

Groupthink in Academia:
Majoritarian Departmental Politics and the Professional Pyramid

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Generally speaking, we can observe that the scientists in any particular institutional and political setting move as a flock, reserving their controversies and particular originalities for matters that do not call into question the fundamental system of biases they share.

Gunnar Myrdal, 1963²

Perhaps we avoid studying our institutional lives because such work is not valued by our colleagues. The academy is, after all, a club, and members are expected to be discreet. Like any exclusive club, the academic world fears public scrutiny. Research is in the public domain. Outsiders might use what the research reveals against the academy.

Richard Wisniewski, 2000³

The “thousand profound scholars” may have failed, first, because they were scholars, secondly, because they were profound, and thirdly, because they were a thousand.

Edgar Allan Poe, 1843⁴

In baseball, fans of different teams can agree on general issues of baseball rules, umpiring, and performance evaluation because such matters are separable from team support. In academia, however, we find research, standards for research, and standards for standards. Criticizing standards is a form of research sometimes called “methodology.” Methods, standards, norms, and practices evolve to form a mass without definite order or priority.

Professors often omit important things and point in an unfortunate direction without making any false statement. Alongside truth, then, is judgment of importance—the issues, the positions, the arguments, the audiences. In our view, one’s ideological sensibilities and commitments are often intimately bound up with one’s notions of the academic enterprise. One’s positions on how performance should be umpired or evaluated and one’s “team” support *are not separable.*

We think vital discussion of ideology in academia is bound to be ideological, and that good scholarship calls on us to declare that what principally motivates the present investigation is our belief that, by and large, the humanities and social science professors are weak in certain sensibilities that we hold. Specifically, there is little classical liberalism. In policy terms, classical liberalism favors domestic reform generally in the directions of significantly decontrolling markets and personal choice, cutting the welfare state, and depoliticizing society. A further policy feature of classical liberalism, in our view, is a strong disposition against military entanglements abroad.

Ample evidence on the ideological profile of professors in the humanities and social sciences indicates that, though not monolithic, the dominant sensibilities are a combination of social democracy and support for (or acquiescence to) most domestic government interventions. (We identify modern American “liberalism” as social democracy, a political outlook that readily treads on voluntarist ethics and that sees the polity as an organization and, as such, advocates the pursuit of collective endeavors, such as equalizing well-being and opportunity.)

Social democratic views do not always run against the grain of classical liberalism. But, in our view, such frictions as do exist indicate problems. Also, even absent friction, the neglect and omission of important classical-liberal ideas often counts as a problem.

Our take, then, is spurred by the judgment that there is something unfortunate in the humanities and social sciences. But that judgment is not argued here.

Adapting Groupthink to the Academic Setting

We approach academic ideology in terms of *groupthink*. Groupthink analysis examines decision-making presupposed to be defective. In that sense, groupthink analysis is pejorative.

In the seminal work, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, Irving L. Janis begins by looking at a number of well-known fiascoes, including the Bay of Pigs, escalation in Vietnam, and Watergate.⁵ The episodes came to be judged fiascoes even by those responsible for them. Janis starts with defectiveness and seeks to explain the absence of correction. He defines groupthink as “members’ strivings for unanimity overriding their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.” He declares the term’s “invidious connotation.”⁶

A major development in the Janis tradition is the work by Paul ‘t Hart, entitled, *Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure*.⁷ Hart explains: “the focus of this study will be on flaws in the operation of small, high-level groups at the helm of major projects or policies that become fiascoes.”⁸ More briefly, groupthink is “excessive concurrence-seeking.”⁹ The applications also are mainly patent fiascoes, including the Iran-Contra affair. Diane Vaughan has discussed the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster in terms of groupthink (need to check this).¹⁰

The groupthink theorist wants to gain standing as a social theorist and therefore wants to avoid unnecessary controversy. Accordingly, groupthink theorists—at least those like Janis and Hart—have focused on episodes where, in hindsight, the judgment of failure (or error) is uncontroversial. The need for uncontroversial judgment is one reason why the scope of groupthink applications has been quite limited.

In this essay, we assume the posture of groupthink theorizing in treating a matter where the presupposition of failure is anything but uncontroversial. The setting of academic ideology is quite different from the settings traditionally examined by groupthink theorists. We suggest, however, that, given the presupposition of failure, central mechanisms in academe make it

possible to adapt groupthink theory to the academic setting. We try to make plausible the idea that, if academic groups were caught up in defective thoughts, the defectiveness would be resistant to correction. We explain persistence, or the lack of correction. We do not seek to explain “how the problem got started,” partly because of space limits, partly because there never was an Eden.

The groupthink literature in the tradition of Janis and Hart mostly examines the belief processes of policy-making groups. Those settings and beliefs are quite different from the academic setting. The differences perhaps ought to make us very cautious about using groupthink to interpret humanities/social sciences academic ideology.

The cases examined in the groupthink literature (Janis, Hart, Vaughn, etc.) usually have the following features:

- The group is small.
- The group is fairly neatly defined—a group of “insiders.”
- The group is chief-based. Decision-making is highly centralized.
- The group is concerned about security leaks or other constraints that lead it to put a premium on secrecy.
- The group acts under great stress.
- The group makes decisions that run great risks and huge possible dangers.
- The group is dealing with issue of great immediacy and exigency.
- The bad beliefs are specific to the decision at hand.
- The bad beliefs are shallow; they are not about issues of one’s identity. There is usually potential for eventual admission of defectiveness.

In all these features, Janis-Hart groups differ quite significantly from academic groups. By contrast, academic groups—whether a group of colleagues in a university department or the leadership at a prestigious journal or association—are larger, less well defined, much less chief-based, much less specific-action oriented, and much less subject to stress, urgency, risk, and danger. Their bad beliefs are much deeper, more complex, and more incorrigible. The bad beliefs are more of the nature of moral, political, and aesthetic values. The differences make the academic group more diffuse and variegated in purpose.

Despite all these differences, however, we purport that there are basic similarity between Janis-Hart groups and academic groups:

- Again, beliefs are defective (in our view, anyway).
- There are tendencies that tend toward concurrence seeking, self-validation, and exclusion of challenges to core beliefs. Mechanisms might result in an “in-group” that is insular, self-perpetuating, and self-reinforcing.

Cultural Elites and the 40-Yard Lines

Any analysis of the character of academic elites should bear in mind that it is self-flattering for elites to endorse the established processes of political culture, at least to the extent that such processes exalts academia. Because such processes have made elites of Joan and Phil, Joan and Phil will tend to say that the processes are working; it represents a collective wisdom. The principle takes special importance in the United States during the 20th Century, because the polity became increasingly social democratic in character and policy, and academic tribes got organized, expanded, and gained cultural power.

Throughout the 20th century, there was generally a mutual movement between established policy and the expanding academic elite, both of which were growing increasingly social

democratic. There have been radicals in academia, but now, since the collapse of socialist philosophies, it is more accurate to think of the humanities and social science elites as mostly between establishment-left and so-called progressivism.¹¹

On any given policy issue, think of the status-quo policy as defining the “50 yard line.” We think it is useful to suppose that humanities and social science professors are “on average” about on the conventional Democratic “yard line.” What “number” yard line that is depends on how large one sees the football field. They might think of it as the Democratic “20 yard line.” However, in our classical liberal view, we see the football field as much larger, and, moreover, define “distance”, not by Democratic versus Republican, but by laissez-faire versus government control.¹² In our eyes, most conventional Democratic views are 40-yard line positions, well within conventional opinion. Unlike many conservative commentators, our view is not that academia needs more Republicans, nor that academia ought to better reflect the views of the “average American.” We confess that our analysis defies the conventional liberal-versus-conservative framework and tends to reject 40-yard lines. We are critical of Democrats and Republicans for not being supportive of the laissez faire 10 or 20 yard line, or, on some issues even the laissez faire endzone.

Elites of a social-democratic bent would say that democracy is imperfect, but generally working. That faith gives presumption to establishment cultural processes and rationalizes the marginalization of policy reform ideas outside the 40-yard lines. Indeed, to admit that established, long-standing policy is very wrong and obviously foolish would be embarrassing, for it would threaten the presumption of collective wisdom and the established anointment of elites.

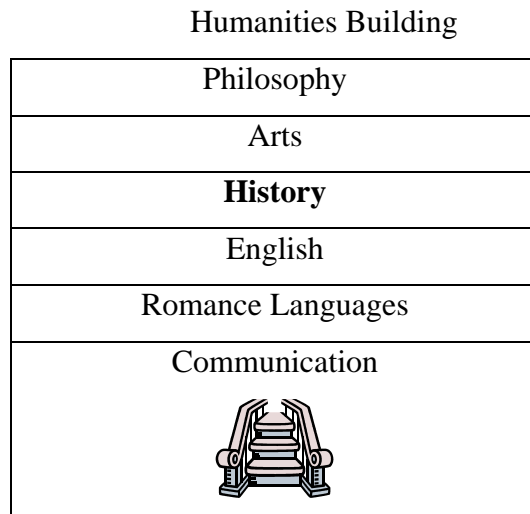
But we need to explain in greater detail how entire academic professions can remain resistant to challenging ideas that would improve thinking. Any explanation must relate *micro* decisions to *macro* norms and values.

Departmental Majoritarianism

Many people do not have a good understanding of how academia works. Imagine the parents of a student at XY University coming to visit the campus. They tour the campus and see the buildings. They sit in on a class. They hear reports from their child.

It is natural to imagine the inner workings of XYU as being like other institutions, hierarchical in purpose, structure, and authority. The organization is led by the Provost or President, with the help of Trustees, and divisions or colleges are led by Deans. Beneath the Administration come the academic departments. In buildings around campus one finds cluster of professors' office and nearby classroom.

Figure 1: What is the XYU History Department?



What is the XYU History department? *Department* sounds like a part. It sounds like a sub-unit of a larger agency. It sounds subordinate to agency chiefs.

Consider the important decisions the History department has to make:

- Whom to hire?
- Whom to tenure and promote?
- What to teach?
- What to research? What issues, positions, arguments to consider? Whom to write for?
- Which students to promote?

Actors within an organization subdivide labor and attention. In most nonacademic organizations, the bosses can scarcely tamper with tasks assigned to subunits; rather, they look for results that advance the organizational mission. In academe there is the same necessary subdivision and delegation, but the sense of organizational mission is much fuzzier. Furthermore, scholarship is inherently specialized and embedded in the scholarly community. Even Adam Smith, who criticized academia, emphasized that any “extraneous jurisdiction” over substantive issues of teaching “is liable to be exercised both ignorantly and capriciously.”¹³ The upshot is that administrators generally rubber-stamp department decisions. The department is left to decide the important questions. It enjoys autonomy quite unlike what the uninitiated suppose. Occasionally a fuss erupts over a particular incident, but for matters of an ideological nature, the department, really, is not “under” any person or body whatsoever.

The most important decisions are tenure-track faculty hiring, firing, and promotion. Such decisions within the department come down to majority vote. Yes, the chair exercises certain powers, committees control agendas, and so on. But the central and final procedure for rendering

the most important decisions is democracy among the tenure-track professors—*departmental majoritarianism*.

Most intellectuals develop ideological sensibilities by the age of 25 or 30.¹⁴ They come to basic outlooks and sensibilities, and rarely substantially revise them. Intellectual delight and existential comfort are had, not in going back and re-examining prior decisions, but in refining and developing ideas down the path mastered.¹⁵ Professors are likely to value other researchers pursuing similar questions, mastering similar paths. They are likely to disvalue researchers who pursue questions predicated on beliefs at odds with their own fundamental beliefs and mastery. Indeed, disagreement at the fundamental levels might threaten one's selfhood and be a source of personal distress, as well as acrimony between colleagues. Also, one professor, call him Professor A, might lose standing and credibility with students if a colleague teaching those same students, but in a different course, were to explode some of the premises of Professor A's course material. The syndromes and mechanisms suggested here apply especially in cases of inferior ideological views, but many even apply to better views.

In the matter of hiring a new member of the department, it is more than plausible to suppose that the majority will tend to support candidates like them in the matter of fundamental beliefs, values, and commitments. Indeed, as a scholar and a thinker, one of the prime responsibilities is to navigate one's way through the big issues, the important things, make judgments and, necessarily, commitments, and move on. These judgments are not apart from science or scholarship, and one is not unjustified in saying: "If Candidate A has judged differently on fundamentals, then Candidate A has exhibited bad scholarly/scientific judgment." This point of view universalizes and cannot be disposed of. There is no way for anyone to step outside of it. Discriminating on the basis of differences in fundamentals, therefore, cannot be

condemned, in the abstract, as contrary to responsible scholarship. We all discriminate on the basis of ideology, and, in the abstract, doing so is perfectly justifiable.

We noted that the academic setting differs from the settings examined by groupthink theorists. Yet some of those differences might compensate for each other. In academia, the focus of belief and action is not any crucial policy decision, like invading Cuba. That means there is no corresponding secrecy and needful separation from regular channels of discourse. That might mean there is no deep insulation. Another difference, however, had to do with the depth or personal significance of the beliefs in question. In academia, the beliefs are deep-seated sensibilities, matters of selfhood and identity. For that reason, their protection and preservation is often a matter of high personal stakes. The existential significance of ideological beliefs in some respects compensates for the fact that each personnel decision, etc., in academia is otherwise mundane and rather socially inconsequential.

In context, people know they must judge and act on deep sensibilities, and they know, if only tacitly, that there is no real scandal in doing so. Theories of group formation and social dynamics tell us that social groups tend to seek and attract newcomers like themselves,¹⁶ tend to screen out and repel misfits,¹⁷ and tend to mold the unformed in their own image.^{18,19}

Suppose it is time to make a new hire, and 51 percent of the department share a broadly similar ideology—say, progressivism/social democracy, conservatism, or classical liberalism/libertarianism—and, further, believe that, in order to be a good colleague and a good professor, one must share that ideology. What happens? They hire one like themselves. The 51 percent becomes 55 percent. Then it becomes 60 percent, then 65 percent, then 70 percent, and so on. As noted by Stephen Balch²⁰ and others, majoritarianism tends to produce ideological uniformity within the department.

The syndrome is rather invariant to what the ideology happens to be. The George Mason University Economics Department is led by and dominated by classical liberals. Some would self-identify as conservative. Only a few would self-identify as liberal (in the current sense). A case of ideological discrimination? The classical liberals and conservatives think that being an interventionist in the manner of, say, Kenneth Arrow, Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, or Dani Rodrik reveals failings in economic judgment. Many GMU economists regard undue confidence in government and politics to be bad science, and status-quo complacency or arcane work of little relevance to be a scientific failure to address the most important things.

The tendency toward uniformity is not the whole story. An ideological oddball might be well liked and non-threatening, perhaps because he is meek or perhaps he does research in some arcane mode that makes him irrelevant to fundamental issues. Also, departments usually have an ethic of *consensus*. Colleagues are human beings, and they are “stuck” with each other. They usually seek to avoid internal acrimony and aggravation. The majority does not steamroll over minority interests. The consensus factor works toward a blandness in personnel matters—the majority advances a job candidate who is in their camp but not too strident or outspoken. The consensus factor moderates the majority, but does not undo the tendency toward uniformity. Probably its main effect is to pull that uniform character toward blandness, in particular, a conventional presumption in favor of the conventional policies and opinions of whatever major party that the departmental majority favors.

Outsiders often think that the classical-liberal or conservative professor only needs to get tenure. But imagine building a career through graduate school and pre-tenure employment (about 11 years) just to be able to be yourself. You find you are no longer yourself—not that your ideological views change much, but that any ideological *motivation* has likely receded.

You “go native,” as they say. Your 20s and early 30s are a crucial period of development and cannot be reversed. Moreover, even after tenure, you depend on department colleagues for pay raises, resources, teaching assignments, scheduling, promotions, recognition, and consideration.

Because of departmental majoritarianism, then, each department tends toward ideological uniformity, perhaps watered down. Some XYU students lament that the History Department lacks classical liberals or conservatives. But at least citizens at large can hope that the public conversation among prestigious academic historians includes such viewpoints. Perhaps they can hope to shop for a university that has a History department with an ideology more to their liking.

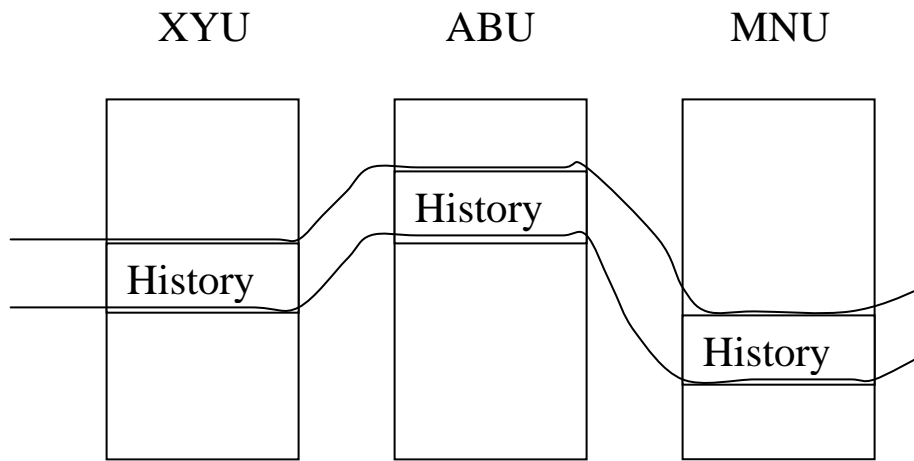
The Professional Pyramid

Sarah comes from a family that admires thinkers like Adam Smith, F.A. Hayek, and Milton Friedman. She went off to XY University. After her first year she disappointedly informs her parents that the humanities and social science departments seem to be dominated by social democrats. Her parents grumble, but what’s done is done. However, they have another child looking forward to college to study History. This time, they shop more carefully and investigate the History departments. Everywhere they see signs of a social democratic bent, and wonder: Why is that?

The principal explanation for the uniformity across campuses lies in understanding what the XYU History is at an existential level. In selfhood, the XYU History department is not so much a subunit of XYU, but rather a village of the larger tribe, History, *the profession*. History, the profession, has a settlement at XYU, the XYU History Department. As professional researchers, members of that department find much of their meaning and validation in belonging to and serving the History profession. The earlier figure showed that the historians at XYU share a roof with philosophers, language professors, and so on. In fact, they almost never engage in

scholarly discourse with those people. Rather, their scholarly life takes place within the tribe of History, which resides in settlements situated *laterally* across geography and physical institutions (see Figure 2). History is the “invisible college” to which most historians really principally belong. The department is more a creature of History than of XYU.

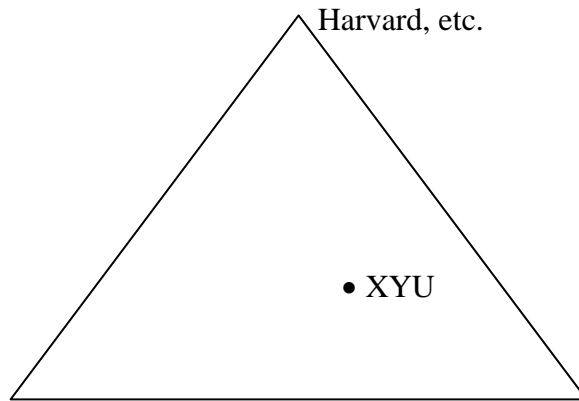
Figure 2: History Resides in Settlements throughout Academe



Again, the XYU History department has to decide jobs, etc. Those are micro decisions. To make decision and justify the actions taken, they draw on the macro norms and values of the tribe. The micro and macro are intimately and thickly interconnected.

In structure, the tribe is pyramidal, with elite at the apex and widening echelons at each step down (see Figure 3). Position within the pyramid is based on focal, conventional rankings of key institutions, notably the academic journals, the departments, publishers, citations, grants, awards, and other kudos. Aside from playing a role as journal editor, etc., individuals help to organize the tribe by such activities as writing letters, praising work, and citing research, and the individuals too are subject to ranking. All the usual metrics are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

*Figure 3: The Profession Pyramid of History:
Status rankings of departments, journals, etc.*



Research is very specialized. The tribe is broken down into subfields. American History, for example, might be broken down by period, by aspect (social, cultural, economic, gender, political, legal, etc.), by mode of research, by theme or character. Prestige and eminence are really determined within the subfield, a kind of club within the tribe. The clubs constitute the tribe, just as agencies and branches constitute the government. The club sorts people, with overt reference to pedigree, publication, citations, and letters. The club controls these filters and then applies them to itself. It controls the graduate programs and journals. Spawning and hiring new PhDs, the club reproduces itself.

The academic job market is quite unlike the market for waiters or cab drivers. In all but the literal sense, one History department “sells” its newly minted PhDs to other History departments. The consumers (History departments), the producers (other History departments), and the products (newly minted History PhDs) *are all historians*. Waiters and cab drivers are accountable to their employers, who are accountable to consumers. Historians are accountable mainly only to other historians. Meanwhile, they are spending monies drawn from taxpayers, tuition-payers, foundations, and charitable donors.

The pyramid of club and tribe is self-validating. But who else could possibly provide the validation? The pyramidal structure is, to a great extent, in the nature of the beast. A department's micro decisions are decisions about friends, colleagues, enemies, friends of friends, students of mentors, and so on. Naturally the department must look beyond itself to make and justify its decision.

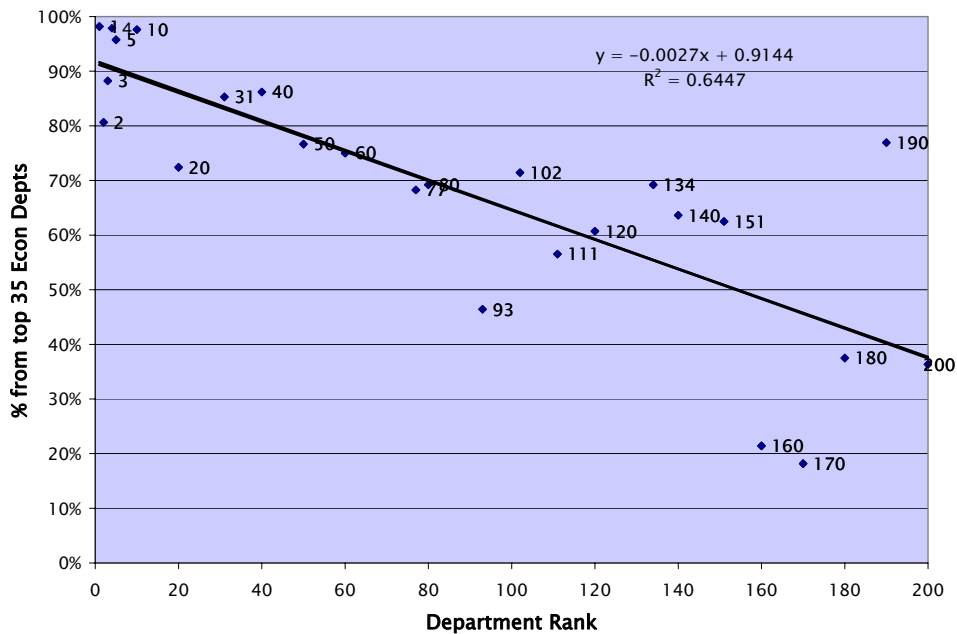
They look to the profession, as one looks to heritage. The allegiance is partly a sincere faith in the tribe. But partly it is a practical matter of needing ways that are commonly understood. The tribe's standards are focal points around which expectations are mutually coordinated and consensus is tolerably achieved.²¹ Without an encompassing standard, a discipline has no prospect of being a coherent enterprise. The precept, *History is what historians do and historians are those with History degrees and appointments*, may not be intellectually satisfying, but at least it keeps the wheels turning fairly smoothly.

The reliance on the tribe's standards to decide jobs, pay, security, teaching loads, grants, RAs, etc., is so entrenched and ingrained that players come to value the standards for their own sake. Having an article accepted at a top journal brings gain and prestige, regardless of what one would really think if one were to sit down and think long and hard about the article or the journal. Functionality depends on internalizing the norms.

Now, suppose that the departments and journals at the apex of the pyramid go ideology j. Suppose the stripe suffuses the apex. Then there is no internal conflict and any dissent from below is safely ignored. Indeed, inferiors will be inclined to refrain from criticism, because they are dependent on superiors' acceptance and endorsement. Micro decisions throughout the pyramid will tend to follow the apex. And besides concurrence mechanisms, there is propagation. The apex produces PhDs and places them well.

Klein²² uses a conventional ranking of 200 Economics department worldwide, treats the top 35 as the apex, and sees where faculty members got their PhDs. Figure 4 shows the scatter-plot and fitted line of the percentage of department with a top PhD. At the very top departments, more than 90 percent come from the worldwide top-35 departments; the top is almost entirely self-regenerating. According to the regression line, the department ranked 100th would have about 65 percent of its faculty from the top 35. Departments generally are smaller the further down the pyramid, so the top-35 departments train and mentor the people who populate most of top 200 departments. The profession, especially at the higher echelons, mostly consists of people directly indebted to and personally loyal to the apex. Yet these results do not fully capture the domination by the top departments, as many studies show that they have vastly disproportional influence in journals, grants, second-generation degrees, and so on.²³

Figure 4: The percentage of economics faculty with PhD from the worldwide top-35 departments.
Source: Klein 2005.



Val Burris documents the case of Sociology in the United States in “The Academic Caste System: Prestige Hierarchies in Ph.D. Exchange Networks²⁴”:

- “Graduates from the top 5 departments account for roughly one-third of all faculty hired in all 94 departments. The top 20 departments account for roughly 70 percent of the total. Boundaries to upward mobility are extremely rigid. Sociologists with degrees from non-top 20 departments are rarely hired at top 20 departments and almost never hired at top 5 departments.”²⁵
- “[M]y data suggest that the hiring of senior faculty by prestigious departments is even *more* incestuous than the hiring of new PhDs... Of the 430 full-time faculty employed by the top 20 sociology departments...only 7 (less than 2 percent) received their PhD from a non-top 20 department, worked for three or more years in a non-top 20 department, and, after building their scholarly reputations, advanced to a faculty position in one of the top 20 departments.”²⁶

As for Law, Richard Redding²⁷ found that “[a] third of all new teachers [hired in law schools between 1996 and 2000] graduated from either Harvard (18%) or Yale (15%); another third graduated from other top-12 schools, and 20 percent graduated from other top-25 law schools.”

Because of propagation, follow-the-apex, and freeze-out, if the apex goes ideology j, it will tend to sweep ideology j into positions in every department all the way down the pyramid. We are oversimplifying, but perhaps not much. There will be some dissent, but heterodoxy focuses on criticizing the mainstream pyramid, because the pyramid remains the gravitational well of group practice and individual ambition. Like any central power, people fight over its exercise and distribution. If parallel pyramids get erected, they generally are either ignored or perhaps co-opted

into the fringes of the official pyramid, altering its character somewhat. In most fields of the humanities and social sciences, there is practically no institutional presence of classical-liberal character with any significant professional standing.

It is possible and even plausible that the professional pyramid and departmental majoritarianism would mutually coordinate and exclude scholars opposed to ideology j, especially from the more highly ranked departments. Although academia differs from the settings explored by groupthink theorists, it exhibits many of the same tendencies and failings.

Academic Groupthink

Irving Janis²⁸ provides a summary table of antecedent conditions and symptoms of groupthink. We reproduce most of them, omitting a few items that do not fit the academic application (such as “Provocative Situation Context”). Text in regular face are our words. We sketch a narrative of increasing social-democratic groupthink from about 1972, when the ratio of Democrat to Republican in the humanities and social sciences²⁹ was about 4 to 1, to today, when it is about 8 to 1.³⁰ What follows **in bold-face** are the antecedent conditions and symptoms of groupthink verbatim from Janis.

ANTECEDENT CONDITIONS:

Decision-Makers Constitute a Cohesive Group—The professional pyramid and

departmental autonomy tend toward group cohesiveness.

Structural Faults of the Organization

Insulation of the Group—No one outside the pyramid is qualified to judge. Insiders

safely ignore outside opinion.

Homogeneity of Members' Social Background and Ideology—Sorting and molding mechanisms produce ideological homogeneity, both throughout the pyramid and within the individual department.

In 1972 the social science/humanities faculty was preponderantly Democratic.

Once the skew became too great, it tumbled into a self-reinforcing process.

Klein and Stern³¹ provide evidence that among professors the Democratic tent is significantly narrower in policy views than the Republican tent.

OBSERVABLE CONSEQUENCES:

Symptoms of Groupthink

Type I: Overestimation of the Group

Illusion of Invulnerability—Academics feel that those outside the pyramid lack knowledge and credibility, and that those inside the pyramid would not dare go renegade.

Belief in Inherent Morality of the Group—Individuals chose to join an academic profession. Many say they do so to serve scholarship, learning, science, truth, society, etc. Belonging is infused with dedication and purpose. It is part of one's identity.

Heightened uniformity made the group over-confident. They took their ideas to greater extremes. Facing less testing and challenge, the habits of thought became more foolhardy and close-minded.

Type II: Closed-Mindedness

Collective Rationalizations—Academic professions develop elaborate scholastic dogmas to justify the omission of challenging or intractable ideas. For example,

discussions that depart the 40-yard lines and explore substantially different arrangements are dismissed as “normative,” “ideological,” or “advocacy.” Classical-liberal formulations of voluntary versus coercive action would be dismissed as illusory and ideological. In economics, mathematical model building dominates the theoretical literature, and it eclipses important facets of knowledge and discovery and corresponding important virtues of free markets. Janis writes: “When a group of people who respect each other’s opinions arrive at a unanimous view, each member is likely to feel that the belief must be true. This reliance on consensual validation tends to replace individual critical thinking and reality-testing...”³²

Stereotypes of Out-Groups—Janis writes: “One of the symptoms of groupthink is the members’ persistence in conveying to each other the cliché and oversimplified images of political enemies embodied in long-standing ideological stereotypes.”³³ It is not uncommon for social-democrat academics to lump their critics together as “conservatives” or “the right,” and, as noted for example by Bauerlein,³⁴ to assume that they are represented by the likes of George W. Bush, Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Sean Hannity. Few social-democratic academics engage classical liberalism as represented by Adam Smith, F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, or Richard Epstein.

Self-Censorship—The pyramid functions much like a genteel society, in which criticism is muted. Particularly because of norms of consensus, it is impolitic to alienate colleagues. Going along to get along, dissidents and miscreants tend to

suppress their disagreements with the dominant view, leading to what Timur Kuran³⁵ calls preference falsification.

Direct Pressure on Dissenters—In Janis’s work, an insider who dissents is pressured to toe the line. In academia, the dissenter is more likely frozen out.

As the quality of belief deteriorated, the group became more sensitive to tension, more intolerant of would-be challengers and miscreants. This led to tighter vetting and expulsion, more uniformity, more intellectual deterioration, and more intolerance.

Anyone contemplating an academic career knows the score. Rothman et al³⁶ provide evidence that conservative scholars hold less academically prestigious positions, controlling for research accomplishment, and Klein and Stern³⁷ show that Republican-voting scholars who are members of major academic associations are more likely to have landed outside of academia (particularly in Sociology, History, and Philosophy).

Symptoms of Defective Decision-Making

Incomplete Survey of Alternatives

Incomplete Survey of Objectives

Failure to Reappraise Initially Rejected Alternatives

Poor Information Search

Selective Bias in Processing Information at Hand

—All five of the foregoing items from Janis’s figure can be applied to social-democratic and 40-yard line blinders and precepts. Classical liberal and conservative ideas are often ignored, dismissed by way of elaborate dogmas, or treated only in false caricature.

For Example...

Perhaps the clearest way to illustrate how we see the problem of social-democratic groupthink in the humanities and social sciences is to do a thought experiment. Imagine a doctoral student who unabashedly pursues classical-liberal ideas like those listed below. Ask yourself whether such a student would be able to find warm support in elite departments of Political Science, Sociology, History, etc. Ask yourself whether the student, no matter how solid his research, would be likely to win grants, get into “good” journals, and thrive on the academic job market.

Consider some specific claims that a student’s research might explore:

- F.D.R. and the New Deal deepened and prolonged the Great Depression.
- American labor laws, such as union privileges, have never been justified and hurt the poor.
- The k-12 school system in the United States is fruitfully analyzed as a socialist industry, and it exhibits most of the characteristic failings of socialism.
- Most mandated recycling programs are a waste.

In our view, such findings are more than merely plausible, and it would be easy to multiple such examples. They are not completely unheard of within the tribe of Economics. But a new PhD developing such claims, and substantiating them thoroughly, would fail on the job market and in the “good” journals.³⁸ The lack of tribe credentials and seals of approval would justify micro decisions to freeze out such a scholar.

Consider some broader theses or postulates in dissertations in Philosophy, Politics, Sociology, Anthropology, or History:

- “Social justice” makes no sense (as argued by Hayek).
- “Social justice” is an atavism (as argued by Hayek).

- Government intervention, such as the minimum-wage law, is the initiation of coercion; the social-democratic state is a society of wholesale coercions.
- The prime features of democratic processes include ignorance, superficiality, and systematic biases.
- Democracy often wars on liberty, decency, and prosperity.
- The rise of social democracy since the late 19th century may be fruitfully regarded as a subversion of liberalism, specifically in that it promotes a view of the polity as a kind of organization.
- Since 1880, intellectuals have altered the meaning of many key terms of the liberal lexicon—such as freedom, liberty, liberalism, justice, rights, property, rule of law, equity, and equality—so as to undermine their power in opposition to a social-democratic worldview.
- Organizational integrity varies positively with the voluntary basis of participation and funding—that is, government organizations tend to lack organizational integrity because they do not face the threat of loss of support based on voluntary participation.
- The distinction between voluntary and coercive action (or laissez-faire versus interventionism) provides a better framework for analyzing political views and public opinion than liberal-versus-conservative.

These ideas are anathema to the tribes of Sociology, History, Political Science, Philosophy, etc. Groupthink keeps them out of “good” journals and course curricula. In some of the fields there are alternative centers and associations that would pursue such ideas, but they generally remain peripheral to the professional pyramid. Classical liberal and conservative

scholars know the score, and, if they nonetheless try to get on in academia, they usually water down their ideas and cloak or misrepresent who they really are.

Conclusion

The social democratic element is well established in the humanities and social sciences, but the wider world of thought and opinion is looking up. Public discourse is increasingly competitive and individuated. Recent decades have seen the defeat of socialist ideologies. The social-democratic professor can inspire commitment in attacking American militarism, but the domestic agenda smacks of paternalism and collectivism. Although collectivist appeals based on democracy and the political “we” are here to stay, the continual advancement of communications, wealth, and globalization would seem to assure that those appeals will languish in a political culture of ever increasing fragmentation. Classical liberals and conservatives continue to make powerful points about the failings of government and the benefits of freedom. Critics beyond academia (or in Economics) deploy basic economics and policy wonkery to challenge individual policies of government control.

Our hunch about the future is that the social-democratic dominance within the humanities and social sciences will grow increasingly insipid. Over time it will become less hostile to classical liberal and conservative ideas, and such scholars of a mild, strategic kind will have greater success in permeating the humanities and social sciences. Enlightenment has its own power and rewards, and, nowadays, even scholarly discourse is much too contestable to keep classical liberalism down.

¹ *Acknowledgement:* We thank Richard Redding and Robert Maranto for detailed feedback that significantly improved the paper.

² Myrdal, Gunnar. 1983 [1969] *Objectivity in Social Research*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

- ³ Wisniewski, Richard. 2000. "The Averted Gaze." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. 31(5): 5-23
- ⁴ Poe, Edgar Allan. 1843. The Rationale of Verse, *The Pioneer* March:xxx
- ⁵ Janis, Irving L.. 1982. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- ⁶ Ibid, 9
- ⁷ Hart, Paul 't. 1990. *Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure*. Reprinted by Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994.
- ⁸ Ibid, 4
- ⁹ Ibid, 7
- ¹⁰ Vaughan, Diane. 1996. *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- ¹¹ Today, political radicalism is probably most common in such programs as Woman, Gender, and Black Studies, but even there it tends to avoid overt socialism. That the regular social sciences, History, and Philosophy are mostly somewhere between establishment-left and progressive is indicated by the cluster analysis of policy-view data in Klein and Stern (2005, 289f), which also shows most Democratic professors do *not* support government ownership of industrial enterprises.. Economics is something of an exception, being by far the most ideologically diverse field in the set.
- ¹² A popular work that offers a classical-liberal interpretation of contemporary politics is Maddox and Lilie (1984), appropriately titled *Beyond Liberal and Conservative*. Their two-dimensional scheme has become quite familiar, but one shortcoming is that it leaves out foreign policy.
- ¹³ In treating the matter of extraneous jurisdiction, as by bishop, governor, or minister, Smith (1981, 761) continues: "In its nature it is arbitrary and discretionary, and the persons who exercise it, neither attending upon the lectures of the teacher themselves, nor perhaps understanding the sciences which it is his business to teach, are seldom capable of exercising it with judgment."
- ¹⁴ Sears, David O. and Carolyn L. Funk. 1999. "Evidence of the Long-Term Persistence of Adults' Political Predispositions." *Journal of Politics* 61(1), Feb: 1-28.
- ¹⁵ Ditto, P. H., & Lopez, D. F. (1992). Motivated Skepticism: Use of Differential Decision Criteria for Preferred and Non-preferred Conclusions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 568-584. and Nickerson, R.S. (1998). Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2, 175-220.
- ¹⁶ McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M.Cook (2001). Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 27: 415-444.
- ¹⁷ Allport, Gordon W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison Wesley. Brewer, Marilyn B. (1999). "The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate?" *Journal of Social Issues*.
- ¹⁸ Katz, E. and P. F. Lazarsfeld. 1955. *Personal Influence. The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. New York: Free Press.
- ¹⁹ Klein 1998 treats self-sorting, screening, and belief plasticity in the tendency toward uniformity in the organizational culture of governmental agencies.
- ²⁰ Balch, Stephen H. 2004. Toward a Reconstitution of Academic Governance. *Academic Questions* 17(1) (Winter 2003-2004): 67-72.
- ²¹ Whitley, Richard. 1984. *The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ²² Klein, Daniel B. 2005. [The Ph.D. Circle in Academic Economics](#). *Econ Journal Watch* 2(1), April: 133-48.
- ²³ Ibid
- ²⁴ Burris, Val. 2004. The Academic Caste System: Prestige Hierarchies in PhD Exchange Networks. *American Sociological Review* 69 (April): 239-64.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 247 – 249.
- ²⁶ Ibid, 251.
- ²⁷ Redding, R.E. 2003. Where Did You Go to Law School? Gatekeeping by the Professoriate and Its Implications for Legal Education. *Journal of Legal Education*, 53, 594-614. Citation found on p. 599.
- ²⁸ Janis, Irving L.. 1982. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. p. 244
- ²⁹ Excluding two-year colleges.
- ³⁰ Klein, Daniel B. and Charlotta Stern. 2005. [Professors and Their Politics: The Policy Views of Social Scientists](#). *Critical Review* 17(3-4): 257-303. Data found on p. 264.

³¹ Ibid, 272.

³² Janis, op. cit., 37

³³ Loc.cit

³⁴ Bauerlein, Mark. 2004. Liberal Groupthink Is Anti-Intellectual. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51(12), Nov 12: B.6.

³⁵ Kuran, Timur. 1995. *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Harvard University Press.

³⁶ Rothman, Stanley, S. Robert Lichter, Neil Nevitte. 2005. "Politics and Professional Advancement Among College Faculty." *The Forum* 3(1), article 2.

³⁷ Klein and Stern, op. cit., 275.

³⁸ It is conceivable that in Economics such a scholar would succeed in placing such an article in a reputable journal, but it is likely that she would nonetheless have no prospects at the "better" Economics departments.