

# The New Criterion

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## A stupid party

*On the liberal domination of the academy.*

**T**he *New Criterion* has often had occasion to comment of the dominance of left-leaning ideology in American universities. In this space in October 2002, for example, we reported on “The Shame of America’s One-Party Campuses,” an article published in *American Enterprise* magazine which argued that

Today’s colleges and universities are *not*, to use the current buzzword, “diverse” places. Quite the opposite: they are virtual one-party states, ideological monopolies, badly unbalanced ecosystems. ... They do not, when it comes to political and cultural ideas, look like America.

In support of this conclusion, the authors shared the results of a recent study that cross-referenced public voter-registration records with faculty rosters. Lo and behold, the overwhelming majority of professors were registered in a party of the Left (Democratic, Green, Working Families Party). At Brown University, for example, there were five professors of economics registered in a party of the Left, but only one in a party of the Right. In engineering, it was seven on the Left and two on the right. How’s that for “diversity”?

As a matter of fact, at Brown, that’s pretty good, because in English the ratio was ten on the Left and zero on the Right. Political science? Seven to zero. Sociology? Eight to zero. In history, seventeen to zero.

**A**s we noted in 2002, Brown is well known as a left-leaning institution. But a similar pattern repeated itself across the board. At the State University of New York, for example, the study found fifteen faculty members in sociology were registered in a party of the Left and ... zero in a party of the Right. In political science the ratio was twenty to one. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, it was thirty-seven to zero in English, twenty-eight to one in history, fourteen to zero in journalism, seventeen to two in political science, etc., etc. The pattern is the same at Harvard, at Davidson College, at Penn State University; it is the same at the University of California at Berkeley, at Syracuse University, at Pomona College, and the University of Maryland. Ditto for Stanford, UCLA, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. At Williams College, the study

reported, out of a faculty of more than 200 only four were registered Republicans.

We suppose that few of our readers were surprised by this news. It merely confirmed the obvious, providing a bit of statistical corroboration for something that everyone already knew: that although “diversity” is the favorite mantra on campus today, strict political conformity is the reality.

Of course, political complexion is not measured only by party affiliation. Indeed, the fact that faculties on most American campuses are predominantly Democratic is perhaps less significant than their adherence to what one writer called “Left Eclecticism,” that intellectual goulash composed of varying bits of Marxism, feminism, racialism, deconstruction, post-colonialism, and other specimens of academic “theory.”

The triumph of Left Eclecticism means that campus “diversity” involves not only political but also intellectual conformity. For although Left Eclecticism comes in many modes and levels of toxicity, it revolves around a common core of attitudes. One unalterable tenet is that “everything is political”: that the traditional academic ideals of objectivity and disinterestedness are pernicious fictions and therefore that all academic pursuits can be, indeed must be, evaluated in political terms. This is why, for example, you so seldom see the word “truth” without scare quotes in academic writing these days. Truth is what the bourgeois hegemonists preach; any left-wing academic worth his salt rejects “truth” in favor of “‘truth,’” its epistemologically challenged but politically adaptable cousin.

As for the practical implications of this approach to pedagogy, they were, we thought, vividly summed up by Keith Moxey, the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Art History at Barnard College and Columbia University. “The abandonment of an epistemological foundation for art history,” Professor Moxey has written, means that “historical arguments will be evaluated according to how well they coincide with our political convictions and cultural attitudes.” In other words, for Professor Moxey, as for so many of his academic brethren, things like truth, probability, and explanatory value take a distant back seat to politics. We hope that his students keep that in mind when they sit down to write their papers for him.

As we say, all of this is simply business as usual in contemporary academic life. It is a natural coefficient of the reign of political correctness among college faculties today. Still, one might ask, Why? Why are faculties overwhelming left-leaning? Why have so many abandoned the traditional scholarly ideals of objectivity and disinterested inquiry? Why have they embraced the rancid smorgasbord of Left Eclecticism? No doubt there are many factors that go into answering these questions. One answer, we believe, involves the institutionalization of the radicalism of the 1960s. After all, the race-class-gender brigade now ruling in the humanities and social sciences is patently a child of the political imperatives of that unlovely decade. But of course one could pose the question again: Why were faculties so susceptible to that brand of emancipationist rhetoric?

There are doubtless many reasons. Original sin is one explanation we have always favored, but we recognize that that is not the whole story. A novel reason has recently been proposed by Robert Brandon, chairman of the philosophy department at Duke University.

As most of our readers know, Duke has been a model of political correctness at least since the mid-1980s when the redoubtable Stanley Fish breezed into the English department there and began installing one of the latest, trendiest, left-most faculties anywhere in the country. Queer theory, post-colonial theory, gender studies, fifty-seven varieties of deconstructionist theory—Professor Fish embraced it all eagerly. And when the National Association of Scholars, a moderately conservative academic organization, attempted to start a chapter at Duke, Professor Fish demonstrated his allegiance to the contemporary spirit of academic diversity by writing to *The Chronicle*, a student newspaper, to charge that the NAS was “widely known to be racist, sexist, and homophobic.” In case that didn’t do the trick, he reportedly also wrote to Duke’s Provost advising him not to appoint faculty belonging to the NAS to key committees involving tenure or curriculum decisions.

Last month, *The Chronicle* ran an advertisement placed by the Duke Conservative Union which called on Duke’s president to address herself to the lack of political diversity among Duke’s faculty. Duke in this respect looks a lot like most other universities: in its history department, for example, there were thirty-two registered Democrats, a few unaffiliated faculty and, yep, zero Republicans. Nothing unusual there: just the usual academic understanding of diversity in action. What was a bit unusual was Professor Brandon’s explanation of the preponderance of left-leaning faculty at Duke. “We try to hire the best, smartest people available,” Professor Brandon told *The Chronicle*.

If, as John Stuart Mill said, stupid people are generally conservative, then there are lots of conservatives we will never hire. Mill’s analysis may go some way towards explaining the power of the Republican party in our society and the relative scarcity of Republicans in academia. Players in the NBA tend to be taller than average. There is a good reason for this. Members of academia tend to be a bit smarter than average. There is a good reason for this too.

Oh dear. A few days after this story appeared, Professor Brandon wrote a letter to *The Chronicle* complaining that he had received numerous “venomous, hate filled e-mails from self-described ‘conservatives.’” How shocking.

It is not often, we think, that academic arrogance makes quite so blatant a spectacle of itself. Everyone knows that professors as a group tend to think they are smarter and politically more virtuous than anyone outside the professorial flock, but generally they communicate this conviction indirectly, through snobbery and other forms of patronizing behavior. There is something almost touching about Professor Brandon’s naked braggadocio. It is also nice that he manages to mangle John Stuart Mill and commit eighty-seven (some have detected ninety-four) logical mistakes in the space of his few sentences.

In our view, John Stuart Mill has a lot to answer for, but he never claimed that “stupid people are generally conservative.” He would never have been so stupid. What he wrote, in a footnote discussing Disraeli in *Considerations on Representative Government*, was that the Conservative party in England was “the stupidest party.” We trust that the chairman of the philosophy department at Duke University will appreciate the distinction.

In his letter complaining about the unpleasant response he had had to his comments, Professor Brandon announced that he would leave Mill out of his discussion. This was a wise decision. It might also be wise were he to take his own advice and “read more Mill.” He might then avoid the atrocious logic of his opening sentence: “If, as John Stuart Mill said ...” Exactly how, Professor, does it follow from what you say Mill said (only he didn’t) that “then there are lots of conservatives we will never hire”? And how does Mill’s “analysis,” or whatever it is you think of as Mill’s analysis—in fact, it is an unsupported contention thrown out for rhetorical effect—how does it explain “the power of the Republican party in our society”? How does it explain “the relative scarcity of Republicans in academia”? It doesn’t. Of course, we know what you mean. You mean that you regard people who share your politics—which are the politics of 98 percent of the Duke faculty—as smarter than people who don’t. But doesn’t a professor of philosophy, albeit a professor of philosophy at Duke, have an elementary obligation to represent accurately a thinker he cites? And shouldn’t he make some effort to reason coherently and not simply emote?

William Chafe, dean of the faculty of Arts and Sciences at Duke, was quoted in *The Chronicle* defending the university’s hiring and promotion procedures. But he added that “the key [to a healthy academic situation] is openness to intellectual discourse, embrace of free speech, and a belief that the quality of an argument is the key to its success.” We couldn’t agree more. So when is Dean Chafe going to start instituting those desirable qualities at Duke?

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