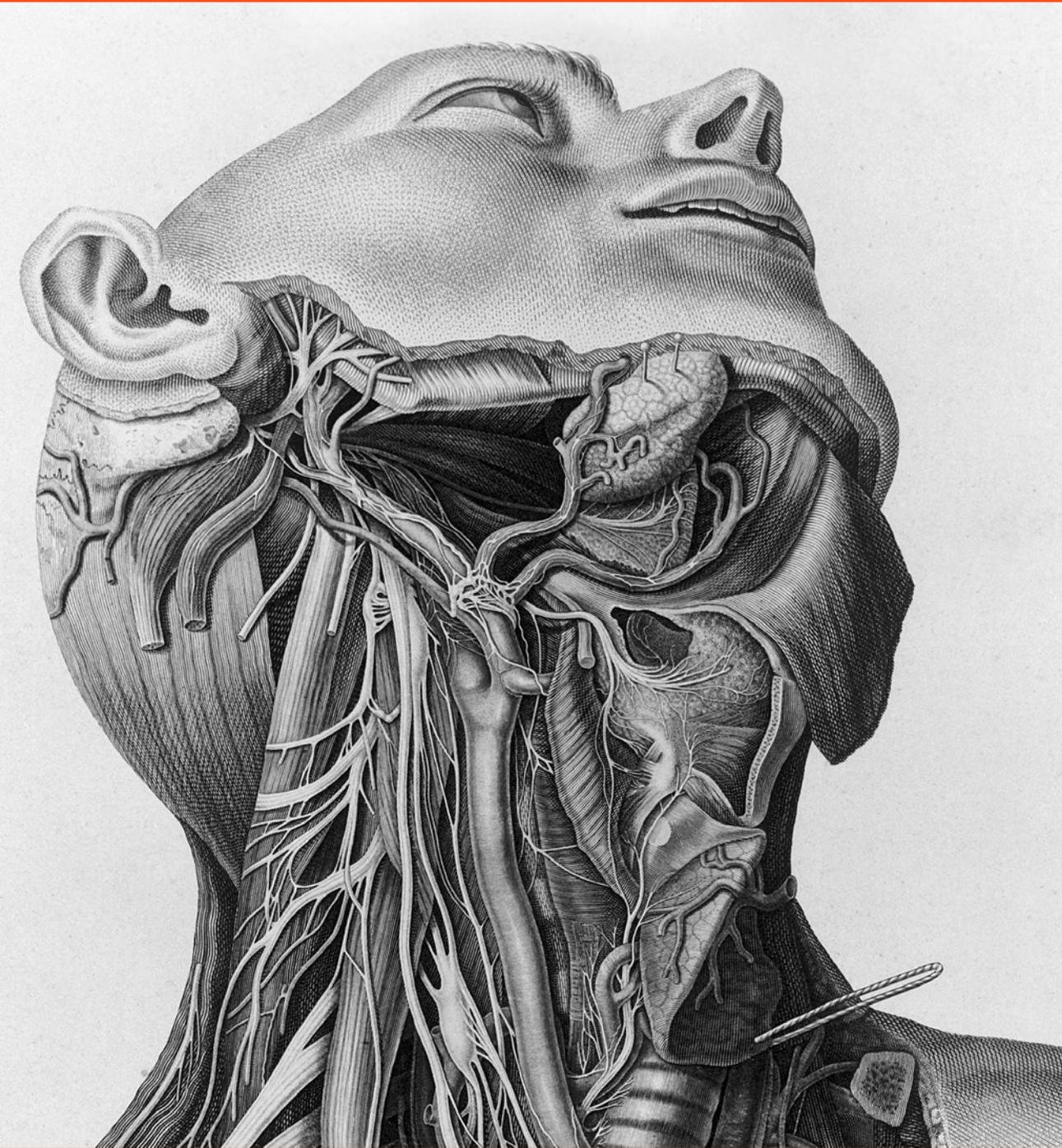




DECEMBER
2024

inquisitive
A quarterly periodical
of Heterodox Academy

The Nerve



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Welcome to **inquisitive**

Dear reader,

As the managing editor for Heterodox Academy (HxA), it is my pleasure to bring you the first issue of *inquisitive*, a new periodical designed to help us think deeper and more creatively about thought, expression, conflict, collaboration, and inquiry in higher education.

Why this, and why now?

Academics and their administrations are grappling as never before with threats to academic freedom, open inquiry, and viewpoint diversity. We've got segments of the student population looking to shut down ideas they find intolerable; elected officials seeking to legislate their personal visions for colleges and universities; professional societies and accrediting bodies trying to tell us the "right way" to think about inquiry. All this in the midst of a media world that surveils, divides, and punishes.

At HxA, we're concerned about all this. As we work to protect and promote open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in higher ed, we monitor and respond to lack of due process with regard to academic freedom, legislation that might open or shut down inquiry and expression, and the use of ideological litmus tests.

In other words, we attend to what's happening *in practice*. But we also recognize that we won't be able to create a better, more intellectually supportive climate on campuses if we *only* deal with practice. To get to that better place, we also need to change hearts and minds. We need to remind each other why it matters that inquiry

and expression remain free, why we should be concerned when politics overtake evidence—why most of us came to academic life in the first place.

This new periodical represents that part of our work. With generous support from the Mike & Sofia Segal Foundation, *inquisitive* takes us back to the intellectual plane, gives us a chance to pause to see things we might otherwise miss, considers work that challenges and startles us into reconsideration, refocus, collaboration.

Along with regular features that flesh out context, each issue wraps a series of essays around a single theme with an eye toward seeing how people from varied perspectives and disciplines think about the sources and solutions to the problems we're facing. In this first issue, with artwork produced and curated by graphic designer Janelle Delia, we bring you essays on the theme "the nerve." Our contributors explore how human nature, federal funding systems, and ethics boards constrain scientific thought and expression. They consider whether teaching in America is really freer than pedagogy under the Chinese Communist Party. And they offer insight into what courage, curiosity, and collaboration mean on today's campuses.

I hope you will find that this combination of offerings lights you up as it has me. If it does, please consider subscribing to *inquisitive's* online and print editions, becoming an HxA member, and writing for future issues. Thank you!

All my best wishes,

Alice Dreger

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COVER ILLUSTRATION

"Against the School" by Janelle Delia (original artwork)

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Inquisitive welcomes proposals for submissions on the theme of "Power."

The deadline is January 10, 2025.

For details, see inquisitivemag.org.

THE IRB PROTECTION RACKET



"66 Degrees," self-portrait by Riva Lehrer (used with permission).

Respecting our subjects may mean naming them.

BY PEGGY MASON

In 2012, ten University of Chicago students studying abroad were hiking together in Punnai, India, when lightning struck. No one was seriously hurt, but everyone felt electricity jolt from the wet ground through their legs.

The following summer, one of the ten happened to intern at a company developing a novel, non-invasive device to measure nerve conduction.

She wondered whether the singular event of a lightning strike could alter nerve conduction. Perfectly positioned to

tackle this interesting question, the student asked me to mentor a project to

test the students, nearly all of whom would be back on campus. I readily agreed.

We got to work seeking Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for our research protocol. At institutions receiving federal research funding, IRB approval is required of any human-subject scientific research destined for journal publication. The idea is to treat subjects ethically, not to prevent science.

Yet two months later, the project and our enthusiasm for it lay dead—slain by the Byzantine process of IRB approval.

IRBs should of course minimize risk to human research participants. But they also should support research nimbly and expansively. That's not happening.

Profound constitutional, political, and conflict of interest problems with IRB review have been beautifully articulated by many scholars (e.g., Hamburger 2016, Dreger 2015, Hehman and Salmon 2024). Less frequently covered are the ways that IRBs impede science and underestimate people's interest in being the subject of research that yields no diagnostic or treatment benefit.

Consider the cases of two individuals with extraordinarily rare conditions—two people with whom I've had the incredible luck to collaborate.

Since birth, Kim has never sensed touch, temperature, pain, itch, the position of her body parts (proprioception), or taste. After years of working together, we have learned that, rather than arising from one of her parents, Kim's genetic condition came about *de novo* in an embryonic cell. That mutation was passed down to the mutated cell's progeny cells. Meanwhile, all other cells in the embryo that became Kim and those cells' progeny did not carry the mutation. That makes Kim a unique mosaic of mutated and un-mutated cells. Not only is Kim one-of-a-kind today, but she will be so for all time.

After a viral infection at age 19, Ian found himself unable to sense touch or experience proprioception below the neck (Cole 1991, 2016). Ian is one of about a dozen people who have experienced a similar sensory loss. Among them, he is the only one who taught himself to stand, walk, gesture, and carry on without proprioception. That makes Ian one-of-a-dozen or one-of-a-kind, depending on your lumper-splitter bent.

Not only is Kim one-of-a-kind today, but she will be so for all time.

Enter the IRB.

IRBs are charged with, “when appropriate, [ensuring] there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of data.” The details of how to do this are left up to each institution’s board. Consistency is not a strong suit of IRB regulation. Some require that researchers completely de-identify research participants by calling them AA, BB, CC, and so on. Others are okay with using subjects’ initials.

Because I work with researchers from other institutions, our work is sometimes governed by multiple boards. One of the IRBs that we used to study Kim was from an institution where the “AA” route

was required. Asked how she felt about this “protection” of her, here’s how she responded:

“It is my desire to be identified by my first name, Kim, in research papers about my neurological condition. I want the world to know my unique story and all that I have experienced. The only way to accomplish this goal is to identify myself. I have made this decision on my own after careful consideration and with no undue influence from any research team member. I am fully cognizant of and comfortable with any associated risks.”

I laughed, recognizing the wording for the legalese that it was. Worthy of Kim-the-lawyer’s training and skills.

Armed with what I saw as a beautifully articulate appeal, we went back to the IRB. No go. The IRB reiterated that Kim would have to be “AA,” not Kim, in any publication covering the work that had been conducted at that institution.

Reflecting the full absurdity of this situation, my parent IRB is fine with Kim being Kim. Thus, sometime in the future, when all articles involving our collaboration are published, the publication on

AA will refer to other publications that honor Kim’s request to call her by name.

For Ian, the situation is even more ridiculous.

Anyone who has read either of Jonathan Cole’s books on Ian (*Pride and a Daily Marathon*, MIT Press, 1991; *Losing Touch*, Oxford University Press, 2016) or seen the 1997 BBC documentary *The Man Who Lost His Body* knows about Ian Waterman. Jonathan drafted *Pride* using “IW,” a form of initializing common in the biomedical literature. The manuscript’s editor suggested naming Ian and, as Ian was amenable, the switch was made. From that time forward, it became patently absurd to anonymize Ian elsewhere.

What emerges from these stories is a lot of happenstance and no principle. Actual ethics have been lost to ethics performance. Surely a research

participant’s wishes should be relevant to how we treat them. Surely it is appropriate to put aside a requirement for privacy if the subject desires to be known. Dictating privacy for a person who wants to be seen is sheer hubris, even if well-intentioned.

“The disability paradox” is the term given to the phenomenon whereby a person with disability has a higher quality of life—close to control values on average—than people without the disability estimate it to be. IRB members appear to be suffering from this as they worry about, perhaps even pity, and ultimately commit to “protecting” ill and disabled people participating in human research, whether they desire such protection or in fact actively reject it. A beneficent motivation does not mitigate the infantilization and disenfranchisement inherent to the “protection.”

Notably, IRBs extend their mandate of purportedly protecting people to protecting the “data” collected from those people. Chief among the concerns are that data (1) not be released to people outside of the study team and (2) be either destroyed or

de-identified once the study is completed. While these goals appear reasonable on the surface, they reflect a narrow philosophy: data serve a particular purpose to be accomplished by a particular group of scientists.

But data from rare individuals should not belong to any one research team or to any one era. Others now and in the future may come up with novel questions or innovative methods. It is to everyone’s advantage that those questions be addressed and those methods be utilized. The IRB’s philosophy of tightly demarcated data usage is incompatible with the benefits to society that accrue from knowing and seeing individuals with ultra unusual conditions, who, by the way, want to be seen. Not just today but for the long term.

To this end, my colleagues and I have sought to create a sustainable, accessible archive of original data collected from Kim and Ian with the ultimate aim of extending this database to other individuals with rare conditions. It remains to be seen whether the censorious IRB attitudes toward research participants and the data collected from them will ultimately obstruct our efforts.

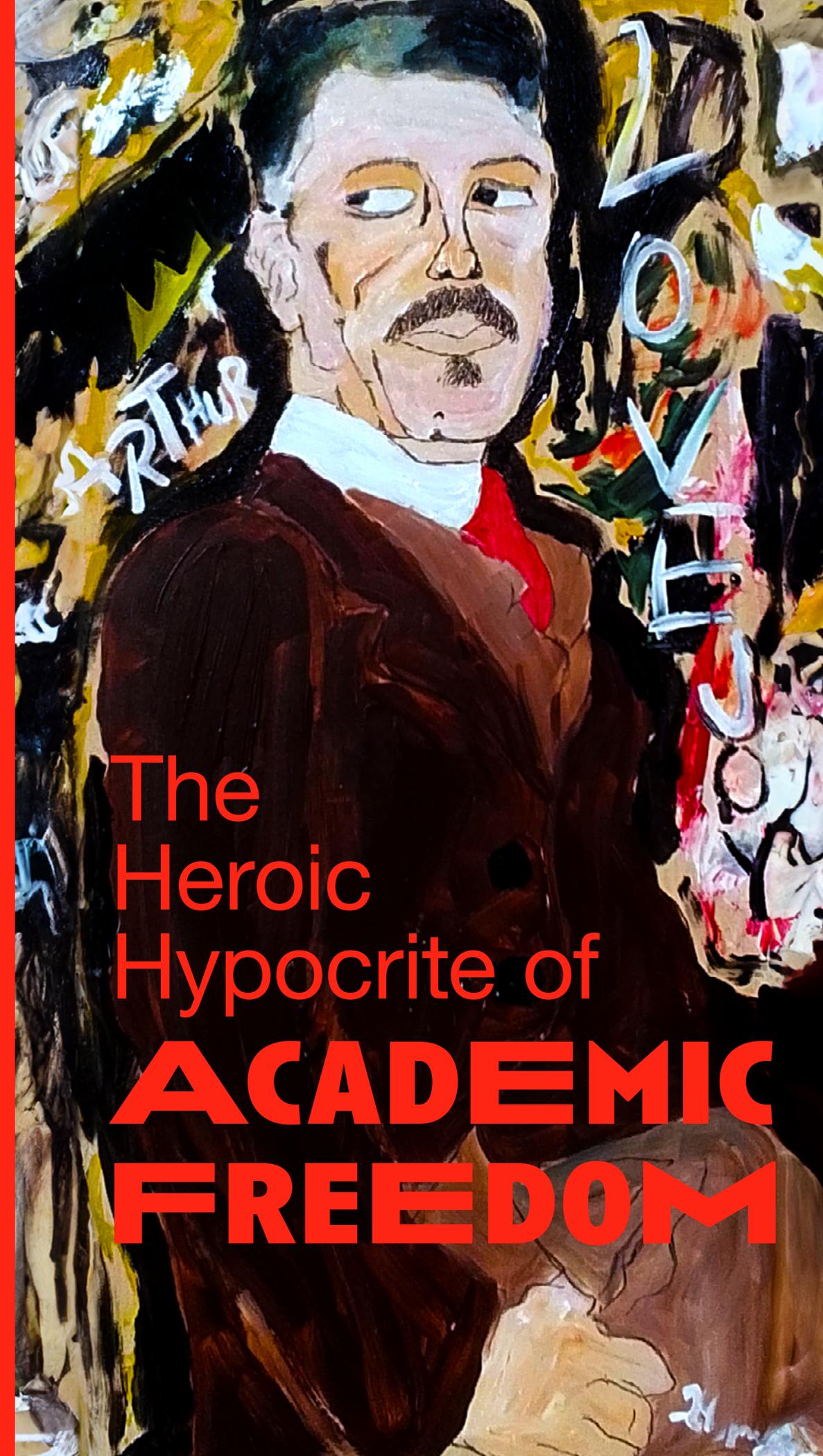
I still regret that we will never know whether lightning subtly alters nerve function. We missed a serendipitous chance to answer an interesting question and to stoke the development of a budding scientist. And for what? Nothing valuable was gained—no privacy, no consistency, no benefit to science, and certainly no respect for all the Kims and Ians out there.

For references, please see inquisitivemag.org.

The author thanks Kim, Jonathan Cole, and Baddr Shakhsher for their comments on this essay’s manuscript.

Peggy Mason, PhD, is a professor of neurobiology and faculty at the McLean Center for Clinical Ethics at the University of Chicago. She also serves on the steering committee for the university’s Forum for Free Inquiry and Expression.

A beneficent motivation does not mitigate the infantilization and disenfranchisement inherent to the “protection.”



“Portrait of Arthur Lovejoy” by Courtney Joliff (used with permission).

The Heroic Hypocrite of ACADEMIC FREEDOM

When the heat of battle melts ironclad principles.

BY JOHN K. WILSON

The most important figure in the history of academic freedom seems little remembered today: Arthur Lovejoy, a man whose life story reminds us how difficult it can be to maintain a principled defense of free expression when we encounter causes we despise.

As co-founder of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) alongside his more famous friend John Dewey, Lovejoy was not only the driving force behind the founding of what was to become the leading organization to defend academic freedom. He also transformed the meaning and application of the very concept.

Yet Lovejoy marred his legacy with hypocrisy, openly embracing repression during World War I and calling for the firing of all Communist professors during the McCarthy Era.

Lovejoy’s interest in academic freedom began early in his career. As a young philosophy teacher at Stanford University, he was one of seven professors to quit in protest against the 1900 firing of economist Edward Ross at the command of Jane Stanford. Dale Keiger’s history tells us “Harvard’s philosophy department wanted [Lovejoy], but President A. Lawrence Lowell blackballed him as a troublemaker.” In 1910, Lovejoy finally found a home at Johns Hopkins University.

In 1913, Lovejoy chaired a committee appointed by the American Philosophical Association and the American Psychological Association to investigate John Mecklin’s forced resignation following objections to his teaching about evolution. The case and Lovejoy’s report inspired the AAUP’s creation.

Some mistakenly presume that the AAUP’s 1915 Declaration of Principles constituted the founding statement of AAUP values. In reality, the Declaration—of which Lovejoy served as

the key author—came a year after the AAUP’s establishment and emerged in response to another key case.

During an April 1915 train trip to see some plays in New York, Lovejoy read a newspaper reference to University of Utah faculty resigning to protest academic freedom violations. Instead of attending the theater, he immediately went to the home of Dewey, then president of the newly organized AAUP, and persuaded Dewey to give him \$300 to fund an inquiry.

The next day, Lovejoy was on the train to Utah, where he spent weeks personally conducting the first-ever AAUP investigation. Meticulously documenting attacks on the rights of professors, Lovejoy produced AAUP’s first official report on academic freedom, establishing the model the AAUP has followed for more than a century.

Champions of liberty have a long history of hypocrisy.

Having effectively created the impression of a free speech crisis requiring a strong, collective

response from the professoriate, Lovejoy then drafted that response with two colleagues, penning what became known as the AAUP Declaration of Principles.

The Declaration represented a radical expansion of academic freedom. Under the older German concept of *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom to teach), academic freedom had been strictly limited to teaching and research within one’s academic expertise, with political freedom excluded. But Lovejoy added an essential third component—“extramural utterances”—to protect the right of professors to speak out publicly about their ideas, a right that was not “limited to questions falling within their own specialties.”

Joerg Tiede has noted that the Declaration’s approval by members “hung in the balance” for a time, as more conservative members objected to the focus on academic freedom. But for the next century, most cases considered by the AAUP dealt with the “extramural utterances” of professors punished for expressing controversial views.

Ironically, not long after this revolutionary leadership, in response to the First World War and at Lovejoy's urging, the AAUP actively embraced repression for the first and last time. Lovejoy argued that colleges had to choose between being an "accomplice" in the "defeat and the dishonor of the republic" and refusing to "give countenance and aid" to war critics.

Condemning conscientious objectors as "an unpleasantly parasitic part in the history of human progress," he called for purging pacifists from academia, "whether or not they have already come within the reach of the law."

With Lovejoy as chair of the AAUP's Committee on Academic Freedom in Wartime, the organization's 1918 report reflected his repressive views. The AAUP decreed that anti-war professors must "refrain from public discussion of the war" and in

private "avoid all hostile or offensive expressions concerning the United States or its government." Those opposed to the war were deemed "enemies of the state," guilty of "treachery."

Criticizing the AAUP report at the time as "a serious disappointment," *The Nation* argued that "the committee, for the period of the war, hands over the keys of the castle to the enemy" and "jeopardizes the very conception of a university."

Lovejoy replied angrily, justifying restrictions and making the startling declaration that academic freedom did not apply to communists: "The American college, if it maintained the kind of neutrality, with respect to the present struggle, which the *Nation* regards as essential to academic freedom, would, in fact, be not merely tolerating but facilitating the efforts of those who would repeat in America the

The greatest revolutionary theorists of free expression never imagined such concepts would apply to people they regarded as evil or inferior.

achievement of the Lenines and the Trozskys in Russia."

Lovejoy reprised his argument three decades later in a 1949 *American Scholar* essay, outlining the "cogent reasons against admitting members of the Communist Party in America to university faculties." Insisting that banning Communists was essential "to safeguard academic freedom," Lovejoy called for all suspect professors to be interrogated, required to resign from the Communist Party USA, and forced to publicly denounce it for suppression of "academic and political freedom."

The AAUP is often condemned for its inaction in the face of McCarthyism, but it never justified banning Communist professors, as Lovejoy himself advocated.

Lest we single-out Lovejoy, it's important to remember that champions of liberty have a long history of hypocrisy. John Milton's 1644 *Areopagitica* is a monument to free speech, yet Milton called for the repression of Catholics and even worked as a government censor. John Stuart Mill argued in *On Liberty* that "barbarians"

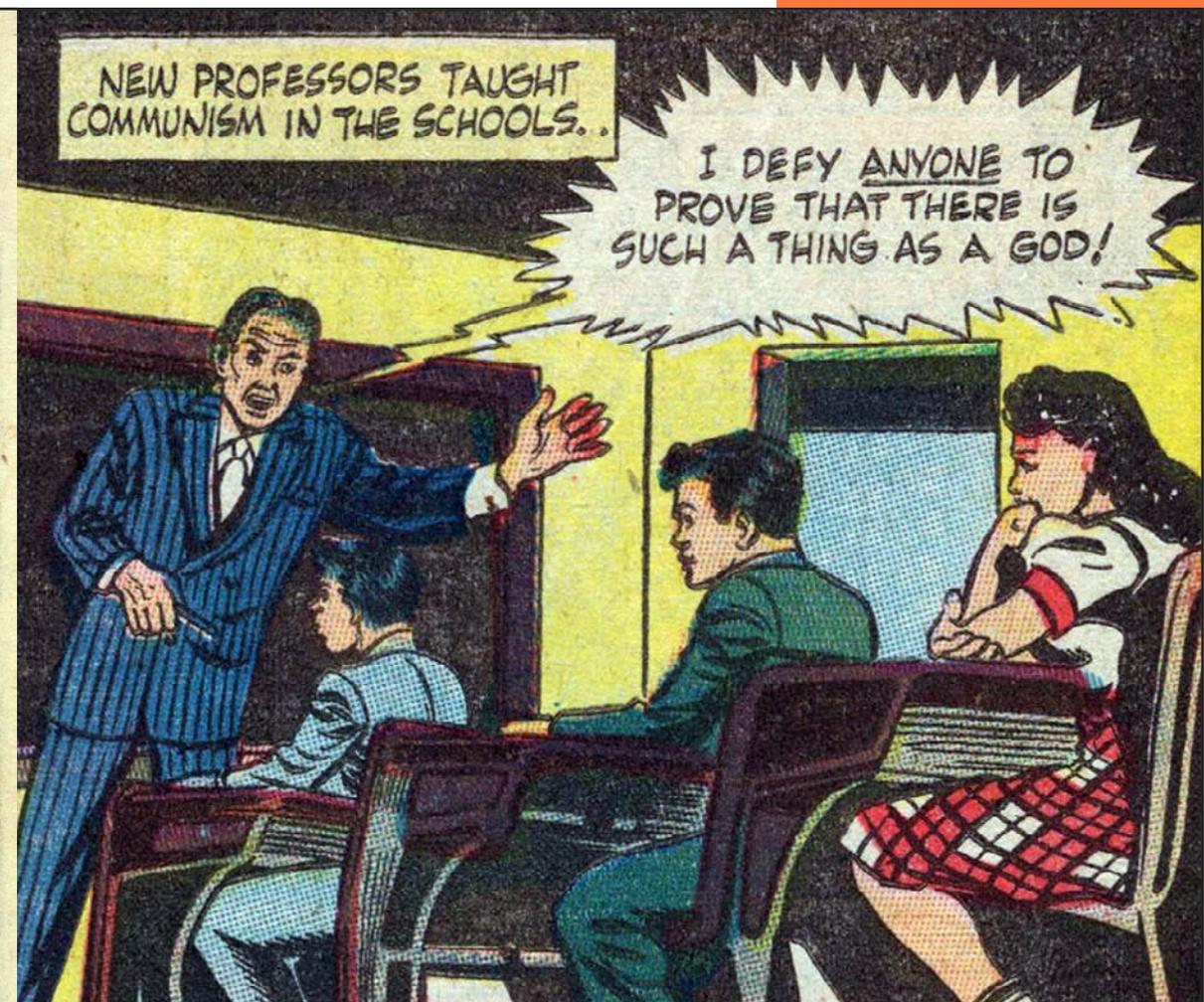
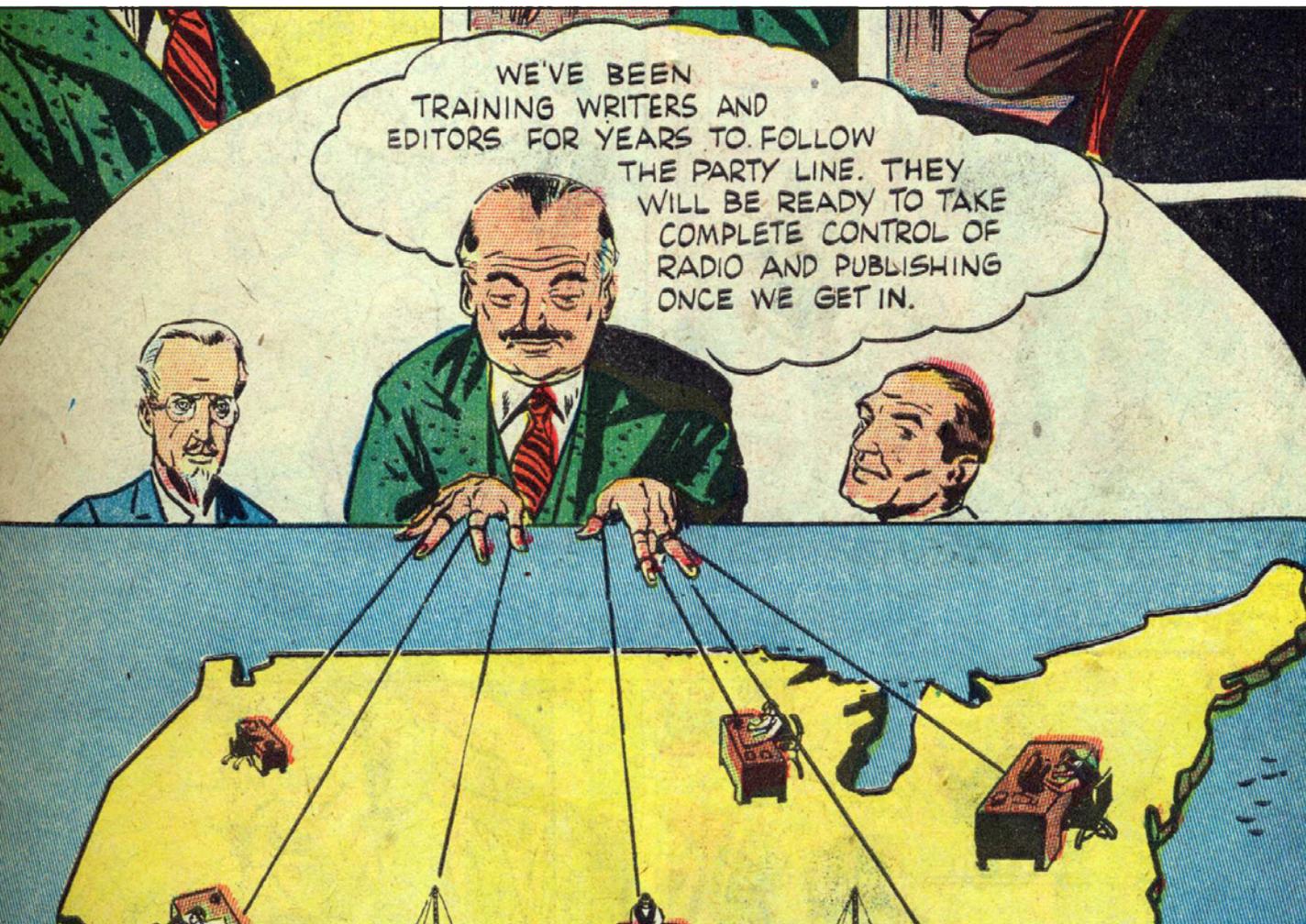
should be denied liberty and ruled by "despotism." Thomas Jefferson never applied the Declaration of Independence to the people he enslaved.

The greatest revolutionary theorists of free expression never imagined such concepts would apply to people they regarded as evil or inferior. It's up to those of us who follow in the footsteps of these thinkers to acknowledge and rectify that history—not to abandon brilliant expositions of freedom because of the flaws of their creators, but to bring principled consistency and universal application to their best arguments.

For references, please see inquisitivemag.org.

John K. Wilson, PhD, is the author of eight books, including *Patriotic Correctness: Academic Freedom and Its Enemies* (Routledge, 2006) and *The Attack on Academia* (forthcoming).

"Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism!" by Charles Schulz is under public domain.



hxo at the Segal Center

Heterodox Academy's Segal Center for Academic Pluralism invites applications for research fellowships for the coming academic year.

Learn more at heterodoxacademy.org/segal



Tenure

And That's Why I Gave Up

This wasn't what I signed up for.

BY NATHAN TENHUNDFELD

As an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia, I made a point to regularly walk by New Cabell Hall because of a plaque there that bore this inscription:

"For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

Pulled from a letter by Thomas Jefferson in which he described his vision for UVA, this embodied what I understood to be the core purpose of higher education: the rigorous and unflinching pursuit of truth—nonpartisan and, by its very nature, meritocratic. I viewed academics as intellectual heavyweights whose ability to articulate and argue for their theories was as important as their ability to throw in the towel and admit they were wrong. After all, following the truth *wherever it may lead* requires an ability to avoid the paths you may want to take in order to travel the path you *should* take.

By the time I decided to give up tenure and the position of Chair of Psychology at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, I felt as if I were living in a world that bore little resemblance to Jefferson's vision. Academia had become a business, and while being a professor was a great job, too often we were being judged on quantity rather than quality. Quantity of publications, of research dollars, of students.

And just like any other kind of business, institutions of higher education had become

beholden to their bottom lines. That meant being expected to cater to students rather than challenging them. Young people have always been more activist by nature than their elders. But faculty were always supposed to be a moderating influence on students—to harness students' passion into lessons about how to think more clearly, not what to think. Now, too many professors actively seek to convert their mentees' passion into outrage over the cause of the day.

Activist faculty not only undermine the educational experience for students, but research as a whole, too. The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume identified what has become known as the 'is-ought' problem. Put simply, you cannot logically derive what someone ought to do solely from an observation about what is true. For example, it is invalid to infer from the fact that it's cold outside the claim that one ought to wear a coat, unless one smuggles in hidden moral assumptions. Empirical research should focus on what *is* true, not what *ought* to be done. Yet today, professional societies, DEI offices, and individual activist scholars constantly inject their moral presuppositions to bridge the gaps between the *is* and the *ought*. As a result, society has turned researchers into the high priests and priestesses of the day, with smug slogans like "Trust the science."

If this deification were restricted to the public's perception of the role of scientists, that would be bad enough. However, entire fields of science have been imbued by an element of praxis which has emboldened vocal, ideological minorities to self-righteously claim that they alone have the answer to society's problems.

Research which focuses on the *is* can be debated using data. The *ought* can only be debated through long and deep conversations about moral presuppositions—a type of conversation only possible if there is viewpoint diversity, open inquiry, and the ability to have constructive disagreements, something we find to be increasingly rare on many campuses.

As just one example, if someone points out that there is compelling evidence of a 'social contagion' effect for gender dysphoria (Littman, 2017), they are typically met with moral outrage and suggestions that such data promotes the erasure of trans-identified people (see the controversy surrounding Diaz & Bailey, 2023). The data can only speak to what we can know empirically, yet so many academics jump immediately to the perceived *ought*. This topic is hardly the only "third rail" in research and teaching conversations.

This simply was not what I signed up for. I felt I couldn't speak out pre-tenure for fear of any alleged moral transgressions being used against me in the tenure process. I didn't want to speak out post-tenure because it could hurt the "business," adversely affecting my colleagues. The sense of freedom I anticipated feeling after receiving tenure never arrived.

Meanwhile, although my line of research wasn't controversial, the things I was teaching were

beginning to be. I found myself increasingly worried that lectures about sex differences or the science behind why trigger warnings are more harmful than good—or even accidentally using the wrong pronoun—would land me in front of an outrage mob. I stopped recording lectures so what I said couldn't easily be clipped out of context. Perhaps I was overly cautious or unnecessarily concerned. But in talking to other faculty, I don't think so.

For the record, my former institution was about as good as I've seen as it relates to the issues that HxA cares about. I had some of the best and brightest colleagues that I could ask for, virtually none of whom share my beliefs on a variety of issues.

But the overall trend of higher education worries me; professors self-censoring not only diminishes the educational experience, it actively harms it. We are giving students the equivalent of a 15-minute introductory boxing class with no sparring and then telling them to confidently go sign up for a professional fight. We then wonder why some of them run around the ring screaming for help.

So, after five years as a professor, 50+ publications, \$2.7 million in grant funding, being given tenure

two years early, and serving as Department Chair, I decided to step away from the calling I once held in high esteem. My new job as a researcher in HxA's Segal

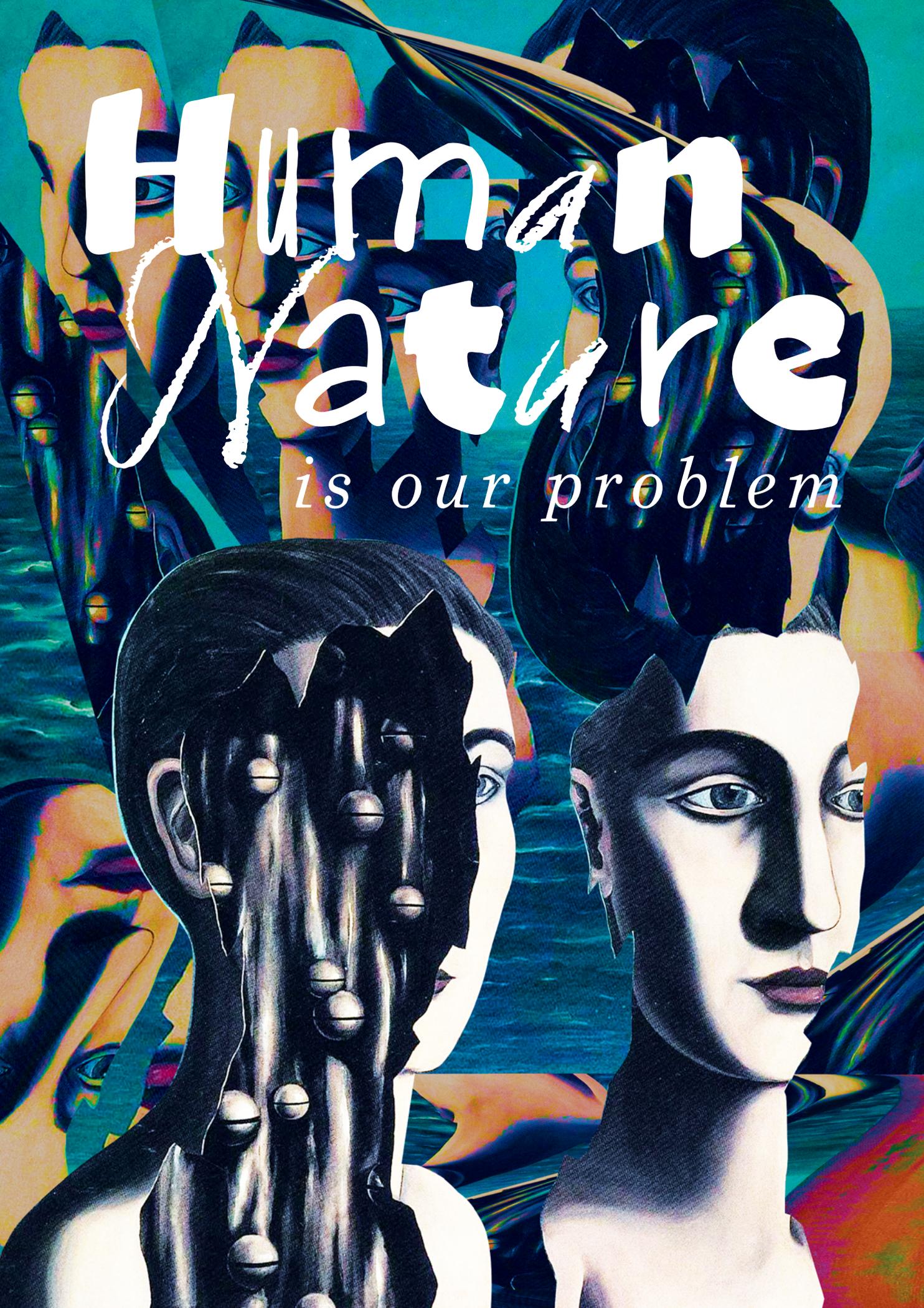
Center for Academic Pluralism makes me feel as if I might help solve the problems faced by faculty like me. And that's why I gave up tenure.

Diaz, S., Bailey, J.M. (2023). Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria: Parent Reports on 1655 Possible Cases [retracted]. *Arch Sex Behav*, 52, 1031-1043. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-023-02576-9>

Littman, L. (2017). Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Descriptive Study. *J Adolescent Health*, 60(2), S95-S96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.10.369>

Nate Tenhundfeld, PhD, is a Senior Researcher for Heterodox Academy.

Academia had become a business, and we were being judged on quantity rather than quality.



Human Nature *is our problem*

Image manipulation by Janelle Delia using "The Double Secret" by Rene Magritte.

We're better together.

BY MUSA AL-GHARBI

Enlightenment era scholars, like many classical scholars before them, believed that human cognition was fundamentally oriented towards truth, objectivity, and logic. Deviations from this ideal were held to be caused by forces external to our minds: our physical appetites, social corruption, or malevolent supernatural entities.

Contemporary scientific consensus now holds that thinking is not something that occurs exclusively within our individual minds; it occurs primarily in conjunction with others, and in dialogue with our physical and social surroundings. At a fundamental level, we think with and through other people and our environments in much the same way as we think with and through our physical bodies.

Working and thinking together in this way, we've developed means of traveling into space. We can split atoms. We can communicate instantaneously across continents.

We can prevent people from contracting diseases like leprosy and polio that have long ravaged humankind. Collectively, we are capable of remarkable intellectual feats.

However, at the individual level, our ability to understand the world is inevitably constrained in some highly consequential ways. Consider the process of perception. It's simply impossible to attend to all the information that is available to us at any given time. And of the things we do pay attention to, we can't remember everything we notice indefinitely.

Instead, we have to make decisions about what to focus on, organize observed details into a relatively stable and coherent picture, and make inferences about what it all means. This process typically unfolds instantaneously and largely unconsciously.

Scholars are not immune to these temptations. In many respects, we may be more susceptible.

And for good reason: in the real world, we can't sit and ruminate indefinitely. Fortunately, under most conditions, our intuitive cognitive systems are reliable, quick and highly efficient.

Importantly, the decisions we make about what to focus on (or not), what we remember and how we remember it (or don't), and how to interpret ambiguous signals—these choices are not made in a random or disinterested way. Our brains are not designed to produce an "objective" and "true" picture of the world. Instead, reflecting their social origins, our cognitive capacities are oriented towards perceiving, interpreting and describing reality in ways that enhance our personal fitness and further our goals.

For example, we pay attention to, easily recall, and feel positive emotions towards things we deem interesting or useful. We dismiss, downplay, dump, and have negative emotional reactions to information that is threatening to our objectives

or our self-image, or that conflicts with our expectations or pre-existing beliefs. Things that don't seem particularly significant in either direction, we largely ignore,

even though sometimes these neglected details prove to be quite important.

Collectively, these systematic distortions are known as "biases." And, critically, it isn't just our perception that's biased. The causal stories we tell are, too. So are our choices of alliances. Our natural impulses are to sort into groups with people who share our values, politics, and other identity commitments, to publicly bring ourselves and push others into conformity with the group, and try to suppress, exclude or dominate others with incompatible goals and perspectives. Our default inclination is to perceive, interpret, and describe the world in ways that flatter our self-image, advance our interests and reinforce our existing worldviews—while explaining others' deviance from our preferred positions through appeals to deficits and pathologies.

Scholars are not immune to these temptations. In many respects, we may be more susceptible.

For instance, people who are highly educated, intelligent, or rhetorically skilled are significantly less likely than most others to revise their beliefs or adjust their behaviors when confronted with evidence or arguments that contradict their preferred narratives. Precisely in virtue of knowing more about the world or being better at arguing, scholars are better equipped to punch holes in data or narratives that undermine our priors, come up with excuses to “stick to our guns” irrespective of the facts, and interpret threatening information in a way that flatters our existing worldview. And we typically do just that.

Hence, rather than becoming more likely to converge on the same position, people tend to grow more politically polarized on contentious topics as their knowledge, numeracy, or reflectiveness increases, or when they try to think in actively open-minded ways.

In a decades-long set of ambitious experiments and forecasting tournaments, psychologist Philip Tetlock has demonstrated that—as a result of their inclinations toward epistemic arrogance and ideological rigidity—experts are often worse than laymen at anticipating how events are likely to play out...especially with respect to their areas of expertise.

Contrary to our own self-perceptions (and self-descriptions), cognitively sophisticated, academically high-performing, highly educated people may be particularly prone to tribalism, virtue signaling, and self-deception. We tend to be less tolerant of views that diverge from our own. We are also more prone to overreact to small shocks, challenges, or slights.

In short, the kinds of people most likely to

become academics are more likely than most to be dogmatic ideologues or partisan conformists. Subject-matter expertise and cognitive sophistication doesn't empower folks to overcome the general human tendencies towards bias and motivated reasoning. If anything, it can make it harder.

Here it should be emphasized that these cognitive tendencies are not necessarily pathological. In general, our biases and heuristics allow us to process and respond to extraordinary amounts of information quite quickly. We could scarcely function without these distortions. Ostensibly

irrational levels of confidence, conviction, resilience and optimism often play an important role in perseverance and even success. Our biases and blindspots are, therefore, not just a product of our cognitive limitations; they empower us to accomplish things we otherwise may not. In Nietzschean terms, our cognitive distortions serve important life-enhancing functions.

That said, it is also an empirical reality that biases often do cause practical problems, especially with respect to knowledge production, and particularly when it comes to contentious social topics. Our socially-oriented cognition (seeking status, tribal victories, and the like) often supervenes even sincere attempts to pursue the truth wherever it leads.

Exacerbating this issue: the specific things we study—and how we choose to study them—are themselves often deeply informed by our fundamental commitments and life experiences. Scientists are not randomly assigned areas of study, after all. We gravitate towards the specific questions we investigate and the specific methods and theories we use to investigate them, for all manner of personal and social reasons we may or may not be conscious of. And upon selecting topics of interest, personal commitments and beliefs

People tend to grow more politically polarized on contentious topics as their knowledge, numeracy, or reflectiveness increases, or when they try to think in actively open-minded ways.

shape how we approach research questions at a fundamental level.

To illustrate the scale of this issue: studies consistently find that one can present sets of researchers with the exact same data, to investigate the exact same question, and they'll typically deliver highly divergent results. This is not just true for contentious social and political questions. The same realities have been observed in the life sciences, technical fields, and beyond. This is one of the main reasons studies often fail to replicate—not necessarily due to flaws in original study or the replication, but because each party made slightly different but consequential choices that led them to different conclusions.

Put simply: scientists cannot simply “follow the data” and arrive at “big-T” truths.

In fact, even the act of converting messy and complicated things and people “in the world” into abstract and austere data that can be easily communicated, transformed and operationalized—this is itself a highly contingent process, deeply informed by the assumptions, limitations, and desires of the data collector. And said data get subsequently analyzed and presented as a result of choices scholars make, driven by myriad “trans-scientific” factors. There is really no way to avoid this.

The good news is, we aren't forced to contend with these problems by futility trying to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Science is a

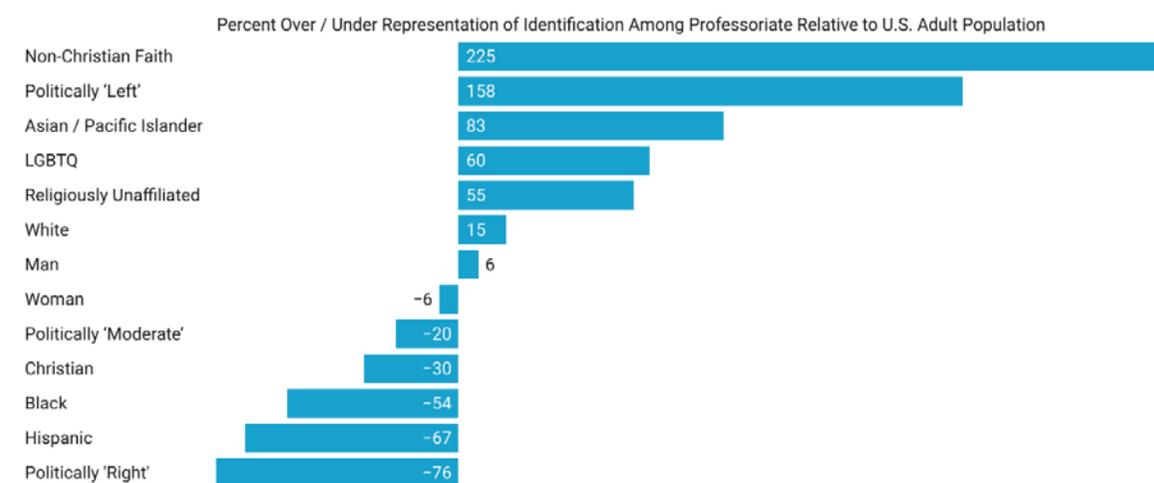
team sport. And under the right circumstances, it's possible to collectively check and transcend our own individual cognitive limitations and vices. In contexts where researchers approach questions with different sets of knowledge and experiences, different material and ideal interests, using different methods, and drawing on different theoretical frameworks and value systems, we can produce something together over time that approaches objective, reliable, comprehensive knowledge.

With this possibility in mind, many systems in science and education have been designed around institutionalized disconfirmation, adversarial collaboration, and consensus building. For instance, decisions about who to admit, hire and promote within departments are supposed to be made through diverse and rotating committees of scholars hashing out the merits of various candidates together. Decisions about what to publish are supposed to be made by multiple, (double) blinded peer reviewers, themselves selected and checked by editors. And so on.

However, these systems only work as intended when there is genuine diversity within a field across various dimensions. In its absence, the same systems, norms and institutions that are supposed to help us overcome our limitations and biases can instead exacerbate them. They can stifle dissent and innovation. They can lead to collective blind spots and misinformation cascades. In contexts like these, important details and possibilities can be right in front of scholars' faces, but it can be

Demographic Representation in the U.S. Professoriate

Full-time faculty at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States.



Source: *We Have Never Been Woke: Social Justice, Discourse, Inequality and the Rise of a New Elite*, by Musa al-Gharbi (Princeton University Press, 2024).



Image by Sunnyisland (used under license from Shutterstock.com).

almost impossible for anyone to “see” them.

If we care about quality knowledge production, we must acknowledge that a major problem we face today is that the U.S. professoriate is drawn from a narrow and highly idiosyncratic slice of society along virtually all dimensions. Consider the skews in this chart:

The problems we face are not novel products of “kids these days,” or “wokeness,” or adjacent contemporary developments.

Similar realities hold for most other institutions of knowledge and cultural production. Bias, the exclusion of outgroups, and the suppression of inconvenient findings are not new issues. Research on how these tendencies influence knowledge production goes back more than a century—as do organizational efforts to mitigate these challenges.

Because these tensions arise from fundamental aspects of our cognition, the resultant problems must be actively and perennially managed. Put another way, the problems we need to overcome are not novel products of “kids these days,” “wokeness,”

or adjacent contemporary developments. They are persistent problems related to human nature. They will endure as long as modern science does because, in a deep sense, what we are trying to do as scientists is unnatural.

It is not natural, and in fact it’s often deeply unpleasant, to slow down judgment and think more carefully—taking care to avoid biases, oversights

or errors. It’s not natural to work amicably with people across lines of profound difference, for example, making decisions about things like admissions, hiring and promotion purely on the basis of merit. It is not natural—and in fact, it is very difficult (although quite important)—to recognize and publicly acknowledge error, and then revise our attitudes, beliefs and actions in accordance with the best available evidence.

And in itself, awareness of these biases and limitations doesn’t tend to change much because, in practice, people tend to think of themselves as

exceptional. Most view themselves as smarter, less biased, and more authentic and moral than average. We tend to think that the forces that bind and blind everyone else do not govern our own attitudes and behaviors to the same extent. Other people (especially those we don’t identify with) are driven by self-interest, ideology, and so on. We are motivated by strong ethical standards, including a principled commitment to the truth.

Sociologist Andrew Abbot referred to this as “knowledge alienation”: declining to apply information we have about the world to ourselves and the institutions and groups we identify with.

Indeed, even when we intellectually recognize that we are susceptible to bias and error, it’s hard for us to actually feel that way, especially in moments of contestation. This is because, with respect to many cognitive distortions, our brains seem designed to avoid recognizing our biases. We have “bias blind spots” that interfere with our ability to recognize when our cognition is going astray. And even when we actually recognize that we may be engaging in motivated reasoning, the social motivations undergirding that reasoning often help us justify our biases to ourselves and others.

As individual scholars, no matter how committed

or well-intentioned, we cannot escape our social brains. To produce, we need to engage with people who don’t share our interests, priors, values, and experiences—which requires a commitment to folding a broader swath of society into the research enterprise and expanding many conversations beyond the Ivory Tower. We need institutions, norms, and processes that help discipline our degrees of analytical freedom and that help us evaluate the quality of work in consistent and fair-minded ways. We need investments and protections that help enable intellectual risk-taking, adventurousness, dissent and conflict—even when colleagues are inclined towards censorship, and even when this censorship is itself intended to serve prosocial ends (as is typically the case).

We can actively strive to integrate a wider range of perspectives and stakeholders into our institutions, our research, our teaching, and our learning. And we should, because the only way we will ever peaceably answer the perennial and the pressing questions of our day is if we leverage, rather than suppress, the diversity of our humanity.

For references, please see inquisitivemag.org.

Musa al-Gharbi is Assistant Professor of Communication and Journalism at Stony Brook University.

How Federal Funding Constrains Scientific Insight



"Astronomer Copernicus (Conversation with God)" by Jan Matejko is under public domain.

Open inquiry? Not if you're funded by the NIH.

BY STUART BUCK

Most outsiders to big academic science might be surprised to learn that one of the most problematic constraints on scientific innovation comes from the federal agencies that pour many billions a year into the system.

What's the problem? Groupthink.

Science funders wield an enormous amount of influence—usually unacknowledged—over what kinds of research will get done. They can bias an entire scientific field towards unproductive ideas, away from innovation. After all, in a highly-competitive academic market, if scientists know

that a grant is even slightly more likely to be funded if it aligns with the current fad, then they are going to hitch their work to that fad.

In their granting methods, science funders should logically bend over backwards to *avoid* groupthink—to encourage a diversity of viewpoints and theories. But that's not what's presently happening.

"The fact that you have to work on the current paradigm is a *huge* problem," a former president of the National Academies observed to me.

"The fundamental problem is you have to work on whatever you've already worked on. So if you have to have preliminary results, you just have to keep plugging along in the same vein. And universities won't hire you if they think you have a low chance of getting NIH [National Institutes of Health] funding."

As one top scientist at Stanford said to me, on condition of anonymity, "Everyone tends to cluster on certain areas, which means there are lots of

things people aren't studying. When I first started working on [X], everyone said I was wasting my time. Now everyone is crazy about it. But that goes to show that we need to study new ideas."

I've come across evidence of the troubling cycle of idea-constraint routinely in my work as Executive Director of the Good Science Project (a think tank focused on improving science), in researching a book about the NIH, and in running a major research initiative for a multi-billion philanthropy (Arnold Ventures). To be sure, groupthink is a danger anywhere—finance, politics, the military—but is a particular danger when it comes to science, as science underlies so much of our lives.

It's worth consciously recalling major scientific discoveries that were unpopular or ignored at first: heliocentrism, the germ theory of disease, continental drift, the viral origins of some cancers, and the bacterial origin of some ulcers. Yet today, we can point to many cases where science funders intentionally embrace groupthink—"following the zeitgeist," in the words of Dan Alkon, an entrepreneur who spent many years as an NIH-funded scientist and who sees the problem.

The misdirection of great minds can have serious consequences. For example, science journalist Sharon Begley has tracked how scientists studying Alzheimer's were forced to adhere to the so-called amyloid hypothesis—a theory about how protein

fragments ultimately kill brain cells—even when their intuition told them to look elsewhere. Begley explains, "This stifling

of competitive ideas, say a growing number of scholars, is a big reason why there is no treatment for Alzheimer's" even after decades of research and billions in funding.

How bad is the constraint? A survey of top scientists working on Covid research found that nearly 80% of them would "change my research program a lot" if given unrestricted funding, whereas only 1.2% wouldn't change their research at all. But if your publications, financial support,

The misdirection of great minds can have serious consequences.

The level of government waste from enforced groupthink can be downright startling.

and even your job is on the line, why tempt fate by going in a different direction than the rest of your field?

Jim Woodgett of the University of Toronto told me, “A lot of science is like watching seven-year-old kids playing soccer. They just run after the ball. They all follow the bandwagon. But when you look at where breakthroughs come from, Nobel Prize-winning work often wasn’t published in a high-profile journal, because it was going against the grain. People who were the most productive in the past had small labs and were able to do work outside the spotlight.”

The level of government waste from enforced groupthink can be downright startling. At NIH, there’s one institute solely focused on mental health: NIMH, the National Institute of Mental Health. How has that research institute done at addressing mental illness in the U.S.?

Here’s what Tom Insel, director of NIMH from 2002 through 2015, told *Wired* magazine in 2017: “I spent 13 years at NIMH really pushing on the neuroscience and genetics of mental disorders, and when I look back on that I realize that while I think I succeeded at getting lots of really cool papers published by cool scientists at fairly large costs—I think \$20 billion—I don’t think we moved the needle in reducing suicide, reducing hospitalizations, improving recovery for the tens of millions of people who have mental illness.”

Why would this be the case? Under Insel’s strategy, NIMH was intensely focused on genetics and brain imaging, while downplaying studies on behavior, social programs, and interventions. As science journalist Benedict Carey put it in 2021, “Government agencies, like the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Institute of Mental Health, continue to double down, sinking enormous sums of taxpayer money into biological

research aimed at someday finding a neural signature or ‘blood test’ for psychiatric diagnoses that could be, maybe, one day in the future, useful—all while people are in crisis now.”

Responding to Insel’s admission of failure, Eric Turkheimer, a prominent behavioral geneticist, wrote, “I find Insel’s late career revelation that neurogenomics may not be the answer to mental illness profoundly infuriating. How many dollars were wasted while behavioral models were ignored at NIMH? Careers? Patient lives?”

For his part, John Krakauer, professor of neurology and neuroscience at Johns Hopkins, noted, “The neglect of behavioral research is a source of great shame. This belief in genes and magic bullets is a cult.”

As with Alzheimer’s research, it didn’t have to be this way. The NIH should have been focused on creating structural alternatives so that an individual or small group’s view (however enlightened and wise it might seem) could not dominate an entire field of research.

And the problem extends not just to what’s being shut out through narrow funding choices, but to the failure to fund confirmation research that could help weed out groupthink. When at Arnold Ventures, I funded a major international project on the replicability of psychological research, where it turned out that only around 40% of studies could be replicated. Replication can be boring, but without it, we may be stuck building expensive castles on sand.

The high-stakes game being played is made particularly vivid with the case of COVID.

The first COVID-19 vaccines were developed using what’s called messenger RNA (mRNA), first discovered some 60 years ago. In essence, mRNA provides a set of instructions for how the

ribosomes in a cell should build some particular protein. In the case of COVID-19, scientists constructed a new form of mRNA that basically tells the body’s cells how to construct some of the proteins involved with the virus. Once those proteins are constructed, the body’s immune system responds and starts to build immunity to COVID-19 itself.

COVID vaccines were developed with remarkable, unprecedented speed. In part this was because of Project Warp Speed and the federal government’s willingness to guarantee billions of dollars of support. But all the funding in the world wouldn’t have mattered without prior decades of scientific advancement, especially research on mRNA. And one of the key leaders of that research was Hungarian immigrant Katalin Karikó, who came to the United States in 1985 and worked at the University of Pennsylvania starting in 1990.

A major challenge to using mRNA for therapy or vaccines was that the human body typically would reject injected mRNA, seeing it as a foreign invader or pathogen. With her colleague Drew Weissman, Karikó published a game-changing paper on this subject in 2005: they traced out how to change mRNA ever so slightly such that it would survive the body’s typical response and still work.

World-class, history-altering science—yet Karikó faced many obstacles in pursuing mRNA research. As *Wired* put it, “By the mid 1990s, Karikó’s bosses at UPenn had run out of patience. Frustrated with the lack of funding she was generating for her research, they offered the scientist a bleak choice: leave or be demoted. It was a demeaning prospect for someone who had once been on the path to a full professorship.”

Karikó told STAT News, “Every night I was working: grant, grant, grant. . . . And it came back always no, no, no.” As she told another interviewer, “I keep writing and doing experiments, things are getting better and better, but I never get any money for the work. The critics said it will never be a drug. When I did these discoveries, my salary was lower than the technicians working next to me.”

Karikó’s bleak situation was perhaps best described by Dr. David Scales, who recounted his experience as a young scientist working with Karikó at Penn after she had been demoted for failing to score enough money in NIH grants: “It’s hard to describe what this moment means to people who have never worked in science at a university, but it is more than the frustration of an experiment not working or laudable work going unrecognized. It is an existential career threat.”

Ultimately, Karikó left academia for good. Since 2013, she has worked at BioNTech RNA Pharmaceuticals, the company that developed what became the Pfizer Covid vaccine.

It’s high time for reform in the federal systems that fund academic scientific research. Across all of today’s R&D enterprise, we have a funding system that is too obsessed with groupthink and too unwilling to take a gamble on outlier views, even as the history of scientific breakthroughs shows that we need less of the former and more of the latter.

For references, please see inquisitivemag.org.

Stuart Buck has spent his career working to make science better, including through his leadership at the Good Science Project and Arnold Ventures.

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A Field Guide to

Epidemiology

Above the skin, below the skin.

BY NIGEL PANETH

When people think of epidemiologists, they probably have in mind the good people employed in county or state health departments and federal agencies like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) who do what we like to call “shoe-leather” epidemiology. These public-service epidemiologists are the ones who get called when a dozen people who attended the same church supper develop severe diarrhea. “Shoe leather” because they pound the streets, knock on doors, interview people, inspect kitchens, and—in the end—determine that the potato salad was contaminated with Salmonella.

Trained in biology, mathematics, sociology, and a few nearly unique methodologies, epidemiologists often go beyond isolating the cause of a local outbreak, because epidemics are not just about infectious diseases but about every kind of health adversity that occurs more often than it should.

Epidemiologists taught us—against resistance from many in medicine and everyone in the tobacco industry—that the lung cancer epidemic was a consequence of the cigarette smoking habit that largely took root in the U.S. after WWI, reaching its peak in the 1950’s, with the wave of deaths following about 30 years later.

Academic epidemiology is where the broader scope of epidemiologic investigation sees its development, with a range of sub-disciplines defined by disorders of public health interest (cancer, heart disease, stroke, auto-immune disorders, problems of pregnancy and birth) or defined by the factors (we like to call them exposures) that influence health and disease, such as nutrition, environmental chemicals, infectious agents and social circumstances. Some epidemiologists work closely on the border with our cousins the biostatisticians, advancing methodology. Others, and I include myself here, find themselves closer to the biological or biomedical roots of our profession, tied more to disease processes.

In our field, we sometimes speak of exposures as being either above or below the skin. Above-the-skin epidemiology considers all exposures from the outside—from microbes to poverty—that affect risk of disease, while the principal below-the-skin form of epidemiology is gene-wide association studies, the attempt to link human genetic variants to disease processes or responses to treatment. The popularity of these various approaches is reflected in NIH funding patterns, which since the Human Genome Project’s beginnings have been quite generous to genetic epidemiology.

While all epidemiologists have in common an interest in the causes of disease and health outcomes, our discipline is not without its tensions.

The first is whether we are a purely intellectual discipline doing science for its own sake or a more purposive pursuit, with the goal of improving public health as its hoped-for end product. Supporters of the more purist view have bandied about “neutral” terms for our field; “occurrence research” was one suggestion. One of our journals briefly tried to ban discussion sections that addressed “public health implications” of

epidemiologic findings. But these efforts faded quickly.

We cannot easily extricate our methods and terminology from the measurement of the impact of

disease or from study designs and analyses that focus on disease control, because our data will inevitably be used to shape public health policy. And epidemiologists often play a more direct role

We must take account of not just the frequency and causes of diseases, but of human wants, habits, and prejudices.

There is the anti-science aura that hovers around universities, at times linked to a vision of science as Western and thus colonial.

by making health policy recommendations, which is no simple task but must take account of not just the frequency of diseases and their causes, but of human wants, habits and prejudices.

A second tension centers on the fact that, although epidemiologists are by nature skeptics who require the makers of assertions and claims to have their feet held to the fire, advocacy can sometimes elbow its way in. This has happened in some corners of environmental epidemiology, for example, where disputes over the impact of certain chemical exposures have become quite intense. But these tensions might be viewed as poles of the epidemiologic globe—from purely theoretical epidemiology to intense advocacy—and, as usual in disciplines, most practitioners live somewhere near the equator.

That said, there is the anti-science aura that hovers around universities, at times linked to a vision of science as Western and thus colonial. An

undergraduate at my annual lecture on smallpox eradication was taught in an anthropology course that the British introduction of vaccination to India had displaced “traditional vaccination practices,” thereby harming health.

What the anthropology professor neglected to mention (or perhaps did not know) was that it was the practice of inoculation—intentional artificial exposure to smallpox aimed at inducing what we now know is immunity—that had been displaced by vaccination. Known throughout much of the ancient world from China to Africa, inoculation was used as a reasonably effective preventative procedure, but with a far from trivial risk of producing lethal smallpox itself, making vaccination, which can never cause smallpox, clearly superior. (Ironically enough, inoculation was introduced into England from Turkey.)

Whether coming from the far left or right, the anti-science miasma now polluting the political

Whether coming from the far left or right, the anti-science miasma now polluting the political atmosphere has serious ramifications for epidemiology.

atmosphere has serious ramifications for epidemiology, a profession whose views, and the policies derived from them, are very much in the public eye. During the deadly heights of the COVID-19 pandemic, most epidemiologists favored population-level attempts to control the epidemic, including masking, isolating, vaccinating, and the like. A very small minority allied itself with the libertarian approach of letting the epidemic take its course until we reached “herd immunity,” regardless of the casualties incurred.

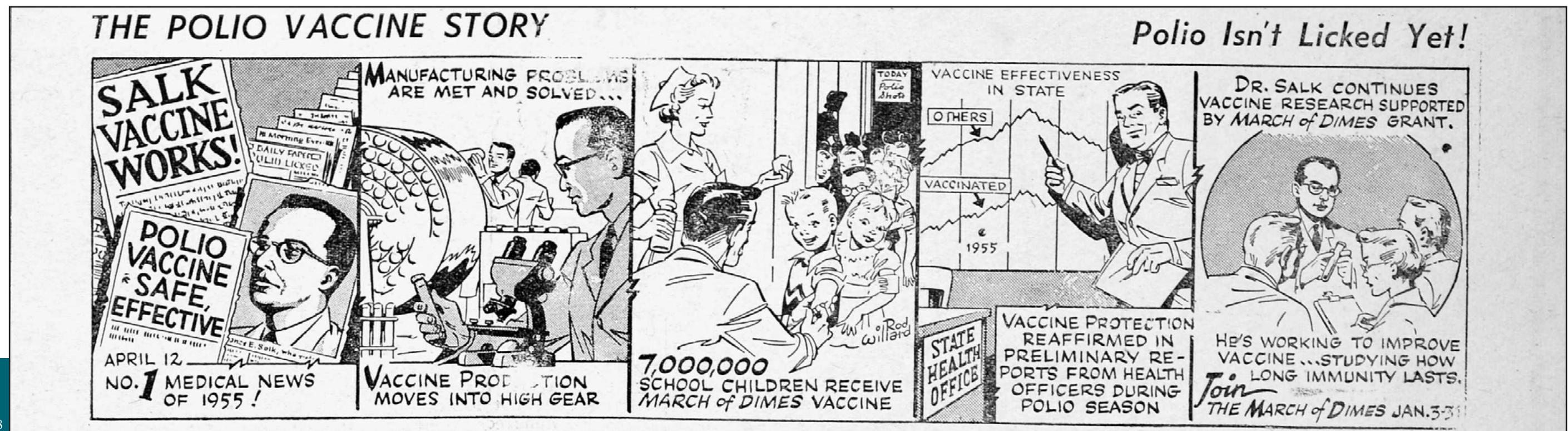
Sweden—whose public health authorities shunned mitigating strategies—experienced double the COVID mortality rates of neighboring Denmark and Norway, countries that enforced policies designed to reduce transmission. In the U.S., these mitigating policies generated intense political divisions and considerable animosity to epidemiologists and other public health workers who were just trying their best to save people from dying from COVID and overwhelmed health

systems.

It is disorienting to live in a time when immunizations—viewed as unquestionably good for most of the 20th century—are under assault in some quarters. If diphtheria were still at its late-nineteenth-century level, we would lose more than a third of a million children every year to a disease whose usual manner of dying—slow, steady strangulation—is about as awful as can be imagined. Photos of polio-stricken children in iron lungs are relics of an ancient world. Yet the complete eradication of smallpox—which killed a million a year in the 1950’s—by vaccination is now just an “alternative fact.” Unfortunately, epidemiology must deal with the vagaries of human nature both in the diseases it studies and in the attempts it makes to address them.

Nigel Paneth, MD, MPH, is University Distinguished Professor (Emeritus) of Epidemiology and Biostatistics and Pediatrics at Michigan State University.

“Polio Isn’t Licked Yet!” by March of Dimes is under public domain.



BRAIN CIRCULATION

Is American pedagogy stifling the participation of Chinese students?

BY STEVE WEILAND

Whatever the problems facing American higher education—equity in admissions, student debt, the impact of the culture wars on the curriculum, the management of free speech—the U.S. still leads the world in attracting international students, particularly from China.

Enrollments of Chinese students climbed from a little under 10,000 in 2005 to 372,000 in 2020. Post-COVID, the numbers have dropped some—in 2023, enrollment was down to 290,000—but the population of Chinese students studying here has remained significant, coming to about one-quarter of all international students in America. The phenomenon has been celebrated as a sign of the globalization of our postsecondary system, with (presumably) gains in cosmopolitanism for American students. Higher ed administrators haven't minded what the influx has contributed to institutional budgets.

Competing “initiatives” display the paradox of educational relations between Chinese and U.S. institutions. In 2022, the Chinese Historical Society of New England launched a multi-year project to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Chinese students attending American colleges and universities. But just a few years earlier, the U.S. Department of Justice, in keeping with the interests of the Trump administration, had the National Institutes of Health and other agencies require universities receiving grants to investigate participating Chinese faculty members (many

of whom had earned American undergraduate and graduate degrees) for suspicious elements of their work that might benefit their home nation. Nearly fifty scientists lost their posts as a result. In reporting the story in March 2024, the Washington Post concluded that some Chinese graduates and current visiting students are warning that “the United States is losing its luster.”

Published just before the pandemic, Yingyi Ma's *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education* (Columbia University Press, 2020), probes what has prompted Chinese families to accept the substantial expense of sending their children abroad to a nominal political and economic enemy. A sociologist at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Ma explains that the U.S. gained its influence in China as an educational destination largely through America's domination of global institutional rankings.

Basing her findings on an impressive combination of survey data, interviews, and considerable time on the ground at Chinese and American institutions, Ma finds that, for many Chinese students, studying in the U.S. is a respite from the national exam-based system, the centuries old “Gaokao,” that shapes local schools and individual prospects for higher education and civil service careers. Enrollment in U.S. institutions with high international rankings has also satisfied the desire of Chinese students and their families for greater social status. Indeed, Ma names the ambition for an American degree the “New Education Gospel” in China. It has been sustained as a subculture reflecting the new wealth and cosmopolitanism of many Chinese families, particularly in large cities, and the wish to gain the rewards of a globalized economy.

Alas, according to Ma, the rewards come with unwelcome limits. For Chinese students at U.S. institutions, large and small, “What remains masked by their economic privilege and transnational mobility is the relative loss of social status and cultural capital after arriving in the United States. From academic studies to social integration, student marginalization is palpable, leading to much anxiety.”

Chinese students have a hard time breaking into campus cultures. Seeing themselves as more diligent than their American counterparts, many reject the “party school” atmospheres they find. Their “pragmatic collectivism,” inspired by growing up in China, is hard to join to the “expressive individualism” they encounter among Americans. Ma names their campus strategy “protective segregation.”

Current American pedagogical trends toward “active learning” also turn out to be problematic for Chinese students. In a sharply written chapter dedicated to “participation” (or “engagement,” as our pedagogical reformers put it), Ma explains why it is so difficult for Chinese students to speak up in class, to give and take with instructors and other students.

There is, of course, the problem of mastering a new language. But even a large share of those who see themselves as capable in English find it hard to accept the rewarded practices of classroom speech. They may welcome the principles of heterodoxy as counterpoint to the traditional Chinese classroom. But contributing to viewpoint diversity and constructive disagreement taxes their resources for participation.

Being an “active” learner in a U.S. classroom requires speech based on taking a (sometimes fact-free) position and questioning the views of others. But Chinese students bring with them cultural and classroom habits of reticence in groups and deference to authority; Ma notes powerful Confucian traditions that feature, in teaching

and learning, “rumination and contemplation, not elaborate verbal exchange.” Finding a place for each cultural style is a demanding task for professors.

Independent and pluralistic thinking—intellectual habits Chinese students may encounter in the U.S.—and the activism that often follows do not appear to tempt most visiting Chinese students. Ma notes, “The Chinese government has been pursuing and promoting social harmony and stability in the face of various kinds of social tensions and injustices in its fast-changing society.

The last thing it wants is to nurture a form of education that promotes outrage and, thus, potential instability.” A recent Washington Post investigative report documented the long-reach of the Chinese government, as demonstrators in San Francisco protesting Beijing's policies and a visit from Chinese leader Xi Jinping were met by organized thugs who harassed and silenced them, including through brutal violence.

Adding to the tensions Chinese students must feel, politics in the U.S. is now framed by attitudes toward immigration, casting a

shadow over Chinese students hoping to come here. Still, as little as a few years ago, Ma saw students describing fresh advantages to studying in the U.S. A popular formulation of the asymmetry in international education, sometimes applied to the results of China's “New Education Gospel,” contrasts the “brain drain” with “brain gain.”

Ma's study convinced her of a third way: “Many Chinese students are interested in engaging in brain circulation—keeping and developing their networks and careers in both home country and host country—and returning to China does not prevent them from achieving that goal.” It is, she says, a sign of “how empowered they feel in this globalized world.”

Steve Weiland, PhD, is Professor Emeritus in Michigan State University's College of Education.

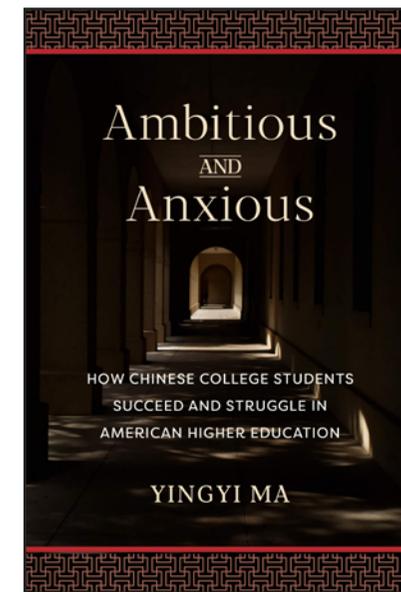


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CODES OF SILENCE

in Chinese versus American Universities

Minding the classroom in our kinky world.

BY GEOFFREY MILLER

It's not this bad everywhere. In many countries, college students still crave the truth, and they tolerate heterodox ideas. They're still curious about the nerdy enthusiasms of neurodiverse faculty. And in many universities around the world, faculty still feel free to teach the truth as they see it, and to share ideas, facts, and findings that some students may find uncomfortable.

Take China, for example. The Western stereotype is that China is the land of totalitarian mind control, so its universities must be wastelands of intellectual conformity compared to American universities, right? In my experience, the opposite is true.

Usually I teach psychology at a large American state university. But during the height of the Covid pandemic (2021-2022), I ended up teaching three online classes for Chinese University of Hong Kong - Shenzhen (CUHK-SZ). This is a new, selective, English-language university in Shenzhen, a prosperous little town of 18 million people that became the tech center of China.

True, there are some political taboos in Chinese universities. Each department has a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political officer monitoring course content for any overt criticism of the CCP or President Xi Jinping, or for promoting unacceptable views about Tibet, Taiwan, or Tiananmen Square. Everybody knows what those specific taboos are and the few lines not to cross.

But beyond that, I encountered a remarkable level of academic freedom and tolerance. I really tried to push the limits, to see how the Chinese students and administrators would respond. Apart from my online lectures, we had lively discussion forums every week where students advocated for their views, critiqued the lectures and assigned readings, debated each other, and shared links to articles, videos, memes, and news items.

I encountered a remarkable level of academic freedom and tolerance.

In my educational psychology course, we discussed behavior genetics versus the Blank Slate theory, the heritability of educational achievement, the coddling and hotheading of kids, and IQ testing and the imperial Chinese civil service exams. Students were smart, active, engaged, and open-minded. There were no complaints, and there was no censorship. I got zero blowback from students, colleagues, administrators, or CCP political officers.

In my decision-making class, we discussed genetic influences on risk-taking, game theory in warfare, stereotype accuracy, virtue signaling, food choice and obesity, Chinese mating markets and online dating, pronatalism versus demographic collapse, sperm donor selection, geopolitical conflict and warfare, AI safety and regulation, and existential risks to humanity. Again, students were open-minded. No complaints, no censorship.

In my edgiest class in China, on evolutionary psychology, we talked openly and fearlessly about sex differences, race differences, sexual anatomy, ovulatory cycles,

monogamy versus polyamory, gay and lesbian sex, and the origins of aggression and rape. We also explored little tangents about pregnancy, breastfeeding, tattoos, gun violence, penis size, deepfake porn, sapiosexuality, incels, lap dancers, casual sex, nonbinary gender identities, BDSM, cloning, birth defects, child abuse, Hanfu ethnonationalism, status hierarchies among imperial consorts, Chinese stigmas about mental illness, and the coddling of the American mind. I really tried to push their buttons. But, again, the students were relentlessly open-minded. No complaints, no censorship.

In the sexual domain, the Chinese undergrads were fairly naïve by American standards. Their high school sex education didn't cover much about gender feminism, trans issues, nonbinary identities, or pronouns. They simply knew how the SRY gene on the Y chromosome orchestrates sexual differentiation, and when luteinizing hormone versus progesterone peaks in women's ovulatory cycles. They weren't very sexually experienced; in anonymous class polls, many reported they'd never romantically kissed anyone,

about half had never had a boyfriend or girlfriend, and most had never had sex.

Yet, if I mentioned polyamory, which most Chinese students had never heard of, they ran off and used their VPNs to Google it, read the latest empirical research on it, and watch videos by poly activists. Then they'd avidly discuss polyamory's pros and cons in class discussion forums. Likewise, if I mentioned BDSM or hentai porn, the Chinese students would go down various rabbit holes and end up in discussion forums debating the neuropsychology of thuddy floggers versus stingy whips, or analyzing futanari furies as sexual superstimuli. Their takes were usually not sophisticated and often had a giggly adolescent vibe. But they seemed intellectually and socially fearless, both with me and with each other.

In an American classroom, most of these topics would have led at least a few undergraduates to complain to my department head and my dean. They might have organized a group letter denouncing me, or a class boycott. Or just quietly given me the lowest possible ratings on their student evaluations of my classes.

In China, no such problems. The Chinese students just accepted my nerdy enthusiasms—and my Aspy neurodiversity in general—as educational resources to be treasured, rather than as problems to be reported. They lacked the pseudo-earnest, conformist, virtue-signaling mindset of American undergrads. They didn't have the cultural programming to think that they had any right to censor their professor—or to censor each other.

Beyond avoiding direct criticism of the CCP, pretty much everything else was fair game. There was no tacit code of silence.

They seemed intellectually and socially fearless, both with me and with each other.

What explains these differences between Chinese and American universities and the relative censoriousness of their students, faculty, and administrators? It might be tempting to attribute the differences to 'Culture'—but the usual stereotype goes in the wrong direction. China has (allegedly) been a conformist, collectivist society for millennia, while America has (allegedly) been a free-thinking, individualist society for centuries.

I think one key difference is that most American universities have adopted speech codes—codes that were imposed with allegedly 'good intentions', to 'keep students safe' and to deter teachers and students from 'offending' each other. Yet these codes have usually been so poorly written, so vague, and so euphemistic that it's almost impossible to know what will fall afoul of them.

The speech codes are typically written by student services staff, DEI administrators, university lawyers, and/or activist adjunct faculty, rather than by tenure-stream faculty who are regularly teaching students. In principle, the speech codes are supposed to protect students from feeling offended, triggered, or marginalized by others. In practice, the speech codes end up endangering, censoring, and silencing students and faculty who might say things that a tiny minority of student activists will (pretend to) find offensive.

American speech codes impose extreme risk-aversion on American professors and students. I used to think their vagueness was a bug, but now I think it's a feature. The vagueness deliberately chills free speech. In China, I knew that as long as I didn't criticize "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," I could probably talk about the heritability of IQ, or sex differences in mating strategies, or polyamory, or BDSM. In America, the speech codes are never clear enough to actually know what is permitted.

Whereas a good professor will try to teach in a way that maximizes benefit to the majority of students,

these speech codes are designed instead to minimize harm to the tiny minority of the most easily-offended students.

In America, the easily-offended are cosseted. In China, they simply learn to be less offended. If dozens of Chinese students are enjoying a discussion forum about polyamory or IQ research, some might express moral disapproval of the relationship style or the research topic—but they don't express moral disapproval of the fact that other students are discussing it or the fact that I'm teaching about it. And they certainly don't expect the disapproval by the minority to take

priority over the learning experience of the majority.

Maybe another difference is that a lot of the Chinese students at CUHK-SZ were rather, by American standards, 'Aspy' (with features of Asperger's syndrome, which has been dubiously lumped into the 'autism spectrum'). They were typically in the top 2% of performers on the Gaokao (university entrance exams) and had spent their teenage years studying hard, exploring their intellectual passions. Compared to the average American college student, many were 'neurodivergent'—nerdy, stronger on systematizing than empathizing, math-savvy, but a bit socially awkward.

As an Aspy academic, I've spent much of my career interested in neurodiversity, and I'm worried that American universities are becoming systemically

biased against neurodiversity and against the kinds of nerdy scholars who, for centuries, sought intellectual and social refuge in universities. Instead of universities remaining Aspy-friendly and nerd-positive, they've institutionalizing the values and views of one particular kind of brain—an earnest, censorious, Left-leaning, hyper-empathizing, typically white, typically female administrator who thinks they know what is best for everyone else.

These code-enforcers appoint themselves mother ducks who believe they must look after their little ducklings (college students) and keep them safe from big bad wolves (sexists, racists, fascists, transphobes, Christians, whatever). They impose speech codes that might seem crystal clear to them but that are vague, arbitrary, and mysterious to most others—including neurodivergent people whose brains have always worked differently and people from other civilizations whose cultures shaped their brains differently. They pretend to value diversity, equity, and inclusion, but only on the basis of a few demographic and sexual traits (race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation). There is no DEI for neurodiversity.

If we really took neurodiversity seriously, we would recognize that brains are highly varied in terms of sex differences, sexual preferences (including kinks

and relationship styles), moral intuitions, political orientations, religions, and so on. It's not just the people who are on the autism spectrum or who have ADHD or Tourette's who are neurodivergent. We are all neurodivergent in the sense that there is so much variation in every psychological trait that's relevant to our current cultural debates and civilizational taboos.

And as I've argued elsewhere, this neurodiversity isn't just within our culture; it's also between cultures. It's almost impossible for someone who is not already steeped in American culture to figure out what our speech codes mean, what our administrators are really worried about, and what could get them into

trouble. We can't expect undergraduates, graduate students, or faculty from Nigeria, Iran, Germany, or China to be able to anticipate everything that

might offend American Gen Z undergrads. Or to censor themselves with 100% accuracy in every lecture, seminar, discussion forum, term paper, office hour visit, lab group meeting, or faculty meeting. No matter how many online training sessions they complete about their university's 'respectful campus' or 'sexual misconduct' policies.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if one of my CUHK-SZ undergrads from China got into an American PhD program, and came to the U.S. They might expect to find a wonderland of free speech, open inquiry, and edgy debate. They might assume that they'd feel at least as much freedom here as they felt in the CUHK-SZ discussion forums I ran. And, in one particular domain—their ability to openly criticize our political leaders and their policies—they'd be right.

But in most other domains, in most other controversies, they'd find a much more intolerant, closed-minded, Aspy-shaming, sex-negative, censorious culture than the one that they left.

For references, please see inquisitivemag.org.

Geoffrey Miller, PhD, is Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of New Mexico.



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Courage

The professoriate and the beaches of Normandy.

BY MICHAEL BAILEY

Fear is our true enemy. And it won't do to tell people not to be afraid. Even researching controversial ideas can lead to sharp social disapproval or worse. Same for questioning popular ideas. Sure, no one is risking life or limb, but social exclusion is not a trivial cost. I speak from experience.

Academics like me—people who rile with “dangerous” research and teaching—we don't get many awards. The Courage Award I received from Heterodox Academy (HxA) on June 6 was the first award of my 35-year academic career. Both the name of the commendation and the group that granted it make it as desirable an honor as I can imagine.

At HxA's conference, I relaxed in ways I cannot where I work. The meeting rooms were full of courageous scholars, people who get that unpopular ideas are often dismissed for emotional rather than empirical reasons. At work, these intellectuals are likely to be described as “outspoken” or “difficult” and, of course, “sexist,” “racist,” “transphobic.” We shared stories about what we have escaped from, albeit all too briefly.

As it turned out, the day I received my award was the 80th anniversary of D-Day. My remarks at the ceremony included the obvious fact that nothing I've done in my academic career required the bravery shown by the 150,000 troops who stormed Normandy.

Differences in the situations of the Allied troops and contemporary academics partly explain the greater courage shown by the former. The Allies faced an evil, totalitarian enemy trying to kill them. Soldiers were united in their desire to defeat this enemy. Any hesitation to join the battle would be seen as cowardice and likely court-martialed.

In academia, the stakes are much lower. No one is trying to kill anyone in defense of identity politics or critical theories. Administrators don't punish anyone for cowardly actions. (They actually seem to prefer those.) Academics are united on little. But maybe that disunity could become an intentional strength. Help us fear less.

Michael Bailey, PhD, is Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University.