



Episode 1,049: Harvard Student: Campus Left Distorts True Nature of Communism

Guest: Laura Nicolae

WOODS: I've got a link to your article up on our show notes page, as I was just telling folks, so they can read for themselves. This should not be particularly controversial what you said, and yet every day the world gets incrementally crazier, such that more and more normal things are classified as being unacceptable. So give me the background here. You wrote this column for *The Crimson* arguing, on the basis of your own experience there as a student – arguing what?

NICOLAE: Essentially that a lot of the depictions that I've seen of communism on campus, mostly by students just in their casual conversations or on social media, have been very trivializing. People make a lot of jokes about how, *We need to start another communist revolution, or I'm not a liberal; I'm a communist*. Just stuff like that, which I had been noticing for a while and was just slowly making me very angry, so I waited until November to publish this op-ed about the trivialization of communism on campus given that it was 100 years since the Bolshevik Revolution.

WOODS: Okay, so in this column – I mean, I kind of gave people the gist of it, but you actually talk about – I didn't mention this – your father's own experience. So this hits home for you a bit.

NICOLAE: Yes. Yeah, my father was a defector from the Romanian communist regime just about a year and a half before the regime fell. He had just finished medical school, gotten his degree, and then decided to leave because he had essentially decided that he didn't want to stay there anymore and would rather take the risk of getting out. And yeah, he came to the U.S. after about two years of a long journey through Europe and married my mom in the U.S. They met in the U.S. And now they're both doctors in Kansas, so a few people now know the background of what they went through, but it definitely influenced me growing up. I heard stories of what happens when the government has too much power, when bad people get power, and that kind of just shaped the way that I saw government and power for a really long time.

WOODS: So this is around 1988, so really on the verge of the collapse of some of these regimes, he was trying to get out.

NICOLAE: Yes.

WOODS: So that kind of goes to show that things are still pretty bad really all the way up to the end, that you would go to all that trouble and risk to do that. And so eventually, he makes it to the U.S. Did he speak any English?

NICOLAE: He did. He had learned some English. I believe it was some in school. He had learned a few languages. I think he had been planning to escape for a while, so he had taken some French, he had learned some German, a little bit of Hungarian. He ended up having to live in Germany for a while in the interim. So yeah, when he made it to the U.S., he just had to pass the American exam for foreign doctors and his English was fine enough that they let him in.

WOODS: Well, how about that? And then his daughter winds up going to Harvard.

NICOLAE: [laughing]

WOODS: Quite a story.

NICOLAE: Yeah.

WOODS: Now, I think I have probably bored folks listening to this show with this story in the past, but way, way, way back when I was on the campus, things were – well, things were different for one thing because we ate in a different place. We ate in the Freshman Union, which, maybe you know the building. They use it for something else. But we used to eat sort of where Lamont Library is. And on our way in every night, there was a table staffed by people from the Friends of the Spartacus Youth Club, and they were selling a newspaper called *Workers Vanguard*. And I'm curious to know if anything like that still goes on. I mean, that was an openly communist newspaper. It wasn't like they were Joe Biden people and we were just trolling them by calling them communists. Like, these were actual, outright, let's-celebrate-the-Bolshevik-Revolution communists. I know that the point of your article is that it's sort of chic among students to have kind of a wink-wink relationship with communism, but do you ever see the actual, real article?

NICOLAE: There aren't too many people who are actually ideologically communist.

WOODS: So I scared them off.

NICOLAE: [laughing] Yeah. There are a few and you kind of know who they are. There is a newly started leftist club on campus, which I do cite in my article. I believe it started the beginning of this semester, and it only has like ten members or so. Apparently they read Marx and Lenin together. But the people that I know, them few of them who actually are ideologically communist I don't think are necessarily involved with that group but more just kind of in those casual conversations are more like, *Well, I actually believe in this. I actually think Marxism is a good idea. Capitalism is the worst, whatever.* But it's definitely few of them. Most people are just kind of casually think it's like funny to talk about.

WOODS: So in other words, it's not casually funny to talk about other forms of totalitarianism, but this is sort of okay, and I wonder is it because people have this

instinct that, well, they may have been social justice warriors in a little bit too much of a hurry for my taste but their hearts were in the right place? Do you think it boils down to that?

NICOLAE: I think that's true. I think, you know, the theoretical ideals of communism sound very nice if you don't think about them, and a lot of people I think are fooled by that, so maybe the idealistic cover kind of just – it gets boiled down to that one-dimensional idealism, and then people are willing to excuse all the violence that occurred as not being inherent to the system, where obviously I argued that it is inherent to the system because of the practical implementation and much of the theory as well.

So yeah, I do agree that they definitely view it differently from other totalitarian regimes. For example, after I published the article, on social media there were all these things insinuating that I support the Latin American dictatorships because I said that communism killing people is bad, which is obviously ridiculous and I found that quite amusing. But it's almost as if it's like a dichotomy, like you have to choose. If you don't support one dictatorship, you must support the other.

WOODS: So has that been the extent of the kind of response you've gotten? Well, here's one thing I want to know. Has the article gotten beyond the Harvard campus? Because it seems to me that it has. I've seen it in a few different places now.

NICOLAE: Yes, it was shared by the American Enterprise Institute. I think they have a column that tracks things from the webs, and there was a commentator who included an excerpt and wrote a short commentary. It was also shared by the Heritage Foundation, and it was also featured as an excerpt, again, in *The Wall Street Journal's* "Best of the Web" column on Thanksgiving.

WOODS: So have you been approached by any media people with any inquiries for you or anything like that? How has this affected you directly?

NICOLAE: I haven't been approached by any media people directly, but I have been approached by a lot of especially defectors or Cuban exiles or people who have had personal experiences with communism. Some people have found like my Facebook account and have messaged me, and I've gotten a ton of messages from people saying that they had wanted to say this for a long time and thought it needed to be said, as well as students from other campuses who said that they saw the same thing on their campus and they had been wanting to say the same thing.

So most of that to me directly was pretty positive, but kind of around social media, there have been posts accusing me of supporting poverty or Latin American dictatorships, which I disagree that that's a dichotomy. So directly to me it's been mostly positive, but no, not any media things directly.

WOODS: Okay, so you're criticizing a system that somehow managed to make Ukraine not fertile, or at least fertile but nobody could eat anything. One of the most fertile parts of the world suffered a famine under that system, and they're accusing you of supporting poverty.

NICOLAE: [laughing] Yes, exactly.

WOODS: Yeah, all right. Now, I did a little bit of background because I wanted to see if there had been any attacks on you or that sort of thing that we could talk about, and in the course of doing that, I came across a video of yours on the nonaggression principle. So do I detect a libertarian on the other end of this conversation?

NICOLAE: Oh, yes. I've been a self-identified libertarian since I was 12. I am co-president of the Harvard Libertarian Club. Yeah, some people know I'm affiliated with the Libertarian Club and they ranted about libertarianism being for people who don't understand the difference communist theory and implementation and things like that. So it has kind of morphed into a little bit of an attack on libertarianism as well, but yes, I have always been a very strong, self-identified libertarian.

WOODS: All right, well, that's a typical Harvard answer. "Since I was 12, I was doing something most people never hear about their entire lives." What happened when — let's see, are you — mind if I ask your age? You're a sophomore, so you must be 19 or —

NICOLAE: Yes.

WOODS: 19?

NICOLAE: I'm 19.

WOODS: Okay, so you've only been there barely a year and a half, but plenty of time to get an impression of the campus and of Cambridge itself, which is an interesting place. I mean, it's an awfully fun place, but lots of craziness. But anyway, I'm curious to know what was it that happened seven years ago that a 12-year-old would be drawn to this.

NICOLAE: So like I mentioned previously, I grew up hearing stories of the communist regime and what happens when bad people have government power. And those things weren't necessarily explicitly political, but rather just made me skeptical of empowering flawed, imperfect humans. And so I always viewed the government as something that needed very stringent bounds, or at least like a logically consistent philosophy guiding it, something that you can justify independently for every bit of power that you give the government.

So when I was six, actually, my dad asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said an anti-communist, so I guess that's worked out well. But I didn't know that libertarianism was a concept that actually had a word for it until I was 12. There was a governor election in my state and I was reading the newspaper and there was the outline of the Democrat's platform, the Republican's platform, and then the Libertarian's platform. And I didn't even know libertarianism was a thing, but when I got to that third column, I was like, wait, this is me; I didn't know there was a word. And then from then on, I started reading like John Locke and Mises and Hayek and got really into libertarian political philosophy and then eventually to economics, which is why I study quantitative economics today.

WOODS: Ah ha, that was going to be my next question. All right, more with Laura Nicolae after this word from our sponsor.

[Sponsored content]

All right, you were saying that your studies are in economics, so you're taking a lot of courses in the economics department. So that's your concentration. I'm wondering about of course in the core – do they still have the core curriculum?

NICOLAE: We do have gen eds, yes.

WOODS: Oh, geez, boy, what an oldster I am. Because we used to have to take different courses in different departments.

NICOLAE: Yeah, it's the same thing; it's just the general education program.

WOODS: Okay, so that along with any electives you might have would expose you to professors outside the economics department. So I'm just curious – you don't necessarily have to mention names, but I'm curious about what your experience has been.

And just to give you a little context here, I would not say that the entire time I was there I was nothing but propagandized by people with an ideological agenda. I would say I actually had a lot of people who were fairly establishment-oriented. A lot of those people are not there anymore. But Ernest May taught me foreign policy and he had served as a minor official in a lot of White Houses, so he wasn't somebody who was going to torch the White House or anything. I mean, he maybe wanted to reform things a little bit. So with me, it was not so much that it was raving leftists who were dying to brainwash me, although there were people like that and you had to watch out for them. It was mainly that I was going to get the establishment view of things and if I wanted to learn a heterodox view, I had to learn that on my own. Now, have you had a similar experience?

NICOLAE: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. I think there's very little explicit trying to push one ideology or another. It is just pretty establishment, and that tends to be just because you study what the majority of the literature is writing about and what the current conversation is centered around, so I think that that makes sense. The one thing I have noticed is more actually like student-oriented, is just in sections – like for example, I'm in a constitutional law class this semester. Section discussions among students will often – if a student is about to make a remark that's not liberal or leftist, there'll often be a preface that's like, "I'm just testing this opinion. I don't actually agree with it." But nobody feels that need to preface their remarks when they are saying something more liberal or leftist. And so I don't think that's any ideological pushing. That is something that I've noticed, but it's definitely more student-created.

WOODS: So you're part of the Harvard Libertarians, which did not exist, by the way, when I was there. I don't know; maybe it did and there was like one guy in it, but nobody really knew what that was all about. What about other – I'm just curious about what student life – like, forget the professors for a minute – what student life is like

there. Again, I think the thing to bear in mind is that when people get sent to these prestigious universities, yeah, it's true that some of them are radicals, but by and large, you go to a prestigious university because you want to have a respectable, mainstream career, which you generally don't have if you're a screaming SJW. You can wind up in an academic department, sure. But so I wonder, my instinct is that these kids, yes, they've got some leftists among them, but generally, I think it's going to be less irritating than at a school two tiers down. Is that your instinct?

NICOLAE: Yeah, I agree as well. I definitely think that that's true. And for the most part, if people are quite leftist, they're not usually – there are a few who maybe just follow the trend or whatever and say they're ideological communists or whatever, but people generally have some idea of the philosophy that they're advocating and it's usually more as kind of like a theoretical, "This is how I would organize society in my ideal world," but not so much just like screaming or like backlash controversy just for the sake of controversy. I definitely agree most people are pretty establishment-type comparatively to other campuses, where I've heard stories where there have been big protests just for the sake of protests, it seems. So I definitely agree with that characterization.

WOODS: Who's the most controversial person who's spoken there since you've been there?

NICOLAE: So there is one group on campus. It's called the Harvard Open Campus Initiative. They're colloquially called the Free Speech Group on campus, and they kind of make a point to invite pretty controversial speakers just to insight discussions about various topics. And they invited Charles Murray, I think it was in the spring. And that did have a fair amount of protest. There was also Jordan Peterson last year, as well. And all of these things had some protests, but nobody was trying to entirely shut down any discussion. And yeah, so I think for the most part it really isn't a bad place for just testing a wide variety of new points. If people think that you have arguments, you're logically consistent, they'll definitely listen to you.

WOODS: All right, that's interesting. Do you write for any student publications other than *The Crimson*?

NICOLAE: I don't. I've submitted articles to the *Harvard Political Review* and to *The Crimson*, but I'm not on the board of any of them.

WOODS: Does *The Harvard Salient* still exist?

NICOLAE: It doesn't. My understanding is it kind of starts and dies every few years, and I've heard some rumors about that it is attempting to be started again, but I'm not sure. I haven't heard anything else about that.

WOODS: Wow, how about that? So is there any right-of-center student publication at all?

NICOLAE: There's really just the *Harvard Political Review* and *The Harvard Crimson*. I don't think there are really any other campus publications at all. And those tend to be

more liberal just because of the articles that are submitted because the student body is disproportionately liberal, but obviously they don't advocate one agenda or the other.

WOODS: That is so crazy. When I was there, there were so many student publications. There were left-liberal publications. There was a feminist publication. It was partly because every one of those kids wanted to be *the* editor of something, so if they couldn't be the editor of *The Crimson*, they'd start their own thing and be the editor of that. Geez, how funny. So they don't have *The Harvard Independent* – I'm sorry, I'm putting everybody to sleep here. They don't have *The Harvard Independent* anymore?

NICOLAE: No, that's another thing –

WOODS: Oh my gosh.

NICOLAE: Yeah, those are things that are kind of like rumors that people may start again, but no, don't really exist.

WOODS: Wow, isn't that something? Because when I was there, *The Harvard Salient* was like the sort of Jack Kempy, establishment conservative kind of publication, and then we had our bomb-throwing publication called *Peninsula*, where we were to the right of them. But now we're all defunct and it's very depressing that *The Crimson* is all that there is. But on the other hand, in this day and age, not that many people read print publications at all, I guess.

NICOLAE: Right. Yeah, most people – I don't even know if there's a print *Crimson* –

WOODS: What?!

NICOLAE: There are print issues of the *HPR* that go quarterly, but those are not all of the articles. Yeah, nobody reads print things. It's all online.

WOODS: That is so crazy. I used to get *The Crimson* delivered to my door, and I would wake up every morning like a dork. And I would see, all right, how did they misquote me this morning, or how are they smearing me – because I was the vice president of the Harvard Republicans in those days, so they didn't much care – And I remember I tried to resign midway through my term because I decided I was a libertarian. They wouldn't let me. The president would not let me. *We're in this together. You're seeing through all the way to the end of your term.* So what do you see? You're in your sophomore year, so anything can happen between now and the end of your time there, but what do you want to do ultimately?

NICOLAE: Yeah, so the current plan is to do a PhD in economics, which is why – I study applied math with a focus in economics, because that's kind of the track to do PhD in economics. And so I would like to do academia and policy work, but you know, obviously I have to get into a PhD program first. But that's been the plan for a while, so as long as everything goes smoothly, that's hopefully what I should be doing in a few years.

WOODS: So are you writing regularly for *Campus Reform*?

NICOLAE: I've written one piece. I don't write regularly for them. I don't really write regularly for anyone, but if I'm at an event and they want an article, or if I get mad about something like this communism piece, then I'll write something.

WOODS: All right, that's good, because ultimately – you know what? After we're off the air I have a really good suggestion for you. But the time that I spent writing for campus publications, I can't say I regret it because I had a lot of fun doing it and I became a better writer. It really did help me become a better writer. But if you could take that time and channel it instead into working toward getting a scholarly article published, as an undergraduate, that's almost unheard of. That would pay more dividends for you professionally than anything else. But it sounds like you have your priorities straight and you're not spending all your time doing what I used to do. But anyway, I'm glad to hear that you're still there and still alive. I mean, presumably you have friends who are kind of ideologically uncommitted. Were they worried about this for you? Did they have any response to this whole controversy?

NICOLAE: Most people say exactly what you said, that this isn't really a controversial argument. I actually didn't really say anything ideological about communism, even – I said communism killing people is bad. Like, insert any ideology in there, killing people is bad. So most people who are not really ideologically willing to defend socialism or communism and view it as an attack on their ideology are pretty much like, yeah, this makes sense. This isn't controversial. It needed to be said because a lot of people have seen the same thing. And a lot of people maybe just didn't even realize because the view of communism is so one-dimensional, it's kind of self-reinforcing, and people just don't even really connect it with the historical violence and the 100 million deaths, and so it kind of just made people think twice, which was the goal of the piece.

WOODS: It really is shocking how little people know about this subject when you do polls of younger folks. And I was just writing about this in my email newsletter the other day, that I'm not a fan of George W. Bush, but one-third of millennials think he's responsible for more deaths than Stalin was. I mean, come on. You've got to have some kind of a ranking of these people.

NICOLAE: Right.

WOODS: And Stalin's got to be right up there at the top. Anyway, as I say, at TomWoods.com/1049 we will link to your article for *The Crimson*. This'll be one of the most articles in *The Crimson*. They should be begging to have you back. This is the most traffic they've gotten in years, in a long time. So I'm going to have that linked. And would you find it embarrassing or fun if I linked to your video on the nonaggression principle?

NICOLAE: Uh – [laughing]. I don't know.

WOODS: All right, I'm doing it. Sorry, too late. It's open to the public. It's up there. Public record. It's going up there.

NICOLAE: [laughing] I mean, yeah. Yeah, I stand by all of those remarks; it's just an old video.

WOODS: No, it's true, and you were young, but the point is that nobody that age would have had the guts to do anything like that anyway, so anybody who gives you a hard time about it is a coward and a loser to start with, so you've got it all over them for that. Anyway, best of luck and congratulations on this article.

NICOLAE: Thank you.