Episode 1,303: The Rise of Victimhood Culture

Guest: Jason Manning

WOODS: All right, this is an interesting book, because what you've done in here — well, of course, you're well aware of what you've done. But one particular thing you've done is you've taken an extremely contentious topic, and you've somehow managed to discuss it as dispassionately as I've ever seen it discussed. You really, even though, you know, you do have a point of view about it, you really are adopting the language and ideas, and one would hope, in a way the of kind of the detachment of the kind of social scientist we would all like to see examining this kind of question. So, first of all, congratulations on being able to do that, because I'm not sure I could have duplicated that feat.

MANNING: Thank you very much.

WOODS: Okay, so let's start with maybe some definitions, because it is a bit provocative to use a term like "victimhood culture," and no doubt that will be taken as an insult. And you do defend your use of the term, so why don't you describe why you chose that term, and what you mean by it?

MANNING: Well, to answer that, we kind of have to go back to the beginning of how we got into studying this. My coauthor, Bradley Campbell, and I both specialize in the study of moral conflict, such as all the different ways people handle grievances and handle disputes and what they get mad about and how they handle their differences. And within that, we've both tended to focus on the study of violence. So about every year here at West Virginia University, I teach a course, "Sociology of Violence." And when you look at the study of conflict and the study of violence, there's a distinction people often make between what they call honor cultures and dignity cultures. And this is not our concept; it's a concept that's been around for a while. A lot of psychologists, historians, and anthropologists use it.

And basically, an honor culture is a social setting where there's a strong, strong emphasis on physical bravery and on maintaining your status by proving your bravery. So this is a type of social status; people can have honor, and it could be lost very easily if you're thought to be a coward. And that can include being someone tests you by slighting you in some way, testing your limits, and you fail to respond with force or with aggression, and you will be labeled a coward and dishonored and lose standing in the eyes of your fellows and your community and be deeply shamed. And we see these sorts of cultures throughout history. They're really widespread, but some examples listeners might be familiar with would be something like in the American South before the Civil War, when the plantation-owning class, they would do things like fight duels. *You've insulted my honor, you've offended me, and then I'll challenge you to a duel*, and they go out with their pistols or their swords, and prove their honor by

fighting each other. The reason that defends their honor is it shows their bravery, their willingness to be aggressive at any sort of provocation.

And so in honor cultures, where this form of status is very important, people tend to be really touchy. If your worth as a person hinges on proving you won't be trifled with and will not tolerate any aggression or insult, you're constantly on the lookout for anything that might be aggression or insult or a slight, and you're always worried people might be testing you and seeing if they can push you further. And so you see in these sorts of honor cultures a high rate of violent conflict. People are very touchy and sensitive to slights. And they also tend to handle all their grievances through aggression, through violence. To handle it otherwise is to ensure that you're cowardly and lose honor, so they don't go to the cops; they don't complain to the general public. They use aggression.

And in the 1960s, a sociologist, Peter Berger, wrote an article on the obsolescence of the concept of honor, saying we still have the term still around, but it's kind of vestigial, nowadays. We have honor codes at college, but it doesn't really mean the same thing it meant in, say, the Old South or amongst the aristocrats in Europe 100, 200 hundred years ago. Now, it's kind of just general integrity, but there's no longer this connotation of, a) violence being attached to it, or b) it being a fragile thing that can be taken by others. Because when you look at honor cultures, honor is something that can be taken. You can be dishonored through someone else's actions. If you don't respond when someone insults you or puts you down, you're dishonored, you're humiliated, you're shamed.

And Berger said, you know, people nowadays view fighting duels as some weird, alien relic of the past, and the idea of being concerned that you've been dishonored, at least in modern Western societies, is a strange thing. This notion of honor is gone, by and large. It survives in some pockets of society. You might think of the importance of respect in a poor ghetto community, where people will kill over being disrespected, or among gang members or among prisoners and other settings were toughness is still valued. But our elites don't kill each other anymore in duels like they used to. And so what Berger was recognizing is that this moral concept, this form of stature or social standing was largely obsolete amongst the middle classes in the modern West.

And he argued, instead, what people emphasize is a form of moral worth called dignity. And this is the idea that we're all human and all have the same inherent worth as humans, and this worth is inalienable. So unlike honor, it can't be taken away. You can't be dis-dignitied like you can be dishonored. If someone insults you, you still have your dignity. If anything, they've lowered theirs by not respecting yours. And you can say something like, "I'll be the bigger person and walk away," to show that these insults are beneath, you have a thick skin. And you see a different sort of moral emphasis in modern society, as where no longer do you need to be sensitive to slight, no longer do you need to be on the lookout to make sure someone's testing your limits. It's even commendable not to do this. To be someone who has a thin skin or is very sensitive is a way of lowering oneself, rather than a way of rising and proving one's worth.

And along with that, you also get this increasing deviance of violence and aggression. So okay, you've been offended; you've been slighted. The first thing to do is ignore it. But if it's severe, like if it's a physical assault or someone's taken your property, okay, well, then you can go to law. Don't take the law into your own hands. Unless you really have to in a self-defense situation, don't do that. That's actually deviant. That's wrong. That will not win you glory and

renown; that will get you in trouble. But the thing to do is, go to the law, let the law handle it, and there's no shame in that. You did your best. You tried to be the bigger person, and if it gets too bad, then you can go to the courts. And so you see this distinction in the violence literature between cultures of honor, which tend to have a high rate of violent conflict, and cultures of dignity, which tend to be more peaceable. They rely on legal settlement for severe things and tend to brush off verbal conflicts and slights of other kinds.

And then what we saw when we started looking at phenomena on campuses these days — such as complaining about microaggressions, or complaining that a conservative speaker was a threat to safety and needed to be banned, or demanding trigger warnings for content that might harm the listener — we saw people having a sensitivity to slight that reminded us of honor cultures and also willingness to complain to others and to depend on authorities that was very unlike honor cultures, a bit more like dignity cultures. And we saw that people were not emphasizing necessarily their toughness and their bravery — *Oh, I'm going to prove them brave by attacking this person who slighted me with some racial microaggression* — nor were they emphasizing, you know, *I'm better than this, I'm not going to get upset by it, my worth's my worth no matter what*. They're emphasizing their status as victims, and you started seeing — people use this term oppression olympics; have you heard that one?

WOODS: I have, yes.

MANNING: Yeah, I've heard it in everyday speech, and it taps into something real. You get people arguing over whose groups had it the worst, who really faces oppression, who really needs to shut up and listen, and who really is privileged. And you see things like privilege being used as an insult, a way of shaming people. "Check your privilege," so admit that you're privileged, confess your privilege, as if it's a sin. And so you had this notion, it seemed like, in the way people were handling their disputes that they were emphasizing their own vulnerability and victimization, and even taking some pride in it, and exaggerating it in some cases, and making it up in some cases. So for example, you get things like hate crime hoaxes, where people claim to be the victims of hate crimes that never happened, for attention or to advance a political agenda or whatever the reason. So we saw this cluster of phenomena involving people emphasizing victimization, manufacturing it sometimes whole cloth, and at the same time, condemning privilege and condemning those who seem to be stronger, have it better, much like in an honor culture that would condemn cowardice or shame cowardice.

And so we hit upon this term "victimhood culture" to try to emphasize that it seems that, in this setting, victimhood is a status, a kind of moral worth or moral status, much like honor used to be in, say, the Old South and sort of like dignity was and still is in mainstream US culture. It's a source of making moral claims, and it's something people vie for and are sensitive to. And so we use that term to try to capture this part of the moral culture, that it privileges those seen as victims and condemns those seen as privileged — which is a very long-winded answer, but that's our reasoning for using that term, which is, for good for ill, the part that a lot of people want to focus on in our work.

WOODS: Right, no doubt. Now, that gives us kind of a bird's-eye overview of the situation, but what I'd like to know is: where do you think it came from? Because, of course, political correctness has been around college campuses for some time, but that's not quite the same thing. This is, I think, a new development. And yet it seems to have come out of nowhere. Do you have any way, using the tools of sociology, to try to understand where it came from?

MANNING: One of the things we do in our work is drawing from the sociology of conflict, particularly a tradition founded by a sociologist, Donald Black, is looking at how the pattern of social relations between the people in a setting or in an interaction shapes the sort of grievances they're likely to have and the ways they're likely to handle them. And I won't go into every facet of this, but for example, we talk about a couple things, like the grievances over slights and things that seem to put one person down or one group down, they tend to arise where people in groups are relatively equal, maybe not perfectly so, but relatively equal. That's where people are very sensitive to inequality. And vice versa, you get people who are extremely unequal — like think about the class system of medieval or ancient societies — there, you take that sort of inequality for granted, and a lot of your sensitivities are to things that reduce inequality, like the servants not being properly deferential or whatnot. And so we explain some aspects of this moral culture with features like the level of relative equality and diversity of the college setting and the diversity, as you might expect, has increased in the past 30, 40 years.

We also look at not just like the content of the grievances, but why people handle them in the way they do, why they do it by complaining to the authorities, demanding safe spaces, demanding bans on speakers, and shaming people on social media. And there, one of the main things we point to is people come to rely on third parties to handle their conflicts for them, to the extent that third parties are superior in status. Like people rely on the state, often. This being a much more powerful entity, they rely on that to handle their conflicts. In a tribal society, they might rely on like the village elders or whatnot.

And to the extent they have ready access to these things. And that's really a big part of this, why it's accelerated in recent years. There's been this tremendous growth in the size and scope of administrative authority on campuses, including the creation of new agencies and departments charged mostly with policing these types of offenses or addressing concerns related to verbal offenses or so-called discrimination or other things that fit into this moral framework. So you have this extensive network now of authorities who are encouraging students to bring their complaints here, bring your grievances here, that they're training them to recognize these things and be sensitive to them. And so that, we think, incentivizes a lot of the growth of this culture.

Another factor that's changed recently is social media, which really began to explode 5, 6, 7 years ago. And one impact social media can have is, you can think of public opinion as being another kind of third party you might rely on, much as people might rely on authority figures. And what social media does is provides everybody with blanket access to this sea of potential supporters out there. And a lot of the time, people are just sending their complaints out into the wind, airing them to whoever is willing to listen. And every now and again, one of these complaints goes viral. You get the big shame storms and the hashtag activism and sometimes very real consequences, people being fired or forced to go into hiding or other things. And so this has provided another sort of avenue for incentivizing and fostering complaint as a strategy for handling differences, rather than, say, sitting there and talking things out with people.

And also, this is a thing we don't address as much in the book, but it's definitely part of it: it provides for the creation of these kind of echo chambers. And you get these on all sides of the political spectrum and ideological groups and whatnot, but people enforcing each other's morality, so it becomes more and more extreme in various ways. And people are trying to

signal to each other that, you know, I'm the virtuous one here, I'm part of the in-crowd, and that also incentivizes certain extremes of complaints and sensitivity.

WOODS: There's even more going on here, because your book begins with a story from Oberlin College, right, where there was the claim that somebody had seen somebody wearing Ku Klux Klan regalia on campus.

MANNING: [laughing] Yeah.

WOODS: And it turns out, as you, again, very delicately point out, it turned out to be a woman wrapped in a blanket. Now, there was another episode not exaggerated as much as this one, but in which — I don't remember which university, but I wrote about it in my email newsletter — where again, a student said it looks like there's some kind of clan activity going on, and what they were actually seeing was an overhead projector with a cover on it through a window.

MANNING: [laughing] Oh, my.

WOODS: And so the student again came to the conclusion — astonishing to me — that just openly on a college campus, of all places, there was a clan meeting going on. Now, nobody in the world defends the clan today, and that's precisely the point. The clan is about as isolated a minority as you could imagine, and minority they are. There are basically no clan members. The likelihood that you in your life are ever going to stumble on a clan meeting is zero. I mean, you have a greater chance of being struck by lightning five times in the course of your life, and yet, we have many people who are ready to believe that that's not only likely, but indeed quite plausible, even in a place like Oberlin. So how do we account for that? So not just that we have the trigger warnings and the microaggressions and the safe spaces, but also this willingness, almost an eagerness to believe the wildest, most implausible things that are completely tone deaf with regard to how American society really functions?

MANNING: Right, some of it's a lot of people just don't have an accurate gauge of how the world works, young people especially so. But yeah, the Oberlin clan sighting was in a lot of ways the thing that inspired our whole project. This was back in 2013, and just the idea that, if anyone listening doesn't know, Oberlin is a small private progressive college. It's really known for a lot of progressive activism and very strong anti-racist activism. So the idea that there would be a clan den in Oberlin of all places, and like you said, there's not a whole lot of clan members left. They're out there, but you've got to figure this is a country of 317 million people. You can find 2,000 people for anything, any sort of group, whether it's lizards run the government or Stalin apology or whatever. But yeah, they're not common, and they're not at elite private liberal arts schools known for progressivism. And people were so prepared to believe, yes, there's Klansmen in our midst. It's a really strange thing.

Our first way of trying to understand that was through the work of a 19th century sociologist named Durkheim, a French sociologist. And one of his ideas is that groups need deviants. People need to have some sort of threat or enemy they manufacture. And so his idea was that, even in a society of saints, where people's conduct would be unimpeachable by our standards, there would still be sinners, because they would just find the least saintly among them and brand that person a sinner and treat things that to us wouldn't be a big deal as being horrible sins.

WOODS: Okay, okay, if I can — I generally don't interrupt a guest, but there's just an example that just comes readily to mind.

MANNING: Yeah.

WOODS: I've had a lot of association with traditional Latin Mass Catholicism, and I know a parish where — and the American bishops, let's say, are not super sympathetic to this, but some of them will hold their noses and tolerate people like us. So there's one parish where they gave these traditional Catholics everything they wanted. They could have the Old Latin Mass; they could have all the sacraments in the old rites from — it would be like Vatican II never occurred. They had everything they wanted, so now there's nothing for them to be fighting about. They would all be happy. And then they started arguing about, well, which translation of the Fatima prayer are you using in the rosary, and then that became the big thing. They had to root that out. So it maybe it's an illustration of what you're saying, that there's nothing, there's no objective reason for them to be fighting, other than this natural inclination to find enemies and root them out.

MANNING: Right, and so approaching it from that way, you have these social settings like modern progressive campuses, where there's a great deal of equality and toleration and diversity and very strong anti-racist ethics and anti-sexist ethics, and you see these two phenomena. One is very tiny things, things that until last week weren't considered wrongs at all, being defined as wrong. Suddenly this is racist, that's racist, whatever. And you also have like the clan example of people either making up or mistakenly believing that there's phantom activity out there, severe things that are happening that aren't actually happening, whether it's an intentional hoax, like someone slashing their own tires and drawing the swastika on their own car to show they've been victims of all the neo-Nazis that hang around elite private liberal arts schools, or whether it's somebody making what I guess you could call an honest mistake, but a fairly silly one if you know how the world works, of thinking this woman wrapped in a blanket is a clans member, and then everyone who hears the story, believing it.

And part of what's going on that we talk about in the book is that, when you have a moral system that's based around claims of victimhood and around arranging people into a hierarchy of victims who should be trusted and supported and believed at all costs and oppressors who are everywhere and their tendrils reach far and wide through society, it primes you to be ready to believe any sort of accusation, as long as the villain and the victim are the right identities. As long as long as you've got the who-whom correct, there's a very high degree of credulity about certain kinds of accusation. And you find it's part of the worldview of a lot of these activists that — and not saying there's no racists out there or anything like that. Everybody knows there are. But the idea that there's Klansmen lurking around Oberlin or something like that, or you get these various hate crime hoaxes involving nooses being hanging around campuses. It's supposedly a reference to lynching in the Jim Crow era, and a lot of those have turned out to be hoaxes. And you start seeing these patterns of someone's stereotype of what a hate crime is.

WOODS: Sure.

MANNING: The stereotype of the boogeyman sort of racist that's in their mind cropping up on these campuses, where those people exactly are least likely to be, and everyone's willing to believe it, though, because they think this threat is everywhere, and you're not supposed to at all be in credulous of complaints of victimization or of tales, no matter how outlandish

they might seem, because that shows you're a bad ally, you're disbelieving minorities, or maybe you're secretly supporting this Klansmen who's hanging around the campus. *Why are you against the witch hunter? Are you supporting witches? Are you a witch?* That sort of thing.

WOODS: Well, I was looking back at a few examples of some hoaxes. Like, for example, this actually wasn't a hoax, it was more lack of information, and then they just assume the worst. On the Vanderbilt campus, you had the case where somebody left a bag full of dog doo just outside, I guess it was a black student center or something like that, and so naturally, naturally, the first inclination must be: well, this is a racist attack. But it turned out that it was a blind woman on campus, and she doesn't know where all the trash cans are located, so she thought, *Well, I'm going to just try and leave it somewhere where maybe somebody can dispose of it*. And so then it was obviously a source of embarrassment, because the black students' association had already blown up, and they had already formed their conclusion about what happened. But then it just became a question of the hierarchy of oppression, because then she portrayed it as, *Well, we disabled people are subject to oppression on campus too*, and then you've got to weight which one —

So all right, so you have material in here on trigger warnings and safe spaces, and I think we're all familiar with these concepts, but what is it that you're bringing to the study of these things that's fresh and new, given that you're looking at it from the point of view of an academic discipline?

MANNING: Well, one thing we're trying to do is organize all these disparate things into a sort of coherent pattern. We think the common denominator across the safe spaces, the trigger warnings, the microaggression complaints, the hate crime hoaxes is this moral system that privileges and has supreme concern for people defined as victims, and at the same time has this hostility towards those defined as privileged or as oppressors, and a kind of Manichean worldview that you're either one or the other or you're somewhere in a hierarchy of them, and rights and duties differ depending on that.

And one difference I think we have from some contemporary takes is we do view this as a moral issue. This is a moral worldview that people have, which is different from just saying that, you know, "The kids are snowflakes," is a common criticism; they need safety, because they're cowardly and they're too sensitive, and they can't handle the real world. But you know, some of these cases, you see the activists at the forefront of some of the stuff are willing to take risks, or even sometimes get violent, as they have at a couple of incidents with conservative speakers on campus being attacked, or the riots at Berkeley, and so forth.

So it's not just a general culture of safetyism, and that might be part of it, but it's also a moral worldview, where people are outraged about something and taking sides very actively, and their concern with safety doesn't necessarily apply to everybody equally, because some are more privileged than others, and if you're privileged, you don't deserve safety. You don't need it, and you may not even deserve or need basic courtesy, which is why you get to things like the arguments that you can say whatever you want about whites or men or whoever. And it's not racism, even if you say, "Kill all white people," "Whites are evil," "Men need to die." That's not racism, that's not sexism, because they have structural power, and therefore it doesn't count. So you get this sort of who-whom ideology. We don't think it's just a matter of people being snowflakes; it's an ideological or a moral worldview, in which their enemies and their allies and people act accordingly. That's one part of it.

Another thing we bring is, even though we spend a lot of time explaining this concept of moral cultures — victim culture, honor culture, dignity culture — that's not really our explanation of why you get these different patterns. This is the way of classifying it and describing it.

WOODS: Yeah.

MANNING: And as sociologists, we try to look at some of the deeper social trends that encourage patterns of morality and conflict to evolve one way versus another, things like the rise of the administrative bureaucracy on campus or the growth of social media and other factors we think are contributing to these changes.

WOODS: And what you're saying is very helpful, because I sometimes hear, not as much anymore, but I hear conservatives repeating talking points from the 1980s about moral relativism. That's the last thing that's involved here. The people we're describing here are not moral relativists. They have their own competing morality. They're not saying that racism and anti-racism, that's a morally neutral distinction, and who's to say who's right and who's wrong? That is absolutely not what they're saying. It is a competing moral system.

Now, I do want to just spend a few minutes on the discipline of sociology itself, because you take practitioners of sociology to task in this book, because you say that — well, you say something that, let me just tell as you somebody who's outside sociology, it's not exactly coming as a huge surprise for the rest of us, that sociology is or has become a form of public advocacy for a particular point of view. And so I would like to know from you, when do you think that started? Or did sociology always have a kind of built-in bias?

MANNING: Yeah, that chapter might not be the best chapter for my career, but we'll see.

WOODS: Yeah, I know it. I know. But you did it. I mean, I was shocked to see that.

MANNING: It's out there now.

WOODS: Yeah, you did it.

MANNING: Yeah, to some extent, sociology has a long history of attracting reform-minded people, people who wanted to learn about society as a means of improving it in some way or offering some solutions. And so that goes back very, very deep into the history of the field. But some of the more specific problems we have that we address in that chapter really started ramping up around the 1960s with the rise of radical movements in the US and that influence on sociology. This is the point where Karl Marx gets defined as a founder of the field. Now, obviously, Marx had been around for a long time, but he wasn't really considered part of the sociological canon until around that time period. He never called himself a sociologist; he was an economist, a philosopher, and other things. But he becomes one of the revered holy trinity of founders that people like to talk about in my field around the 1960s.

And I don't want to go into a knee-jerk, blanket condemnation of everything Marx ever wrote, even though his influence on the 20th century was nightmarish. If you look at some of the models of society, there's things in there that might be useful ideas to extract, like the idea of the importance of economic systems for shaping culture and things like that. But the

influence on sociology has mostly not been good, in my opinion. It's mostly been people latch onto the morality tale aspect of his work, the more ideological part that views all of society as this great struggle between two sides — the oppressor group, the ruling class, and the oppressed group — and analyzes all things in that way, often, in ways that aren't producing any sort of scientifically testable explanations or hypotheses. It's just kind of after-the-fact classifying of who the good guys and the bad guys are.

And you see this influence spreading throughout the field and taking different forms. And it's called conflict theory in my field. And again, there's good versions of it. There's more sober versions of looking at intergroup struggle or inequality, and how the dynamics of elites versus non-elites can shape some phenomenon. But a lot of it's heavily ideological. It's complaining and giving a morality tale more than it is explaining or trying to analyze things. And so that thread has been growing in the field for a while, and in a lot of ways, this is the intellectual source of some of the victimhood culture stuff you see on campus. A lot of the ideologues, their talking points are ideas that have been circulating in sociology now for decades.

But we saw sort of acceleration over the past several decades of the extent to which sociology has become synonymous with activism. When you go back to even in the 1960s, when the radical elements were having their influence, there was still a sort of intellectual seriousness about it, and a lot of people in the field were just taking it for granted this is a field meant to explain social behavior, it's meant to come up with theories of behavior, and you still had a lot of — it was still the dominant view, I think, even if it was coupled with a view of, okay, we're understanding things in order to be activists or in order to reform. It was the idea of explaining coming first. And I have no quantitative data on this, beside a ton of examples in the chapter from things like topics of American Sociological Association meetings, to the pedigrees of some of the recent presidents, including one who said sociology's goal was to advocate democratic socialism. One wrote a book, *Liberation Sociology*, which is a call back to the Marxist-inspired liberation theology, and other examples.

The activists seem to be in a much stronger position in the field than they used to be, and that's starts to create a self-selection effect. It's getting harder, I think, to find people coming into this field because they're interested in a scientific approach to human behavior. If you're a student studying at a university, you wouldn't even necessarily get that impression, depending on what classes you took or who your instructors were. And so there's a kind of filter now for what sort of people we attract and what their interests are. And honestly, it's a little bit depressing, as someone who would rather have a field that analyzes and explains things. And I got into it because I like doing that kind of nerdy stuff and was fascinated by human behavior and how it worked and what the patterns were.

And it's a big, diverse field, right, so I always wince a little bit about tarrying the whole thing with one brush. If you look at an edition of our top journal, *American Sociological Review*, you'll see a lot of solid empirical work in there, people doing real research with real data. But you'll also look at, say, our national organization and its anyone meetings, and the organization seems to have been taken over pretty heavily by the ideologues, and our meeting themes are often overtly ideological, and the awards and who gets the recognition in that organization is often overtly ideological. So this decay of sociology as a science, I think, has accelerated even in my career. And I'm young. I just got my PhD seven years ago.

WOODS: Are you tenured?

MANNING: Yes [laughing].

WOODS: Thank goodness. All right, thank goodness. All right, there's a lot in this book. I mean, it's really, really quite detailed. You seem to know — either you know every relevant campus incident ,or there are so many more than I could even dream of that you just scratched a little surface and found all these. But as I read your concluding chapter, I mean, obviously you're a chronicler. You can't singlehandedly change a cultural phenomenon, so you don't at the end say, "Well, here's what we can do to fix this," or, "If we do X or Y, maybe this will go away." But people are going to want some — by the way, you also cover free speech on campus. I mean, there's a lot of stuff in here. But people are going to want some kind of a resolution at the end. I mean, how are we better off for now being able to — I mean, I guess it's better to understand a phenomenon than just be frustrated by it. But if this were ever to change, where could the change come from?

MANNING: That's one of the more frustrating aspects of this work. I mean, ideally, understanding something, and if you think it's a problem, if you understand it, you would have very clear solutions. But sometimes problems are very hard to solve at a practical level, even if you have a good handle, even if our theory is right about what's led up to these changes, walking them back's not necessarily simple, because we're talking about things that are big, macro social trends that no one person is well positioned to roll back, or maybe that we don't even want to roll back. Some of these things we don't like might be negative consequences of changes that are otherwise positive, right? Like one of the things we talked about is the sensitivity to racism and sexism and the tendency to define seemingly harmless things as being that might be a side effect of actually stamping out a lot of the severe racism and sexism. And we're in favor of that, but we just wish we wouldn't have this over correction.

And we talk about things that might be more feasible, such as rolling back the scale of the administrations on campuses. Now, the roadmap for how you do that, I'm not sure. That requires some more thinking about how you organize and exert pressure and how you even get a bureaucracy to trim it, which is not the easiest thing in the world. They tend to just grow indefinitely until they run out of resources. But that's one strategy we have hit upon, is if growth of administration and increasing involvement of administration in the lives of young people is driving some of these trends, then try to scale that back, try to prune some of that.

Another direction we discuss is getting young people more practiced in other ways of handling conflict. I mean, if the problem is sort of a self-reinforcing cycle of you've been encouraged to handle your conflicts by complaining, and therefore you don't know how to handle them in any other way so you're more likely to complain in the future, therefore you never really learn how to handle your grievances by, say, talking things out with people, explaining, "What you said was kind of offensive," or, "Here's what I thought, so what did you mean by that? And maybe we can find a way to not get on each other's nerves in the future." And that might be a more productive thing than shaming someone on Twitter or complaining to the administration or whatnot.

Well, how do you get people practiced in handling their conflicts in these ways that we might see as more productive? One thing to do might be to try to encourage young people having space to do this. So free play, the free range parenting movement, trying to support people who are getting in trouble for letting their kids play alone park or walk alone two blocks to the store, whatever, and encouraging people to give your kids this unstructured time where they can deal with other people their age and learn to manage their issues without having an

adult five feet away. And that might be another potential solution, training people in alternative ways of handling their grievances by encouraging free range parenting or a decline and what they call helicopter parenting. That's another potential path.

WOODS: Well, I mean, I certainly encourage those things. And see, from my point of view, now that I'm out of academia — I have a PhD in history, but I'm out of academia. I'm able to support myself just producing stuff that people seem to like, and that means I can do and say anything I want. And for me, almost any topic that comes up, I want to try and study and give us at least a semi-academic response. Like we have the financial crisis. I wrote a book trying to figure out what exactly the cause of that was.

But with something like this, your response has been very measured and scholarly, and my response has just been outright ridicule, not so much because I expect to convert these people with ridicule, but because I want to knock them off their self-righteous moral perch, where they believe themselves to be morally superior to everybody. No, I think the more I can show them to be — and the thing is, this kind of conflates me with a lot of pop right-wing critics, because the easiest thing in the world to criticize are spoiled college kids complaining about nothing. That's easy. And I don't necessarily like to look like just them, because I have a lot of differences with them, but doggone it, I can't help myself. And so I feel like the best you can do is, the crazier it gets, the better, because you can just warn people about it.

And I think most Americans, even though they do share some of the concerns of people on campuses, I still think the majority of Americans don't think it's a good thing when Jordan Peterson is giving a speech and the protesters who've been removed are banging on the doors and saying, "Lock them up and burn it down." I think it's good for that to be publicized, because I think Americans should know this, and the more they know about it and the more repulsed they are by it, the better. Because as I say, sitting these people down when, as you say, they live in a completely different moral universe, and trying to persuade them one by one, I wish they hadn't walled themselves off in this way, but unfortunately, they have. So it seems to me, the only tool I have is just to ridicule them. And by ridiculing them, I don't have to call them names. All I have to do is just highlight what they're doing. I mean, really, all I'm doing is giving them free publicity. Am I wrong to respond that way? What do you think I should be doing?

MANNING: I'm not sure [laughing].

WOODS: [laughing] I'm asking a lot of you. You're not my therapist.

MANNING: Or a rabbi or anything like that. But I don't know; I'm wary of digging in and ridiculing things, because you get the cycle of polarization. And like you said, no one's convinced by any of it. To some extent, you're right that exposing this more widely might be valuable, because a lot of normal people, they don't live on campuses or spend time around academics, or they don't even have much interaction maybe with the HR department at their place of work. And they may not know how far the trends are going in some places or give much thought to — this is coming down the pike. These kids you're saying aren't prepared for the real world now will be your HR director in ten years.

WOODS: Yeah, exactly right, exactly right. And also, these are people who want to be in influential political positions, and they're going to tell you how you should live. So my thinking is that, if there's one thing these universities care about more than the actual double

standard where some people's grievances mean we drop everything and cater to them and other people don't even exist — if there's if there's one thing they care about more than that, it's money. And if I can let the alumni know what's going on at their university, and I can get them maybe to close their wallets, that's one good function that just a typical guy like me can perform.

MANNING: Right, and as somebody who works at the university currently, I can't exactly get on the defunding train.

WOODS: No, I understand that, right, but you know —

MANNING: But I would understand why an outsider would consider that a sanction on the table.

WOODS: Right.

MANNING: And I think that, for those of us on the inside, that's a real danger of, if we can't bring some sanity, I mean why would — especially like, I'm in West Virginia. This is a red state. Why would the people here want any of their tax money or government support going to support people who think, you know, make fun of the crackers all you want to; it's not really racism; they deserve it, and that kind of thing.

WOODS: Yeah.

MANNING: Why would people in conservative states support universities where conservatives aren't allowed to speak?

WOODS: Yeah, it's crazy.

MANNING: And people really need to start thinking about, if we don't control this on our end, it could get ugly. But it's being slashed, and people just saying, all right, now we're going to get some government control — that gives us another option that might happen too, is you might get people advocating for more government micromanaging of what universities are allowed to say, which is not a spin I think either side in the mainstream right now is looking for. But that could be the result.

WOODS: Well, I appreciate your time today. The book is *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*, by Bradley Campbell and our guest today, Jason Manning. Best of luck in your career, but we respect that you've in effect stepped out onto that third rail, and it will benefit a lot of people who will thereby understanding things better, and so you've done something important, regardless of what happens. So thanks again. I appreciate it.

MANNING: Thank you. Have a good day.