

How Serious Is the Damage?

John M. Ellis

When surveys of faculty tell us that politically right-of-center voices are now much reduced or even in certain areas largely absent, we can be sure that the academy is damaged in at least one respect: the campus political and social climate will be unrealistic.¹ Programs where this is central, such as political science and sociology, will be damaged most, but its effect will be felt throughout the humanities and the social sciences. That's bad enough in itself. But the kind of damage I want to talk about goes deeper than this—and that is the damage done more generally to the quality of teaching and research when the campus is so politically one-sided.

Students go to college to learn to think in a disciplined way: how to shape arguments and recognize weak ones, how to marshal evidence, how to analyze issues and draw valid conclusions. All of that requires that they develop an intellectual curiosity that is not limited by their own, or anyone else's preconceived opinions. Giving students this kind of education is a core function of the university. If the campus political monoculture damages this—as I think it does—that is infinitely more important than the narrower question of a realistic political climate.

Defenders of the academy as it now is tell us that the political tilt makes no difference to teaching and research, because the campus has always leaned left, and because professors are professionals who teach their subjects conscientiously whatever their politics. And once they take that position, these defenders must regard the campus horror stories of unprofessional, politically motivated behavior that we hear so often as atypical, isolated cases without wider significance.² This defense is certainly not a good example of disciplined thinking.

First of all, just the way in which political one-sidedness is distributed tells us that it has not always been as it is now. It is very much more pronounced among younger faculty than among older faculty, which shows both that it used to be less extreme than it is now, and also that it is getting worse all the time, as older faculty retire and are replaced by younger ones. The distribution by department also tells us that things are not as they once were. A recent survey of faculty political registrations in major universities found that in some departments of political science (of all places) there were no professors registered as Republicans, while dozens were registered to parties

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of the left.³ For example, UC San Diego's department had 27 left-registered and zero right-registered in this survey. That is certainly new; in past times these would have been viewed as what they so obviously are: incompetent departments. Contrast this with what happened even in the late 1960s on a notoriously left-leaning campus like mine—UC Santa Cruz—when our department of sociology appointed in the same year two distinguished, outspoken conservatives: Ivan Vallier and Cesar Grania. Who could imagine such a thing today? Moreover, these two enjoyed the respect of their colleagues. Grania turned the tide of a faculty senate meeting that had seemed headed towards passage of an anti-war resolution with a brilliant speech. The motion failed by a comfortable margin after he spoke on the folly of a campus faculty taking a political position.

If the current political one-sidedness really were nothing to do with how classes are being taught, it should follow that it would be randomly distributed across fields. But it is not. The more politics is relevant to the subject matter of a field, the more extreme the imbalance is. Where it matters most, it's greatest. But another and more telling way to put this point is that where it matters most *not* to have a political monoculture, it is at its most extreme. The fact that the imbalance takes this distinctive shape means that it can only be the result of conscious choices, not traditional patterns of life in the academy, and that those choices are indeed related to political motivation.

But even headcount numbers that show a new and worsening imbalance still understate the problem. This is because there has also been a change in the *kind* of leftism that is now predominant. Formerly, the majority were left-liberal, with few radicals. That has changed drastically: the proportion of left-radicals has increased until they now dominate campus leftism. This fact undermines the defenders' argument that professors are professionals who teach their subjects regardless of political viewpoint, because that older conception of professionalism is not shared by left radicals. For them, everything is explicitly political, including their teaching, and they think that social change is what their teaching is about. This characterization of them is not one that needs to be reached by a process of interpretation or of abstraction from what they do—it is simply what they themselves say openly and explicitly.⁴ And this change within the left too is getting worse all the time, for the same reason that the general left vs. right imbalance is getting worse: younger left faculty are more radical than older left faculty, so that faculty turnover will continue to increase the tilt of the campus left to radicalism.

This development gets us to the heart of the matter, which is that it is in the nature of a political monoculture that it will automatically lead to extremism and thus to a degradation of academic competence and responsibility.

Nobody put this point more clearly than John Stuart Mill, who said in the second chapter of his classic essay *On Liberty*, that "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that." In other words, you don't really understand the case for the left until you also thoroughly grasp the case for the right, because the one is an answer to the other and so each is a necessary part of the definition of the other. It follows that an all-left department would not even be able to make a competent exposition of

leftist thought: "They do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess." If left professors think they can simply present the right's case themselves, Mill has this devastating response: "Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post as soon as there is no enemy in the field." And for that reason, he went on to say, the student must "be able to hear [the arguments] from people who actually believe them, who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form." As for those who do not: "All that part of the truth which turns the scale, and decides the judgment of a completely informed mind, they are strangers to." Mill concludes by insisting that this discipline is essential to "a real understanding of moral and human subjects."

We can still miss the point here if we focus too much on those absent right-of-center professors. The problem lies not in those who are not there, but in those who are. It lies with people such as those 27 left-registered professors of the UC San Diego Politics department, for example, who apparently believe that you can run a political science department without voices from one half of the spectrum of political thought. Real academics instantly recognize the truth of Mill's famous remark about those who know only their own side of the case—but these ones do not. Which raises the question: Do they really have the temperament needed for academic work? And while the relevance of this point may be most obvious in political science departments, it is no less relevant to the other departments in the humanities and social sciences.

The change within the campus left occurred in part because some new departments (such as women's studies) were founded by political activists. But that's not the whole story. For a more complete explanation we must turn to Mill again. With respect to the two major strains of political thought, Mill said, "it is in a great measure the opposition of the other that keeps each within the limits of reason and sanity." This remark gives us the meaning of the rise of radicalism within the campus left: where there are no right-of-center voices to keep the left intellectually on its toes, the once thoughtful analysis of the campus liberal left will degenerate into the incoherence of the radical left. The academic's focus on careful analysis of and abstraction from all relevant evidence gradually gives way to the zealot's selective use of partial evidence to bolster trains of thought fathered by political wishes and even fantasies, not by fact. Here Mill puts his finger on the mechanism that is at work as the one-party climate degrades the intellectual quality of the academy until, in his words, it breaches the limits of reason and sanity. This is where all of those campus horror stories come from; they are not atypical and isolated—they are the symptoms of a sickness that is systemic. Thus nonsensical conspiracy theories about 9/11 as the work of the U.S. government itself are what we must expect when the campus descends into a political monoculture.

Running through all of these disturbing campus incidents there is a recurring thread, one that tells us a great deal about how deeply into the core of academic life the damage has penetrated. It concerns the way in which contrary opinion is dealt with, by which I mean opinion that goes against the opinion of the main actors in each case. This theme can be seen in social science and humanities departments that exclude

contrary opinion by appointing only professors on the left; it can be seen when visiting speakers of the wrong political persuasion are shouted down by people in the audience, forcing cancellation of a talk; it can be seen when a course description is written so as to presuppose a specific political orientation, thus foreclosing dissent; it can be seen when students report being intimidated into silence by politically zealous instructors; it can be seen when a whole print run of a conservative student newspaper is stolen and destroyed; it can be seen when simply to mention research on differences between male and female brains is treated as heresy and punished. Through all of these separate incidents from different areas of campus life, the common thread is that contrary opinion is not engaged and debated, but instead evaded and suppressed.

This goes to the very heart of what the academy is for, how it works, and why a society needs it. For academic people, looking hard at and learning from facts that are not as we might have wanted them to be, and learning from difficult-to-answer counter-arguments, is not just an unpleasant duty: on the contrary, nothing is more central to an academic's way of life than this, both in teaching and research. Contrary arguments interest academics more than any others; these are the ones that really get their attention. They can be a spur to new knowledge, because real academics know that inconvenient facts and arguments are where the next breakthrough in thought will likely be found, and they know that they must teach their students to give them special attention, not ignore them. A young researcher I know recently told his wife over dinner that the project he was working on was turning out to be almost impossible, for technical reasons. She assumed that he was despondent about this and tried to cheer him up. No, no, he said, you don't understand. This is *good* news: if we manage to do this, we'll have solved something that nobody else could have solved. And of course that is how real academics think.

And so an academic's reasons for being not just receptive to contrary arguments, but obsessed with them, goes even beyond the point that Mill made about the need to know the other side of the case. The state of knowledge in a field at any given time always has holes in it, and there are always questions that are hard to answer. And those are precisely the questions that interest academics because in those directions lies new insight. This is the essence of academic life, and of the intellectual curiosity that academics try to inspire in their students.

Keeping all of this in mind, when we see people who have academic appointments protecting themselves from contrary arguments by shutting their intellectual opponents out of their departments and suppressing contrary opinion in so many other ways, that is profoundly shocking; it is completely alien to academic life. In a normally functioning academic community, incidents like these would strike everyone as absolutely intolerable, and the leaders of that community would intervene decisively to stop the very first signs of the shouting down of speakers, or the creation of left-only political science departments, or the offering of courses that stifle intellectual curiosity by requiring that what is legitimately disputable not be disputed. But the silence here is like that of the dog that does not bark, and in not barking tells us everything. These incidents ought to be opportunities to reassert the core values of the university;

instead, they are occasions on which the betrayal of those values becomes fully apparent. An academy that routinely looks the other way as its core values are being violated is in very bad shape.

A recent case in the University of California, however, showed that the university's administration and faculty leaders had gone beyond the condition of the non-barking dog to outright complicity in and furtherance of the anti-academic agenda.

A course was announced at UC Berkeley on "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance."⁵ The course description announced a concern with the Arab/Israeli conflict. It should be clear enough what an academic treatment of that conflict should look like. All the salient facts would be considered—those that favor one side and those that favor the other—together with all the various claims made about them on both sides. Those claims would be weighed against each other and judged as to their reasonableness or unreasonableness, regardless of which side comes out ahead. That is what professors do, and they provide a real service to the wider world in so doing. Some 25 years ago historian Robert Kee did just that in a televised series of programs about Irish history. When representatives of the two sides in the conflict over Northern Ireland sat down with him at the end of the series, they all said that his work had helped them to understand the position of the other side.

By contrast, the Palestinian instructor's course description made it clear that he would be looking only at facts that favored one side, and claims made by one side. It does not matter which side that was. What matters is that from an academic's point of view, the instructor had just announced himself and his course as hopelessly incompetent. He clearly had no capacity for the disciplined thinking that would be required for serious academic work. Any responsible dean should have intervened then and there to say that this was not an academic course at all, but instead political case-making that we can find on any street corner. The academy must do much better than this.

The course in question did indeed cause a great deal of fuss—but not for anything that I have described so far. Had the instructor done no more than this, nobody would have noticed. This kind of un-academic course had long since become routine. What caused the scandal that ensued was the instructor's naiveté: his course description openly stated that conservatives should not take his course. The rest of his course description and many others like it already implied this clearly enough, but this instructor made the matter explicit, which made it hard for administrators to go on ignoring what was happening.

A University of California rule clearly banned such a course. It read:

Where it becomes necessary . . . to consider political, social, or sectarian movements, they are dissected and examined, not taught, and the conclusion left, with no tipping of the scales, to the logic of the facts . . . the conditions under which questions are examined are those which give play to intellect rather than to passion . . . the University assumes the right to prevent exploitation of its prestige . . . by those who would use it as a platform for propaganda.

UC's rule only stated the general understanding that had long existed throughout the university world. It conflicted with the course, and the matter was now very public, so the university was forced to confront a discrepancy it had tolerated quietly for so long. However, what the university administration now did was breathtaking. It resolved the discrepancy not by reaffirming the rule and abolishing the course, but by reaffirming the course and abolishing the rule. And worse still was to come. In happier times, UC's administration might have been swept from office by faculty anger at this betrayal. Instead, the Assembly of the Academic Senate, an elected body representing the entire faculty of the ten-campus system, voted to ratify this disgraceful action by a lopsided vote of 43 to 3.⁶

This incident should put an end to any notion that those campus horror stories are isolated and atypical, because it involved the entire faculty and administration of the world's foremost multi-campus university. The short answer to the question how much damage political one-sidedness has done to the American academy is: this much—the once great University of California corrupted to a previously unimaginable degree.

Faced with a challenge to all that the university had ever stood for, faculty leaders and administration fell over themselves to appease the radical left as quickly and completely as they could. I use the word “appease” advisedly, because this episode was truly the Munich of the American academy, and President Richard Atkinson its Neville Chamberlain, happily waving his new emasculated rule as academic peace in our time, instead of the cowardly surrender that it really was.

UC managed to avoid the real issue—and that was the extreme academic incompetence associated with radical politics—by focusing on the old rule's preference for intellect rather than passion. The new rule allows for urgent commitment in teaching, but it says nothing about what happens when urgent political commitment leads to propagandizing that looks nothing like genuine academic analysis.

Enforcing basic academic competence should not be controversial: it has nothing to do with denying anyone the right to a political opinion or to free expression. If you teach a survey course on the history of English literature without mentioning Shakespeare or Chaucer, you should be fired for incompetence. And if you teach the Arab/Israeli conflict without all the facts of how the three wars started, or the relevant societal differences between the two groups at odds with each other, the result should be the same. It's not a question of sympathy for one side or the other: it's a matter of working at the minimum level of analytical intelligence and responsibility to the facts that we expect of academics.

The incompetence that the UC administration and faculty leadership moved heaven and earth to protect was not just any kind of incompetence: it bore a particular stamp, the stamp of radical politics. And radical politics is not just a degraded version of academic analysis—it is diametrically opposed to it. It is anti-academic.

Academics weigh all the facts; radicals select those that make their case. Academics look at different interpretations to see which one best fits the facts; radicals fix rigidly on conspiracy theories and then make the facts fit them. Academics use analogies and metaphors cautiously; radicals use them rhetorically and recklessly. Academics use

arguments consistently; radicals use them opportunistically: the same argument is used when it helps, and rejected when it does not. Academic teachers used to consider this undisciplined thinking as something that a university education corrects; now it is what many professors themselves suffer from and inflict on their students. A radically anti-academic way of looking at issues has gradually made huge inroads into a community formerly devoted to patient, reasoned analysis, and to careful abstraction from a comprehensive review of all available evidence. The academic mind must be free to change direction as new evidence and argument takes research into unexpected new directions, and to follow wherever the argument leads it. But political radicalism is so shackled to its rigid initial commitments that it cannot have that kind of freedom, and so must act in anti-academic ways to protect itself from the affront to those commitments that new evidence or argument will bring.

The contrast is so fundamental that radical politics ought to be considered a poison in the body of the academy. And yet the radical left has now made a home for itself in the academy, and to judge from the case of UC, the poison has spread too far for the institution to be able to heal itself. It's not hard to see that radical politics cheapens and distorts academic life—so why have the defense mechanisms that used to protect the academy against such things failed so completely? University administrators used to be quality-control agents, but as is evident from the example of UC's capitulation, they are that no longer. Most have been intimidated into silence by the size and ferocity of their radical faculty; some are now largely sympathetic to that group in any case.

Remediation is urgent, and this must not be thought of as action against a political group, but rather as a return to enforcing genuinely academic standards of competence once more. Campus administrative quality control has long since broken down, and so the ball now seems to be in the court of governing boards. They have the responsibility of appointing and supervising senior campus administrators, and their task now is to appoint and support presidents who will do their traditional job of quality control by appointing deans who will make it their business to weed out teachers and courses that are academically incompetent. The first thing they would need to do would be to tackle absurdities like political monocultures in subject areas that deal directly with politics. But to make that possible, they would need to make the case publicly for an end to incompetent one-party politics and sociology departments, incompetent anti-academic courses, and anti-academic behavior in public meetings or in classrooms. A governing board that explains very carefully what it is doing to a general public that ultimately pays the academy's bills both as taxpayers and parents will find that it has more than enough support for its actions.

Notes

1. See Daniel B. Klein, Charlotta Stern, and Andrew Western, "Documenting the One-Party Campus," *Academic Questions*, 18:1 (Winter 2004-5), 40-65, where an analysis of the results of a number of surveys by quite different organizations leads to the unambiguous conclusion (64) that the "one-party system" of the college campus "is no longer a matter of conjecture. It is an established fact."
2. For the skeptical, there are more than enough examples posted on the web-site maintained by Luann Wright at: noindoctrination.org.

3. For further commentary on this survey see Martin Trow, "California Redefines Academic Freedom," *Academic Questions* 16:3 (Summer 2003), 36-48. While there are very large numbers of cases like Harvard's Political Science department with 20 left-registered to one right-registered, there is also a surprisingly large number with the perfect score of the San Diego Political Science department, e.g. Cornell History, 29 to zero, UC Berkeley Sociology, 15 to zero, UC Santa Barbara English, 20 to zero, and Political Science, 13 to zero. In theory, these numbers are incomplete; they may not include individuals who have not registered to vote, or those who have not changed their registration since changing institutions. But it is hard to believe that patterns of registration that are as distinctive as these could be changed significantly by such factors.
4. Here there is a fundamental contradiction. If you claim, as women's studies departments do, that politics and political goals are central to your work, then you are committed by that very claim to ensuring that your department has a competent range of political opinion and knowledge. But claims like this one have always been accompanied by the exact reverse—that is, the exclusion of all but extreme left perspectives. These departments should long since have been told that they must choose one of two consistent positions: if politics matters to them as much as they say it does, then a competent range of political opinion and knowledge within the department is required. But if a political monoculture does not present a problem, as they also say, then politics should have no place in their classrooms.
5. For earlier reports of this astonishing event, see again Martin A. Trow, "California Redefines Academic Freedom," and Leila Beckwith, "One side fits all: On-campus ideologues smother academic freedom by choking off critical thinking," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 2003.
6. To be sure, the Assembly of the Academic Senate, though technically a representative body, is not an entirely reliable indicator of faculty opinion. It has often been remarked that the Assembly tends to contain a disproportionate number of those members of the professoriate who are ambitious to obtain administrative positions. As such, they are more likely to fall into line with the president and approve his proposals, whether through an identity of outlook, or a wish to ingratiate themselves with and be noticed by the administration. Thus while the ostensible purpose of the Assembly is to represent a strong faculty voice, the reality is that it readily adapts to administrative attitudes, as seems to have been the case in this instance.