the book about classes in which you give students some sense of what they’re in for, when you can actually put them in a
Cory Clark: One thing that I really liked about the book was the sort of historical context around a lot of our modern higher ed buzz words. So you talk about diversity and inclusion and PC culture and free speech and free inquiry and how do we get there and how did we come to – like what is – how long have we cared about these kinds of things within higher education?

And you talk about dating back at least to the late 1970s or early 1980s, thinkers worrying about the state of higher education and balancing student comfort and free inquiry.

So I’ve asked many academics this question before and I haven’t got any clear answer. So maybe you’re the person who can give one. From your perspective as a historian and as an individual who has been working in higher education for a while, would you say things really are different now than they were say 20 or 40 years ago?

Have things – like people say, things have gotten worse. Have they gotten worse or is maybe that not even the right way to think about it? Maybe the tension between student comfort and free inquiry is something we want. You want people pushing back against it and you want people pushing for it. That’s really going to be the best state and that’s how higher education should proceed.

Michael Roth: Yeah. It’s hard to say worse or better according to what criteria, right? I mean it’s not in general – to say it’s worse or better. I’m not sure how to make that judgment. I do think – so if one is interested in our university’s places where new ideas can be entertained and explored with rigor today more than in the past, it really would be hard for me to measure that.

I think there are some ideas that are no longer explored with seriousness and others that have gained currency and that was – but that statement would have been true 40 years ago.

Cory Clark: Right.

Michael Roth: I think the – what has changed or the campuses are – especially at elite universities are more diverse than they were in – 40 years ago in the sense that women have a lot more to say about how the universities are run and the content of the classes than when I was an undergraduate. It was just a few years after Wesleyan was co-ed in my case and a lot of schools like Wesleyan in those days.

So women were fairly new to those spaces and men were used to running them as men’s clubs and now with women in them. That’s quite different today. I think it’s good that it’s quite different.

I think that we have a significant percentage of students at elite institutions from the Lincoln families and that is different I think from 40, 50 years ago. But I think you have a much greater kind of inequality weighing on campuses today than you did then. So that – and that leads to a
different kind of politics I think that low income first generation students today actually think of
themselves as an identity group, which certainly wasn’t the case in the 1970s and that there were
at least as many first generations whom I suspect as – the previous generation didn’t go to
college as often.

But I don’t – I certainly – I was a first generation student they say but I never thought myself in
that category. There wasn’t a category like that. So I think the categorization of students into
identity groups and the – politics which follows from that is certainly stronger today.

In some ways, that’s really good and in some ways, it leads to different forms of parochialism.
So I think as a teacher, one’s job is to break down parochialism in ways that expose people who
have certain allegiances to the possibilities of having other allegiances. We’re seeing their
previous allegiances as perhaps being unworthy of their support and of becoming more self-
critical as well as critical of other groups.

I do think that the – it’s pretty well-documented and the Heterodox Academy has done a great
job of doing this. That there is a narrowing of political experience among the faculty members,
especially at northeast school and especially at elite schools and although faculty members are
smart people and they’re able to teach things that they don’t agree with let’s say or they don’t –
they’re not partisans for that stuff, I do think that the – it takes an effort to ensure that you as a
teacher and that your department and its curriculum actually exposes students to a broader range
of ideas in humanities and social sciences than the people in the department actually believe in.

I think that in many schools, that’s not the case and I have argued that we should push back
against the current narrowing of political discourse on campuses by exposing students to
conservative and religious traditions that they might not be exposed to automatically given the
inclinations of the faculty and I have friends who think I really overstate that people who stay in
philosophy and teach Aristotle and Plato all the time and they’re not exactly contemporary
American professors.

They teach Aristotle and Plato not because they are Platonists or Aristotelians necessarily but
they teach them seriously and thoughtfully. So I want to acknowledge that people can and often
do teach things with which they disagree. I certainly do that myself. But I think just this was the
case in the ‘70s and ‘80s when men said, “Well, I could teach women’s history. We don’t need
to hire women to do that. We should just hire the best person.”

I think that rhetoric of we’re just hiring the best people and they happen to all agree with us
politically, I think that rhetoric is really suspects and we have to have what I’ve called an
affirmative action program for conservative and religious and libertarian thinkers. I still feel that
pretty strongly. It’s harder these days because of the idiocy of the official conservative
movement in the United States, the kind of Trumpianization of the right and the United States
has led to a kind of aggressive idiocy, which has no place on a college campus and it goes anti-
science. It’s anti-inquiry and it just uses lying as a technique of rhetoric.
That really – we shouldn’t allow to become part of the campus just because it’s popular in the country. We have to resist stupidity at universities. That’s one of our first jobs and – but that doesn’t mean we should ignore the rich tradition of serious conservative thinking and market-oriented libertarian thinking that – with which one might agree or disagree, but is kind of a serious contender on some key issues to humanities and social sciences.

Cory Clark: Yeah. Our members in the Book Club noted your distaste for Trump and his supporters. I personally think the average Trump supporter is not as bad as a lot of people say, but I agree. Like there are certain things we want to take more seriously and I think philosophy is such a great example of where academics are – it’s kind of part of the field to overcome your personal beliefs and like whether you think a particular philosopher was right or wrong, you still teach their ideas as worthy of consideration and that’s something that – I’m a social psychologist. That’s something that I think we don’t do.

We just teach whatever we think is the right thing and I think now more than ever, that’s something we probably should be rethinking with the replication crisis and what is motivating some of the scientific findings and maybe we should be opening up the range of what we’re teaching.

Michael Roth: Yeah. Social psychology I find really interesting in that regard because it’s very popular among students and lots of interesting findings, some of which are counterintuitive. But the – some of my friends in the field, they have a very clear political atmosphere that they create at classes and they will say to me well – what I’m actually encouraging is compassion let’s say or of a fellow feeling or generosity. Who’s against that?

I get that part. But there’s a – sometimes a missionary dimension to social psychology that is not just hygienic. It is political or values-based and I think the field would do well to call attention to those things, so the students are more aware of them and could be more self-critical. But that’s – each field I think has its own proclivities.

I think what happens apparently in search committees and in missions offices is that people begin to just get a group think phenomenon and you start hiring people you think are clearly the best. But they’re the best from your point of view because they agree with your prejudices rather than on some independent metric.

I have had this argument at Wesleyan with some departments that really feel strongly that they should have a political profile and not just an intellectual one. Unfortunately I don’t have enough power. So I can’t just make it – what I think is right, which of course makes sense. But –

Cory Clark: So you’re saying they want to like – they want to like incorporate the politics of candidates into their decision making for hiring?

Michael Roth: Not overtly but let’s say you have a social science department that says, “We’re a feminist department,” and – but they say that’s not political. That’s a kind of moral stance. We
don’t want any – you know, or they say it would be – well, you want to still hire some racist? Because, you know …

**Cory Clark:** Right.

**Michael Roth:** … we’re anti-racist and of course the answer is not that they should hire racists. But there may be some people working in a field who actually are not taking a stand on political issues because of the nature of their work and – or if they did, they would take it differently than the majority of the department.

It’s interesting to me because we recognize – these same folks would recognize that students today want to find faculty who look like them. That’s the expression. I don’t think this is a good thing. But it is a thing. It is true that many students feel that way, that they gravitate to people with whom they can identify.

If we have no one on the faculty with whom conservative or religious students can identify, then we have the different kind of replication crisis, right? We are replicating but we’re replicating people on the basis of prejudice and of politics rather than on the basis of inquiry and understanding.

**Cory Clark:** Yeah. I could talk about this for hours. But I feel like I have to get at least some of our member questions.

**Michael Roth:** Oh, sure, sorry.

**Cory Clark:** Oh no, this is great. So let’s see. One of our members asked, “What is the systematic evidence behind the causal claim that a diverse student body enhances learning outcomes and specifically which forms of diversity have been shown to improve which student outcomes?”

**Michael Roth:** Yeah. Well, I think the appeal to empirical evidence for improving student outcomes is really a fraud. I mean there are people who do think that there is clear evidence. Stanford Design School has a website with tons of references about how diverse groups are more creative, that echo chambers are less likely to produce good results than groups that have lots of different points of view.

So I think there’s a fair amount of social science evidence that – conducted by people who want to have the conclusions that they got. However, on the other hand, I think this can be commonsensical that if you’re going to be graduating students into a world in which there are people from lots of different backgrounds, with different points of view, you would serve those students well by having them learn with people of different backgrounds, with different points of view.

The other thing about diversity leading to outcomes is that I think we have a responsibility in American higher education since we benefit from public support in the form of tax exemptions
and the like. We have the obligation to promote the social nobility and not just to cement social privilege and although places like the one I lead, Wesleyan, does a lot of – we do a lot of cementing, right? I mean most – we have a lot – a disproportionate number of – or percentage of rich people versus – in the – compared to the population as a whole. So I think we have to work really hard to find strong students from a variety of backgrounds, so that our students can understand people who have different experiences than themselves because when they graduate, they will – we want them to live in those worlds.

Now the question I could say, well, actually most people when they graduate from American universities, go into a much more segregated world than university itself. I think that would be true and I think that’s a terrible thing for American democracy and American culture and that the ability to listen to and learn from people with a variety of points of view is an important part of being an educated person.

**Cory Clark:** Yes. Certainly it’s true for a lot of students. But I wonder if the majority of students – like if you go into academia, it’s a totally – that’s not a representative world whatsoever. But for a lot of people who work jobs that require a college degree, they might be exposed to different kinds of people and it would be good to have some exposure to that before you’re out trying to make a living. But …

**Michael Roth:** I think so.

**Cory Clark:** … I’m not sure about it. Interesting – yeah, it’s an interesting problem. OK. So another member wrote you wrote – or asked, “You wrote Safe Enough Spaces before COVID-19 changed the world. How do you feel the virus has influenced your calibration of safety on college campuses?” and I guess I will add on to that. In general, how do you think or hope COVID-19 will impact campus climate both in online learning and when students finally do return to campus?

**Michael Roth:** That’s a really good question. I feel like it’s very hard to give a good answer to that question when you’re in the middle of things.

**Cory Clark:** [0:25:46] [Indiscernible]

**Michael Roth:** You know, it’s like in 2008 and 2009 when people kept saying, oh, it’s this – nothing will be the same. Actually they said that after the – September 11th and the subways will never be the same and this will never be the same. It was all nonsense and because in the middle of it, it feels like this is the most important thing that has ever happened to me or to my generation and if – it feels that way because it’s so intense. But it’s really hard to find good – people who are good at predicting the aftermath.

I mean look, remember the rhetoric around disruption and the end of – Kevin carried this thing recently and I saw in Twitter that – the end of colleges. Well, now it’s coming true. He wrote a book years ago about the end of college because of the internet and the online classes and books. You know, there has been a change in everything. So I’m suspicious of such rhetoric. On the
other hand, as a guy who wrote a book called *Safe Enough Spaces* and as a president university trying to figure out whether to open in the fall, is it safe enough? Is the university going to be safe enough with that if there’s no vaccine or we don’t know what vaccines do yet?

What is a tolerable level of risk? I do think that as we think about opening up universities and other parts of the economy, we have to think about what’s a tolerable level of risk and for whom, right? I mean there are people who argue that it’s a tolerable level of risk and they think – they say that because they’re not yet in a high risk group.

So it’s tolerable for them. But if you have a five times higher death rate for people who are 70, it’s OK for them. They don’t mind that. Well, I think that is – that’s wrong-headed. I think we have to think about how do we protect at a university the most vulnerable. How do we make it safe enough for older professors or staff members while also encouraging safer practices for young people who at Wesleyan seem to think they’re immortal typically?

That will make it a challenge. I really do hope that we open the university and that we go back to having a cosmopolitan environment in which international students and faculty play an important role and I think it – the COVID also underscores the importance of strong federal leadership on global and national issues.

So when you don’t have strong federal leadership, you have real problems and if you were in a war footing as – like someone as pacifistic as Danielle Allen talks about, one of my heroes. She’s – we should be on a war footing. What does that mean? That means that the government as a whole, the nation as a whole, should be marshalling its resources to fight a common enemy. In this case, COVID 19.

In order to do that, you need science. You need epidemiology. You need sociologists. You need a lot of people thinking hard about a problem and having resources to attack it. So I think in the aftermath of COVID-19, I hope that we understand that universities are special places where advanced research gets done and people get trained to tackle real problems and not – are not just bastions of elitists who are afraid of free speech. They’re actually places where people are engaging in risky thinking about absolutely crucial issues in the sciences and society.

*Cory Clark:* Yeah, I’m wondering like is there going to be some – it seems like a tricky position to be in to be the person to make the decision. Like we’re going back in the fall and you don’t – I don’t think you want to be the first university to make that decision. But someone – you will have to be the first to make the decision, right? If that’s going to be what happens. So like who takes the risk and makes the bold decision and then other people follow in their footsteps.

*Michael Roth:* Well, I think it – you know, there will be some guidance in this regard from government authorities and I mean even Christine Paxson just recently – from the time we’re recording this, a piece in the New York Times about how Brown should open in the fall but it actually says if, if, if, if there’s testing, if we have supportive isolation and if there’s good tracing. I think that’s exactly right and Brown is not going to invent the test itself or the apps for tracing.
But we need a concerted effort to put universities and other essential enterprises in a position where they can be safe enough for their faculties to have students and that probably will mean in places, larger universities, that there won’t be any really big classes and that you have to design food distribution so that there aren’t large gatherings. But I think that schools will probably move not one at a time but in groups.

There are a couple – like [0:30:45] [Indiscernible] is ready now, so it will be online. Mitch Daniels at Purdue announced that he’s going to be open. But when you read the fine print or the second paragraph of the story, usually they say well, we hope to be because nobody wants to put their student body or their faculty at an undue risk but it’s a question of – you know, people aren’t totally safe where they are right now. So we want to make sure that we provide a safe enough environment for them to study in – and to support the kind of research that will enable societies to deal with pandemics in the future.

**Cory Clark**: Great. So I actually have a bunch more questions for you. But in interest of time, I will give you just one more from – submitted from a member. They were actually looking for recommendations for students who have been chastised for what they perceive to be as not adhering to mainstream liberal ideas. So presumably you’ve been involved in many student disputes. So on the end of the person causing offense to others and on the person claiming offense, what can individuals do to resolve these kinds of disputes? Like what is an effective strategy there?

**Michael Roth**: Yeah, that’s a great question. I don’t know that there is a general answer one can give. In *Safe Enough Spaces*, I give a couple of stories of people who felt offended by let’s say what they perceive as racist remarks and the person making the remarks was offended to be called as racist because what they thought they would do was making another kind of point and sometimes there’s the ability to create new grounds for conversation and debate and sometimes there isn’t.

So in the case of – we had this free speech debate around critique of Black Lives Matter on our campus a few years ago and there was a lot of anger and people yelling, screaming and that wasn’t very useful and everybody claiming free speech and people yelling and screaming that people – that was their free speech. Other people said that they were being yelled at because of their speech and I think what we did – which may be a model for other things is when Jelani Cobb wrote this piece in the New Yorker saying free speech rhetoric is often a cover for racism – I had recently published something about – called *Black Lives Matter, So Does Free Speech*.

So I felt somewhat attacked by his article although he didn’t have my thing in mind and mine was very local. But I invited him to come and speak at Wesleyan about his point of view, which was not my point of view because he’s a really smart guy and maybe I’m wrong and so he – and he was good enough to come even though if he had seen my thing, he would say, oh, that’s not the kind of thing I believe in or the kind of person I would want to have dinner with. But we did have dinner and then he gave his talk and the students were shocked that when he got up to the
podium and very generous didn’t have to do this. He said, “I want to thank Michael Roth for bringing me here today,” and all the activists in the room were like, “What? Roth? He’s a …”

You know, and he’s like Roth and I don’t agree about certain things. But it’s really good to talk about it. So there it was, these two people who don’t agree modeling disagreement. Not agreement. We’re modeling disagreement and then he in a kind of ingenious way both bucked up the activist and I gave them support and at the same time, steered them away from their – some of their automatic reactions. Not in – he wasn’t supporting me in that regard. He was just being a great teacher by bringing disagreement into a relationship – what people already believed, so that they could expand the range of ideas they would consider.

So the answer to the question is finding ways to have a conversation that expand the range of ideas that people will consider because some of those ideas might be true and some of the things you believed before might be false. I think that sometimes it’s possible to do that and sometimes it’s – you know, the conflicts are too intense or too deep or there’s no interest in finding an expanded range to consider. I mean with some violent ideologies and totalitarian ideologies, there is no interest in that expansion and there’s nothing to do about that but to defend yourself, I think, and the people who you care about.

But most of the time, it’s not the case. Most of the time, I think it’s appropriate for colleges, universities and their teachers to help students expand the range of things they would consider and expand the possibility that they would discover that they’re wrong about what they believe in because it’s not just getting more truths. It’s also getting rid of some of the false ideas you had before and I was very lucky in my life to have teachers who are really good at that who could be very touch at times and gentle at other times, but making one really – get rid of someone’s prejudices and open up to the possibility of new ideas.

Cory Clark: Yeah, I love that story and I totally agree. I wish more professors would model that kind of behavior for students and demonstrate that they’re open to listening to other people and having like decent relationships with people who disagree with them. I think that’s really cool.

Michael Roth: Well, that’s what I really admire about Heterodox Academy is that I think you guys encourage that and I’m – and to the fact that you invited me to be on a book club podcast when my book is actually critical of your founder. That’s a good sign and he – I know we don’t know each other well. But I learned from him and from the other members, from Jon and other members of the Heterodox Society, we don’t have to agree and that’s what makes it so interesting.

Cory Clark: Great. Thank you so much for coming on.

Michael Roth: My pleasure. Thank you.

Cory Clark: You can follow Michael on Twitter at @mroth78. You can find the link to his book in the show notes. If you have any comments, you can contact me at