

Embarrassed as a Non-Left Professor?

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In her *New York Times* article, “Professor Is a Label that Leans to the Left,” (Patricia Cohen 2007) reports on a new paper about why professors lean left. The following paragraphs are from the NYT article:

“The overwhelmingly liberal tilt of university professors has been explained by everything from outright bias to higher I.Q. scores. Now new research suggests that critics may have been asking the wrong question. Instead of looking at why most professors are liberal, they should ask why so many liberals—and so few conservatives—want to be professors...

Jobs can be typecast in different ways, said Neil Gross and Ethan Fosse, who undertook the study. For instance, less than 6% of nurses today are men. Discrimination against male candidates may be a factor, but the primary reason for the disparity is that most people consider nursing to be a woman’s career, Mr. Gross said. That means not many men aspire to become nurses in the first place—a point made in the recent Lee Daniels film “Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire.” When John (Lenny Kravitz) asks the 16-year-old Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) and her friends whether they’ve ever seen a male nurse before, all answer no amid giddy laughter.”

In their paper, Gross and Fosse are suggesting that men don’t want to become nurses because people will giggle at that. Perhaps there is something to that. There may be a path-dependence that has gendered nursing and works to keep it largely female. But for the non-left professor—by

“non-left” I mean in particular classical liberal, libertarian, or conservative, not centrist or neuter—the analogy does not ring true.

I’ve never dreaded telling an acquaintance I’m a professor. I don’t fret that he’d figure I like FDR or *The West Wing* or single-payer healthcare. Why should I care if he did? As for people I care about, they get past any professor stereotype.

I hang out with a lot of non-left professors. I’ve never heard any say he dreaded people’s reaction to the professor revelation.

Most elite chess and poker players are men. Are those fields gender typecast? Would a woman dread reactions to the revelation that she is a chess or poker player? Might not such a woman find a special pride in having cracked a male field?

Indeed, sometimes the non-left professor may feel that way. Also, the non-left professor has the comfort of blaming leftist bias for his not being more eminent.

Role models and mentors do matter a lot. That there are relatively few will certainly matter. But that’s different from the giggle theory.

Even from afar, however, a student can admire a Milton Friedman or Richard Epstein. It isn’t hard for one to find images of the non-left professor. One communes with Milton Friedman by reading his books and watching the many videos of him available on Youtube.com. But, again, not taking classes with a non-left professor will certainly dampen the non-left student’s academic aspirations and prospects.

Can the mechanisms be disentangled? In the recent book *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope and Reforms*, published by the American Enterprise Institute, Charlotta Stern and I discuss groupthink mechanisms. The majoritarian procedure of each department means that once a majority leans left, the department will tend toward leftist/neuter uniformity. The pyramidal structure of each disci-

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pline means that publication, awards, grants, recommendations will follow the pyramid's apex, and if the apex goes left it tends to sweep leftists/neuters into job posts throughout the pyramid.

If leftists have a lock on many fields, it means that non-left applicants will tend to be screened out. Awareness of that feeds back to the non-left student's thoughts about the future. Self-selection is a function of the screening.

In their research paper, Gross and Fosse show awareness of some of the complexities. And among the variables found to be significantly correlated with becoming a professor is having advanced educational credentials.

Stern and I surveyed six social-science/humanities associations. Gross and Fosse cite our main piece, but they manage to leave out any mention of the following findings contained there.

We found (see page 275) that Republican-voting members of the scholarly associations were significantly more likely to have landed outside of academia. For example, in Anthropology/Sociology, 43% of the Republican scholars were working outside academia, compared with only 24% of Democrat scholars. In History, it was 47% versus 27%. In all six disciplines overall, it was 41% versus 25%. (See also our statistical models, pp. 286–89, in which working outside academia correlates (at 0.01) with voting Republican.)

The individuals we are talking about here are members of the American Anthropological Association, the American Historical Association, and so on. Most had PhDs. So we find that Republican-voting members of such associations are consistently more likely to be working outside of academia—in government, private sector, independent research, or other. Do we think these people don't care for research and learning, that they just don't want the income, security, prestige, and student attention that professor status affords? Why then are they members of such associations?

Somehow the smoking-gun evidence of our study has been consistently overlooked by scholars like Gross and Fosse, the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Meanwhile, Patricia Cohen assures us that “What distinguishes Mr. Gross and Fosse's research from so much of the hubbub that surrounds this subject is their methodology. Whereas most arguments have primarily relied on anecdotes, this is one of the only studies that use data from the General Social Survey...”

Cohen also assures us that, unlike the hubbub, “experts in the field have vetted [Gross and Fosse's] research and methods.” A quoted Harvard professor even says so.

Why is the professoriate so left-leaning? I don't have a good answer. In their paper, stepping aside from their statistical approach, Gross and Fosse candidly say that the question is as much historical as theoretical. I strongly agree.

We must remember that the professionalization and entrenchment of the academic disciplines, and vast expansion

of the public university systems, are all part of the modern social-democratic age. The past 120 years are one era. In the history of the social sciences and humanities—economics included—the professionalizers generally had ideological sensibilities strongly progressive/social-democratic.

But surely various dispositional factors do play a role in young people's decisions about attempting an academic career. Let me float another possible partial explanation.

The great liberals Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek said that, by and large, beyond our local setting we lack the knowledge to make our benevolence effective. Smith and Hayek helped to formulate and establish a web of verities, by-and-large truths, intended to establish a presumption of liberty, a presumption that we don't know enough to intervene beneficially. The underlining character of their liberal philosophy is one of humility.

Now, as scholars, we may illustrate the verities, but adding yet another illustration of them is really of marginal significance. We may try to deflate any of the myriad hubristic contraventions of the liberty maxim, but such work is largely of a critical nature.

The classical liberal philosophy thus does not make for a “progressive research program,” in the sense of an epistemic conquering of the cosmos. Moreover, it does not fit the image of science as precise and accurate.

People who avoid what Hayek in his Nobel address called “the pretence of knowledge” can, certainly, live a scholarly life, but I find it a contemplative and critical sort of life, one out of step with modern academia in a number of significant ways.

Further Reading

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