

Where We've Come and Where We Should Go: The Route to Academic Pluralism

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America's opinion leadership is probably more ideologically divided today than at any time since the Great Depression.¹ Left and right find vociferous voice in virtually every public medium, and while there is rarely balance, there is also nothing like monopoly, whether in publishing, broadcasting or the "new media". Moreover, despite an overall liberal/left preponderance, the general trend has been toward increasing heterogeneity. The main exception has been the academy, where the edge of left over right in politically and culturally sensitive fields ranges from about 3 to 2 in economics to well over 10 to 1 in English and philosophy. And the evidence suggests that these academic asymmetries are in all likelihood worsening.²

The nearly closed intellectual shop that has developed on our campuses should be a source of major concern for all Americans who appreciate the educational value of competition between ideas, but most especially for conservatives of every stripe whose thought bears the brunt of the exclusion. Since the academy educates future generations of citizens and leaders, houses an army of "expert" commentators, and, perhaps most significantly, establishes what counts in elite circles as "respectable opinion", conservatives should recognize that reopening it is not only something highly desirable for education's sake, but for the future of the principles and ways of life they cherish.

There is only one feasible path to greater intellectual pluralism in academe and that leads through the faculty. "Personnel is policy" as much in academe as elsewhere, and only when the composition of faculties begin to alter—when faculty members who dissent from prevailing orthodoxies can be hired and make careers in appreciable number—will fresh breezes start to blow.

Lesser measures will have but marginal effect. Even the most provocative speaker is but a flash in the academic pan, a comet streaking across a firmament whose fixed stars are the

tenured professoriate. Likewise for alterations in the curriculum. What's taught is far more a matter of who's teaching it than anything the catalogue describes.

Materially changing the composition of faculties is a daunting task. Fortunately, a massive overhaul may not be required to achieve important intellectual results. The admission of a significant cohort of dissenters to secure career prospects should have effects far beyond what their numbers might suggest. The flabbiness, trivialization, and incoherence of so many academic orthodoxies, the very nature of postmodernism's *métier*, opens the real possibility of their destabilization once serious internal debate gets underway. Still, to reach even this point will entail challenging some central assumptions upon which the "constitutional system" of academe is founded, assumptions that possess a "givenness" born of long and undisputed usage and the formidable professional and ideological interests that they've come to anchor. Dislodging them will not only require dogged application of organizational pressure, but an ability to reimagine the sum and substance of academic life.

I.

The near academic monopoly enjoyed by the liberal/left has many roots. But it could never have established itself were it not taken for granted by nearly all those with any title to cultural respectability that, unlike other professions, the professoriate can be trusted to intellectually police itself. Whereas bureaucratic experts must be held responsible to elected officials, and business executives to the marketplace (as well as officials), scholars are thought answerable to virtually no one for the intellectual quality of their work except their own colleagues. This has naturally lead to cozy arrangements, the academic equivalent of an industrial trust restricting the competition of ideas for the sake of insider advantage.

Yes, colleges and universities possess governing boards and, in theory, legislatures retain fiduciary responsibilities over public institutions. Yet their powers are almost never exercised about questions of academic quality and content. Trustees, although seasoned and tough minded in their chosen spheres, turn to putty in contemplation of the cries of academic freedom that academic interventions are certain to evoke. Ditto for politicians, who, however hardened to the dangers of the legislative jungle, liquefy on approaching those of the blackboard. (Grantors, to be sure, have influence *over the direction research takes*, meaning that, in the natural and applied sciences especially, the questions researched—though not the findings reached—are substantially determined by defense and commercial interests. But this has minor impact on the *cultural content* of academic life.)

These enviable immunities have been largely acquired through the juxtaposition of superficially similar but distinct concepts. Essentially, professors have persuaded the laity, as well as themselves, that all the intellectual marketplaces of academe are created equal and are thus to be governed by identical rules. Specifically, the marketplaces of the humanities and social sciences have been successfully equated with those of the natural sciences, where, as is well-known, truth naturally outs.

Although this equation of domains had some plausibility in the heady springtime of the modern research university, more than a century of subsequent experience, and the growing political correctness of the last forty years, have demonstrated its inadequacy. On its reconsideration the success of reform depends.

The first step to wisdom lies in appreciating how anomalous among the intellectual arts natural science actually remains. The true sciences have developed systems of experiment and close observation that allow for dispositive tests in the trial of alternative explanations,

permitting consensuses about facts and theories to voluntarily emerge among practitioners. Even more impressively, the true sciences can translate many of their results into powerful utilities widely employed and appreciated by the outside world. Scientists have unusually clear cut ways of knowing when they've got it right, and are highly rewarded both individually, and as a guild, for so getting it.

Needless to say, this doesn't come merely as a gift to those who choose to be physicists, chemists, geologists, and biologists. It derives instead from the character of the problems they attack. Although sometimes maddeningly difficult, they are nonetheless amenable, with great ingenuity and technique, to the isolation, simplification, and clarification of key elements in a manner cumulatively leading to general insights of precision and power. It is for this reason that the language of mathematics becomes their practice so well. Reduced to clear, crisp, interchangeable bits, the conceptual elements of natural science give numbers true fit.

It doesn't work that way when it comes to the observation of human beings. While quantification has its uses in humane scholarship, they are usually confined to the definition of massive terrain features such as aggregate economic resources, or the great divides of public opinion. It reveals as much of a society's detailed interior decor as does a room covered in furniture cloth.

When, in imitation of the natural sciences, numbers are force fed into humane discourse, they often fail even in this, wreaking instead an artificiality that trivializes or obscures. However enabled by survey research, cliometrics, or economic analysis, the bottom line in humane discourse remains judgment, informed by breadth of learning, creative intelligence, and that primordial empathy with one's fellow creatures sometimes called common sense. In these key

respects the sciences proper part company with the realms of humane learning, even those that assume science's title.

They part company in another respect as well. Although natural science has produced the most revolutionary cultural effects, it has, for the time being at least, descended into a certain taken-for-grantedness within the larger culture. Perhaps this represents a momentary lull in its history of induced upheaval, but, for the most part, the newest revelations in physics, astronomy, chemistry, and geology, are not fed into the maw of politics. Environmental science is, of course, an exception. And sometimes biology too, with issues pertaining to health, the environment and, increasingly, human identity of interest to activists. But no interest groups – apart from those enthusiastic about intelligent design—are as yet critical of biology's actual findings, only their possible misuse.

The “findings” of humane learning enjoy no such privilege. They're comestibles for political consumption, often under suspicion of being cooked to taste. Politics is, after all, argument—at its higher levels argument about history, the nature of justice, the character of man, the workings of the economy, or simply the fairness and efficiency of everyday social arrangements. The authority scholars marshal can tilt these arguments. Thus, while the natural sciences generate utilities whose universal appreciation humane learning can only envy, humane learning in some sense compensates through the production of polemical utilities whose value is assessed along partisan lines. The fields of force in the natural sciences pull strongly toward truth, nothing more will serve, and everything less is eventually to be found out. In humane learning they pull at cross purposes, sometimes toward truth, but frequently toward serviceability for, and reward from, causes.

Moreover, these causes, as the data on professorial allegiances indicate, are not evenly distributed across the spectrum. As already noted, it's the left that recruits the big battalions. This is not because the right lacks interest in employing scholarship, but because humane scholarship, so much the artful conflation of words, merges far better with the projects of the left.

The left, to vastly but usefully simplify, is about visions of change, while the right is about protecting things as they are. Humane learning also tends toward visions – visions of the good, beautiful, and true. Especially when it comes to the production of “theory” – read feminism, the utopian variants of ecology, and the numerous epigone of Marxism – the symbiosis between visionary thinkers, on the one hand, and activists on the other, can be smooth and mutually rewarding. (Had we a significant utopian right the situation might well be different). By enmeshing themselves in the causes of race, gender, and class, the most vocal and driving segments of the academic left have been enabled to gain a support and sense of purpose their less politicized peers generally lack. This zeal has time and time again translated into institutional power.

The constitutional theory of academe, entrusting intellectual decision making almost exclusively to academics, makes good sense in the natural sciences whose characteristic qualities it assumes universally hold. In the natural sciences consensus about theory represents the piecemeal aggregation of individual consents, one hypothesis crowding out others as observers evaluate their respective congruence with growing bodies of evidence. Scientific powers-that-be may sometimes hinder this process, but, given the multiplicity of research centers, and the existence of relatively conclusive tests, they have never been able to halt it. Likewise, scientific curriculum and personnel decisions remain anchored in considerations relevant to the knowledge

and skills recommended by this same rationally assembled consensus. From the perspective of lay overseers, such a record has made *laissez faire, laissez passes*, seem by far the best practice.

The dynamic in humane learning has proved otherwise. Potent bodies of theoretical knowledge recognized as such by “laity”, as well as practitioners, have not developed. There are kernels of theory to be sure, as well as large bodies of well-attested facts and an enormous amount of interesting, and sometimes penetrating insight and judgment, but no one looks for a flow of universally conceded and powerful utilities from fields like literature, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, political science, or, for the most part, economics. Instead, one too often finds creeds, socially constructed beliefs (in the true spirit of postmodernism) which reflect causes served rather than verisimilitude attained. And where one has creeds authoritarianism often follows, because only thereby does the creed’s arbitrariness get masked and its reward-system preserved. The academy’s naive extension of the natural science model of internal governance into humane learning has made it easier for this authoritarianism – that is to say, political correctness—to develop.

The critical factor in the erection of ideological hierarchy has been academe’s almost total reliance on a cooptation process, dominated by faculty majorities, to control hiring and tenure. The exclusion of external lay oversight was more or less accomplished by the mid-twentieth century through the triumph of the contemporary notions of academic freedom and shared governance incorporated in the AAUP/AAC 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure and subsequent resolutions.³ (The firings of the McCarthy era constituted oversight’s last discrediting gasp) Since in humane learning hiring and tenuring decisions are heavily imbued with creedal and cause desiderata, ideologically dominant coalitions, once sufficiently in the saddle, have been able to use them to drive dissident perspectives toward extinction⁴, a

phenomenon the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, together with other seasoned political hands, would have hardly found surprising.

Withdrawal of supervision and majoritarian decision-making is far from the whole story. If they were, different universities and colleges, within the extended universe of American higher education, should have moved in a variety of ideological directions. That they largely did not, suggests that the driving factor has been the appeal of visionary creeds for status-seeking intellectuals otherwise light on useful knowledge. But the nullity of governing boards, and the hiring power of departmental majorities, has lent the process a runaway character that might otherwise have been avoided, resulting in the virtually wall-to-wall ideological monoculture now to be seen on campus after campus.

II.

Like it or not, the intellectual governance of academe, if not quite hermetically sealed against lay influence, is entrenched against it within multiple defensive rings. The first ring is comprised by the reigning concept of academic freedom, eliding the distinction between the natural sciences and humane learning, and thereby also between the liberties of searchers-after-truth and the privileges of guild self-interest. Governing boards and legislatures are fully snared by these confusions. One can envision, of course, some national crisis in which the academy's general *incivism* becomes politically intolerable. But failing this, it is hard to imagine any massive arousing of slumbering fiduciaries in the foreseeable future. At particular institutions, however—perhaps those buffeted by scandal or an especially galling ideological outrage - adventuresome trustees may seize an occasion for pressing against the perimeters.

To yield any profit, this assault will have to involve close collaboration with senior administration—and university presidents rarely arrive in their positions without substantial

vetting by the ideologically committed. Although the great majority therefore espouse academe's corporate values with enthusiasm, as men and women of practical affairs, most are also capable of recognizing the institutional downsides of skewed intellectual climates. Given their control over budgets and staffs and quasi-academic status, they have access to many more leverage points than do trustees in isolation.

Unfortunately, significant intellectual reform, even under these best of conditions, will still require protracted pressure, and while presidents and trustees come and go, professors are, more or less, forever—bringing us to the status-quo's second ring of intellectual defense, tenure. Tenure has a significance for the lives of individual faculty quite different from that which it possesses for the balance of university power. For the individual scholar tenure serves as advertised, protecting dissident opinion and, as such, is frequently a lifesaver for conservatives. (Although without new intake, there are fewer and fewer such creatures to be saved.) But viewed in its relation to academic governance, tenure has the effect of creating a semi-permanent faculty, which, much like any other civil service, can delay, unravel, or roll back the efforts of transient reformers. Even with the best of wills, a university president contemplating a challenge to ideological vested interests must reckon on what can be realistically accomplished in the time he has available, together with the considerable damage the predictable hubbub will inevitably inflict on his subsequent advancement.

If trustees and chancellors are uncertain reeds, can donor power provide the needed oomph? Here again, alas, hope is more often hope against hope, than any realistic expectation, as we here reach the status quo's third ring of fortification, endowment.

By endowment is meant not just the surpassing fortunes on which many elite institutions rest, though these make the contributions of most donors weigh much less against considerations

of internal politics than might otherwise seem likely. (As was most famously witnessed in 1995 when, following faculty protest, Yale returned a \$20,000,000 gift from Lee Bass that had been intended to support new Western Civilization programming.) Beyond these, it is the lavish endowments of psychological preferment and social benefaction that allow universities and colleges, many cuts below the Ivy League, to so contain donor unrest. The appeals of alma mater as the cherished scene of youth's morning (and evenings), are difficult to ignore. Big hitters are assiduously courted. Meetings with the president, seats on the fifty-yard line, seats on the board, each carry sizeable cachet, have a way of turning potential critics into self-blinded insiders preferring to believe the best and told little else. Moreover, America is a land in love with education as the engine of mobility at the heart of the national dream. This aspirational font showers prestige on virtually every reputable university and college in the land.

There are, of course, doubters, but they scarcely know what to do with their doubts. Those who give get appreciation, even honor. Walking away leaves little but a bad taste. The better course - finding ways to give against the grain—requires a cleverness hard to come by without instruction, a service development offices are unlikely to provide.

This is not a message of despair, but realistic expectation. Too strong to be taken at a rush, the citadels of political correctness are nonetheless vulnerable to patient siege. For all their apparent buttressing, their cloud-capped towers are mainly mental gossamer, false positions liable to collapse once under protracted squeeze. The key is concentrating reform's modest current forces on the points of maximum vulnerability. Where then to begin?

The first step lies in providing reliable guideposts for those wondering what can be done to foster change. Trustees need to understand that their responsibilities don't end with fund raising and cheer leading. Donors must learn that there is more they can do than just walk away

in disgust. Dissident academics require direction and inspiration to take advantage of the opportunities before them.

Let's begin with trustees. They should be reminded that many of the reasons ultimate control over America's universities and colleges was originally lodged outside the faculty remain good ones. Specifically, they should understand that concentrations of power tend to corrupt wherever they occur, even where such power lies in the hands of the intellectually elevated. The weaknesses of the current laissez faire regime, the gulfs that separate scholarly practice in different domains, and the governance implications of these gulfs, must be clarified for them.

There won't be any sudden epiphany. The best to be hoped for is a gradually deepening immersion by particular boards in the intellectual problems of their institutions, breeding an increasing confidence in addressing them and enhanced resources for continuing to do so. Most boards are virtually unstaffed, leaving them dependent on the institutional apparatus they are supposed to supervise. A "moment" will thus have arrived when a board decides it needs to "staff up" to better exercise its intellectual responsibilities. The creation of academic advisory councils made up of distinguished scholars and scientists would be a splendid way to begin. Such blue-ribbon bodies commissioned to investigate the state of intellectual practice across disciplines, could start educating trustees, to say nothing of the larger university community, about the true corollaries of academic freedom. This, in turn, might lead to the further elaboration of standard-setting mechanisms, perhaps in the form university offices – similar in status to those that now sustain "diversity"—charged with uplifting the overall tenor of the academic culture, assisting weaker fields in rising toward the levels of the stronger, and embedding an understanding of best intellectual practice in the graduate training of every doctoral student.

Could one actually imagine such a process unfolding? It would necessarily require intimate collaboration between trustees and an unusual university CEO—suggesting that the best initial move for an enterprising board is to hire such a pathfinder. Circumstance, in the form of scandal or public outrage, like the “Affaire Ward Churchill” at the University of Colorado, serving to dissipate, even temporarily, a university’s endowment of psychological capital, would certainly also contribute to feasibility. But however put in motion, a single successful example of constructive trustee engagement could lead to others and then, just possibly, to a genuinely broad based campaign for the academic uplift of ideologically crimped fields.

In mediating this uplift, governance reform on the principle of “different strokes for different folks”, is essential. Exceptional deference to insider governance has powerful justification in the natural and applied sciences. The fields of humane learning may not only warrant a good deal more lay oversight, but also the introduction of some institutionalized forms of adversarialism. The spreading movement to create new and “intellectually diverse” academic programming offers one very promising way of accomplishing this.

The courtroom, perhaps, provides a better guide for the governance of humane learning than does the laboratory. As in academe, so too in court, the discovery of truth is the transcending objective. In court, however, partisanship isn’t disguised, but admitted, institutionalized, and turned to truth’s advantage. Lawyers, as officers of the court can’t struggle “no holds barred”. But though they are obliged to play by the legal rules, they are also expected to make their client’s best possible case. It is this clash of rival efforts, mediated by a neutral judge and jury, that operates to deliver enlightenment.

Unlike attorneys, it is not for professors to understand themselves as the pliers of causes. Yet they easily slip into such roles. Perhaps then, in order to keep them honest—to the greater

intellectual good of all—it might do well to import into their midst something like the courtroom’s deliberately structured theater of contest. A recognition of contending “schools of thought”, as an accepted, indeed, cultivated organizational element within universities—kept, to be sure, within the rules of reason and civility by higher university authority—poses an attractive way of accomplishing this purpose.

New programs, representing conservative, traditional liberal, and libertarian perspectives are now springing up and are prospering at institutions like Princeton, Duke, and Brown. These, together with smaller sprouts at other universities, sponsor “intellectually diverse” speakers, conferences, courses and even modest programs of study. Some of these programs are also experiencing significant fund raising successes, mainly because they have finally provided disgruntled donors with that long sought after means of “constructively” giving to alma mater. And since university presidents and development offices often seem pleased with this win-win arrangement, “psychological endowment” is finally being turned into a facilitator rather than a barrier to reform. In addition, the creation of new programming provides frustrated faculty dissidents with a way to precipitate institutional change that does not leave them at loggerheads with their higher ups.

New programs of modest dimension can have intellectual impacts significantly exceeding their size. But to become genuine paths to intellectual pluralism they need climb toward a much higher organizational plateau. Crucially, they need to be able to hire and train, provide secure career venues for dissenting scholars, and serve as launching pads for entry into the scholarly profession. Given the tensions that can rise between rival viewpoints, effective intellectual pluralism probably requires more than just official blessing, it demands firm institutional ground on which to stand. At a minimum there is a need for new programmatic entities constituting

departments-in-fact, if not departments-in-name, because only at the departmental level, or higher, does semi-autonomy of function confer the requisite degree of career control embodied in the possession of faculty lines.

Programs limited to the sponsorship of extracurricular events are relatively easy to establish, especially if the money is there. So long as courses are not offered or, of greater moment, curricula and degrees are not involved, administrative approval is usually enough to confer official status. Beyond that, faculty bodies must give sanction, and given the likely influence of zealots, herein will lie the rub. In unusual circumstances, trustee and presidential decisiveness may allow the creation of a major program through pure *coup de main*. Otherwise, a steady clambering upward will be required, moving from lectures, through courses, to minors, to majors, before reaching for the final prize. Not an easy assignment, though with art and diplomacy, as well as demonstrations of student, donor and political interest, from step to rising step, probably feasible at least at some places. And once accomplished, easier elsewhere by virtue of the demonstration effect.

This is a not a call for “affirmative action” for ideas or ideologues, nor for the authorization of self-contained intellectual ghettos that ignore everything beyond their walls. Too many already exist. In order to justify their purpose, new programs and departments must be committed to freewheeling intellectual engagement and a readiness to examine the assumptions favored by their own membership, to which occasional gadflies might be useful additions. There is a fine line to be drawn here: common sensibility rather than a common doctrine being the thing to be sought. For example, in the current university environment, a department devoted to the integrated study of Western Civilization would probably bring together scholars whose interests were sufficiently overlapping to provide a strong sense of professional fellowship (and

risk reduction), without simultaneously creating any stale unity of thought. The same might be true of a department focused on studies of what could be called “free institutions”—the history and interconnection of constitutionalism, market economics, and the variety of social, cultural, and philosophical arrangements associated with them. There is hardly a single way of pursuing such studies, but the subject matter alone is sufficiently heterodox to make a strong feeling of community among practitioners almost inevitable. Both of these subject areas would also resonate with disaffected donors, since each clearly communicates a challenge to politically correct habits of thought.

In an environment of deliberately fostered intellectual contest, the academic responsibilities of senior university administration would necessarily expand. Ensuring reasoned discourse in an atmosphere of civility will take an attentiveness, concentration, and even imagination not now frequently displayed. There might, for instance, be a variety of interesting ways in our era of electronic communication to put the interrogation of opposing perspectives on full public display. Administration will need to cultivate them. More venerable formats might also be taken off the shelf. A revival of the medieval university practice of periodic open disputations between rival perspectives has a potential worth considering.

Perhaps all this is just whistling in the dark. Although not contemplating a revolution in the intellectual climate of academe, the creation of departments or other programming of similar heft, may require more gumption than any governing board or university president is ever likely to summon. So, looking further down the road, there may yet be another hope. The information revolution holds the potential to make higher education—all education—a much more capital intensive and much less labor intensive business than it presently is. Conceivably, it will be mass marketing of virtual classrooms and faculties that finally breaks the grip of the ideological

guilds. But before the internet becomes the academic route of choice, the better part of a generation is likely to pass, to the enduring loss of both liberal education and our civic culture.

Let us then seize the moment.

¹ See James Q. Wilson, “How Divided Are We” in *Commentary*, February 2006 for a forceful presentation of this view.

² See Stanley Rothman, S. Robert Lichter, and Neil Nevitte, “Politics and Professional Advancement Among College Faculty”, *The Forum*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, Article 2.

³ For these documents see AAUP, *Policy Documents and Reports*. The most explicit avowal by the AAUP of the “scientific justification” for the exercise of academic freedom can be found in that organization’s founding document, *The 1915 Declaration of Principles*. Interestingly this can no longer be found in *Policy Documents and Reports*, but is included in the AAUP’s *Academic Freedom and Tenure* (Louis Joughin ed., 1969) pp. 155-176.

⁴ I expand on this point in *The Antidote to Academic Orthodoxy*, *The Chronicle Review*, April 23, 2004, pp.B7-B9.