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inquisitive

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Class

A peek into this issue's offerings.

***BY ALICE DREGER**, Managing Editor*

Socioeconomic class sometimes feels in the academy like the final frontier. Sure, it has always been a named panel of the triptych meant to hold our attention in the disciplines that pay mind to social power – the other two being race and gender, of course. But class has often been the forgotten middle child in our readings, our research, our discourse.

Several of the contributions to this issue of *inquisitive*, on the theme of "class," suggest why this may be. In "Go Dig a Ditch," Sarah Hartman-Caverly captures how, in many families of the manual labor class – and among academics, too – matriculation has been seen as the first step in the journey *out* of your family's class. Class on the low end becomes something to escape, and you can't fully escape it by continually talking about it.

Still, class persists as a divider, even if, as Scott Pell suggests in "The Pipeline," American academics paint a veneer of two-party politics on it all to justify derision and discrimination against those who have less. In an excerpt we bring from his new book, *Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at America's Colleges*, Richard Kahlenberg traces out just how startling class disparities have become in universities, and why it is those in power have had very little interest in addressing them – even when addressing them might improve public perception of higher education.

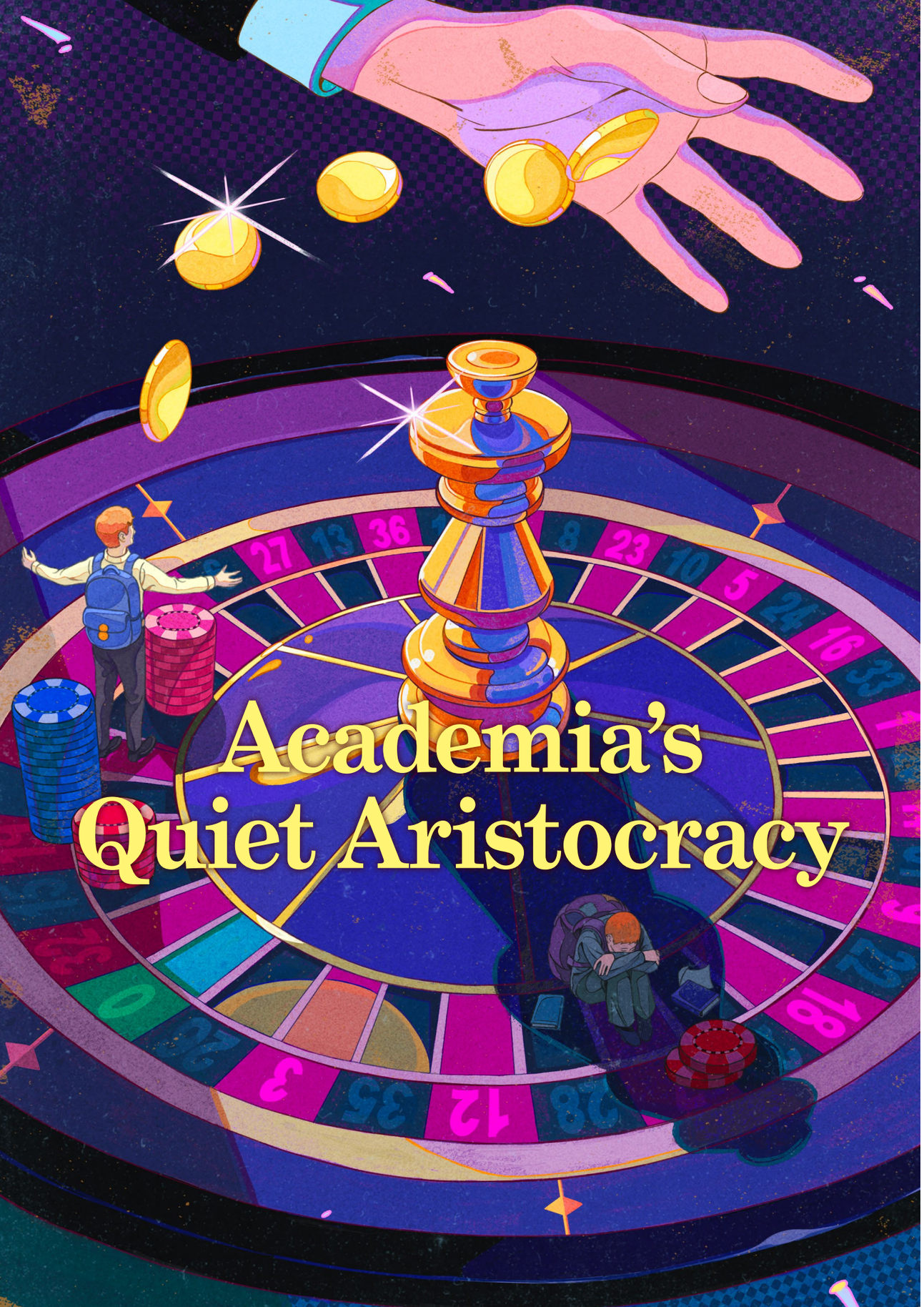
As Kahlenberg and others have shown, the myth of pure meritocracy is a tale told by the haves. It provides a handy justification for what Farid Zaid terms "Academia's Quiet Aristocracy," that is, the rich who just keep getting richer. In this issue, Zaid marshalls the data to expose the inner workings of the disparity-producing machine, and suggests ways to fix it, while in our Heterodox Life column this quarter, Frances An provides a first-person reflection on what it's like to be at the poor-get-poorer end of the academic game.

Struggles over class mean battles over power, and so this issue also brings a number of fine essays considering specific struggles for scarce resources and/or self-determination. Brendan Stern recounts the political consciousness-raising of deaf individuals while making the case for a more heterodox Deaf America. Scott Davies examines departmental and disciplinary "micro rituals" and takes special note of how they tend to be flavored quite differently among younger versus older faculty. And Steven Engler explains how he has used the insights of scholars of class to help students understand religious practices.

Finally, for our "Field Guide" series, Deepa Das Acevedo parts the grasses to help us see into the strange (to most of us) discipline of legal anthropology, and, for our "Back in the Day" column, James Simpson considers how literature survives and parses cultural revolutions of the type through which we may now be living.

I have just one favor to ask: Please consider sitting with this issue and reading beyond your usual classes. And please also consider pitching us your ideas for future issues. Our open call is presently on the theme of "limits," and you can find it at inquisitivemag.org.

"Detroit Industry, North Wall" by Diego Rivera, 1932. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.



Academia's Quiet Aristocracy

"Matthew Effect Roulette" by Weston Wei (used with permission).

Open inquiry requires a revolution in research assessment.

BY FARID ZAID

In a well-worn biblical parable, a master is preparing to leave on a long journey and, before departing, he entrusts his servants with portions of his wealth – "*talents,*" or large units of currency. To one servant he gives five talents, to another two, and to the third, just one. The first two servants invest their shares and double what they have been given. The third buries his single share in the ground, hoping only to preserve what little he has. When the master returns, he rewards the two who took risks and multiplied their talents and admonishes the one who did not, declaring: *For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*

Traditionally, the parable is read as an exhortation to diligence, ambition, and faith. But it is hard to ignore the harsher subtext: It is easy to take risks when you begin with plenty; fear is rational when you have almost nothing. The servant with the smallest endowment was not slothful – he was vulnerable. His caution wasn't a form of laziness, but a rational response to the desperate calculus of scarcity, where every misstep could mean ruin.

Over time, this lesson – the compounding of advantage for those who already have, and the stripping away from those who have little – has been formalized into what is now known as the Matthew Effect, named after the gospel in which the parable cited above appears.

The effect shows up – often subtly – across a striking number of economic and cultural domains. In education, early gains in reading proficiency lead to compounding advantages in literacy, while struggling readers fall further behind – a gap that often widens over the school years. In wealth distribution, those who begin with wealth are more likely to access further opportunities for capital growth, entrenching inequality over time. In the labor market, early career access to high-status networks or prestigious internships accelerates opportunity, creating self-reinforcing loops of visibility and success. In cultural industries like music and publishing, exposure-based algorithms and bestseller dynamics amplify already-popular works, crowding out emerging voices regardless of quality.

Yet nowhere does the principle reshape outcomes more quietly – and more consequentially – than in academia, where it is not just results but the architecture of ambition itself that bends to its logic.

Universities present themselves as arenas of merit, where brilliance rises naturally toward recognition. Yet in reality, the world of journal publishing, citation counts, and institutional prestige resembles a reputation marketplace skewed by legacy and access. Influence compounds along familiar lines, while those outside established networks find themselves locked out of visibility, relevance, and reward. Innovation, it seems – unless safely packaged – is a dangerous wager. And so, countless ideas, like that buried talent, are hidden away before they are ever given a chance to grow.

> **Metrics were meant to illuminate excellence. But instead of casting light, they have thickened the shadows – entrenching privilege, narrowing inquiry, and rewarding only those already standing in the spotlight.**

The idea that scholarly excellence could be measured with precision is a relatively recent invention. The Journal Impact Factor (JIF), introduced in the mid-twentieth century, marked the beginning of this shift – offering first libraries and then academic publishers, universities, and funding agencies a seemingly neutral way to quantify influence and impose order on the

ambiguity of peer judgment. Over time, additional metrics such as citation counts, university and journal rankings, and the h-index amplified this logic, promising to identify scholarly value with algorithmic efficiency. It was a technocratic vision of academic meritocracy: detached, rational, transparent, and *fair*.

But the illusion of neutrality surrounding citation-based metrics masked the extent to which they can be – and routinely are – manipulated and distorted. Far from offering a transparent window into scholarly merit, these quantifiable measures invite strategic behaviour that rewards gaming over genuine intellectual contribution. Editors seeking to elevate their journal's standing have been documented pressuring authors to insert irrelevant citations or favoring submissions likely to boost citation tallies, regardless of substance. Researchers, in turn, often engage in excessive self-citation to fabricate influence. Most concerning is the recent documented rise of citation cartels: collusive networks that systematically inflate members' citation counts without regard for scholarly relevance.

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Beyond these intentional distortions, deeper structural shifts in academic publishing have further eroded the reliability of citation-based metrics. As publication rates accelerate, studies are increasingly fragmented into smaller publishable units (aka salami-slicing), author lists lengthen, and the volume of references expands, while the signal-to-noise ratio of scholarly output diminishes. Measures such as citation count, h-index, and journal impact factor are increasingly saturated – amplified not by scholarly impact but by scale, density, and consolidation within elite publication networks. Across disciplines, and even within departments, such metrics no longer offer stable grounds for comparison.

These distortions are not fringe aberrations; they are embedded responses to institutional systems that equate numerical visibility with academic value. In line with Goodhart's Law – which states that, when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure – what began as a tool for assessing quality has become a force that reshapes scholarly practice itself, introducing perverse incentives that reward visibility over substance, resonance over rigour, and citation-maximization over genuine insight.

Metrics were meant to illuminate excellence. But instead of casting light, they have thickened the shadows – entrenching privilege, narrowing inquiry, and rewarding only those already standing in the spotlight. Sociologist Robert Merton first exposed this disturbing aberration in science: a self-reinforcing cycle of early recognition, often linked to institutional prestige, leads to disproportionate future rewards, irrespective of underlying merit.

Originally identifying what he termed "the Matthew Effect" in the context of how eminent scientists received more credit in collaborations or simultaneous discoveries, Merton later broadened the concept to include the ways in which scientific communication and visibility are skewed by status. Contributions from prominent figures are amplified while those from lesser-known scholars are often overlooked. Eminent scientists benefit not only from structural prestige, but from the psychosocial conditions it enables – confidence, risk-tolerance, and the freedom to pursue difficult problems. The Matthew Effect, in this sense, describes how prestige not only multiplies rewards but also reshapes the conditions of intellectual labour itself.

Empirical studies consistently show how success compounds along prestige lines. Citation counts, often taken as proxies for quality, are deeply shaped by where a paper appears, not simply by what it contributes. Even when identical papers are inadvertently published in different journals, the version in the higher-ranked outlet consistently attracts more citations – a striking reminder that visibility and prestige can outweigh substance. This "halo effect" – where perceived value is amplified by institutional reputation – helps explain why journal prestige remains one of the strongest predictors of citation rates. That early boost in visibility quickly compounds. Once scholars publish in elite journals, they are disproportionately invited back – benefiting from editorial trust, increased visibility, and a kind of reputational momentum that is hard to replicate elsewhere.

So entrenched is this pattern that some quip that science advances one funeral at a time – a grim but telling nod to how tightly access and authority are linked, and how slowly intellectual gatekeeping gives way to new voices. This isn't just about who gets cited – it's about which ideas are allowed to shape the future of knowledge.

This same gravitational pull of early advantage exerts a powerful influence in the competitive arena of research funding. Scholars who narrowly secure early-career grants are significantly more likely to dominate future grant competitions. The pattern holds just as firmly in the world of research funding more broadly: early success all but guarantees future access, while a narrow miss can quietly end a promising trajectory.

Those who miss out – despite equal talent – are often pushed to the margins, their research trajectories diverted or cut short. Rather than correcting for structural barriers – whether institutional, socio-economic, or demographic – the system entrenches them, reinforcing inequality at scale. Innovative or unconventional ideas that originate outside dominant networks are routinely underfunded, while resources cluster around those already recognised.

The implications of these compounding advantages are not peripheral – they are structural. They determine who gets to contribute, whose work defines the field, and which ideas are given the space to grow. The result is a scientific community that is less epistemically diverse, more risk-averse, and less resilient to intellectual stagnation and dogma.

By constraining what gets seen, cited, and funded, systemic biases don't just mute the potential of individual researchers. They narrow the horizons of scholarship itself. We lose not only voices, but possibilities. It is this quiet aristocracy – the subtle, often invisible consolidation of power and legitimacy – that shapes not only careers, but the intellectual boundaries of entire disciplines.

And this imbalance distorts more than just outcomes; it quietly narrows what scholars even dare to attempt. Just as the servant entrusted with only one talent feared taking a risk he could not afford, scholars with fewer institutional resources learn, often unconsciously, to aim for work that will be deemed acceptable by the dominant tastes of gatekeepers. They are drawn, often instinctively, toward caution.

Research questions are trimmed to fit familiar frames, and methods skew increasingly conventional, selected less for what they might uncover than for how safely they can be defended. Conclusions tilt toward what is already known

and already admired. Even dissenting or unconventional viewpoints – those that might have stretched a field, challenged a consensus, or opened a new horizon – are often abandoned before they are fully formed – not from lack of imagination, but from an acute awareness that the margin for error is razor-thin. Those without prestigious institutional armour must learn to protect themselves. They bury their riskiest ideas deep beneath the surface, choosing safer, more acceptable paths.

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This dynamic undermines the conditions necessary for open inquiry. Diversity of thought – not merely demographic, but epistemological and methodological – becomes collateral damage. Scholars from less represented regions, institutions, or intellectual traditions find it harder to gain a hearing, no matter the intrinsic merit of their work. The academy, instead of being a robust marketplace of ideas, morphs into an echo chamber, where what is already prestigious is simply amplified. If academic freedom is to mean anything beyond a formal protection against censorship, it demands the dismantling of prestige's silent gatekeeping, so that insight, not inheritance, determines what rises.

The good news: Despite the entrenched power of prestige metrics, alternatives already exist – and some are beginning to gather momentum.

The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) calls for hiring, funding, and promotion decisions to prioritise the quality of individual contributions over the journals' prestige. Preprint servers such as PsyArXiv create spaces where scholarship can be seen and engaged on its merits, without waiting for gatekeepers to confer legitimacy.

Some universities are beginning to move away from journal-based proxies altogether, experimenting instead with direct evaluation of research outputs at the article level. These approaches, often referred to as article-level metrics (ALMs), aim to measure the reach and influence of individual works rather than the prestige of the journals in which they appear. Unlike citation counts alone, ALMs incorporate a broader set of signals – social media mentions, news coverage, blog posts, policy citations, and usage statistics like views and downloads. The result is a more immediate and textured picture of how knowledge circulates both within and beyond academia. Though still imperfect, these tools gesture toward a more pluralistic and less hierarchical way of recognising scholarly value.

Funding bodies, too, are facing growing calls to shift their criteria, away from narrow benchmarks of prestige and toward a more generous recognition of intellectual risk, methodological diversity, and boundary-pushing inquiry. Rather than favoring projects that conform to familiar paradigms or emulate prior success, funders are being urged to support work that challenges disciplinary norms, explores emerging questions, or takes genuine epistemic risks.

These reforms remain modest and uneven, but they signal the contours of a healthier academic culture – one where scholarly value is judged by creativity, rigor, and the substance of its contribution, not by the institutional weight behind it. At present, however, too much depends on mastering the subtle codes of the academic aristocracy: the right language, the right citations, the right tone. True open inquiry requires more than permission to speak – it requires the structural capacity to think differently.

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

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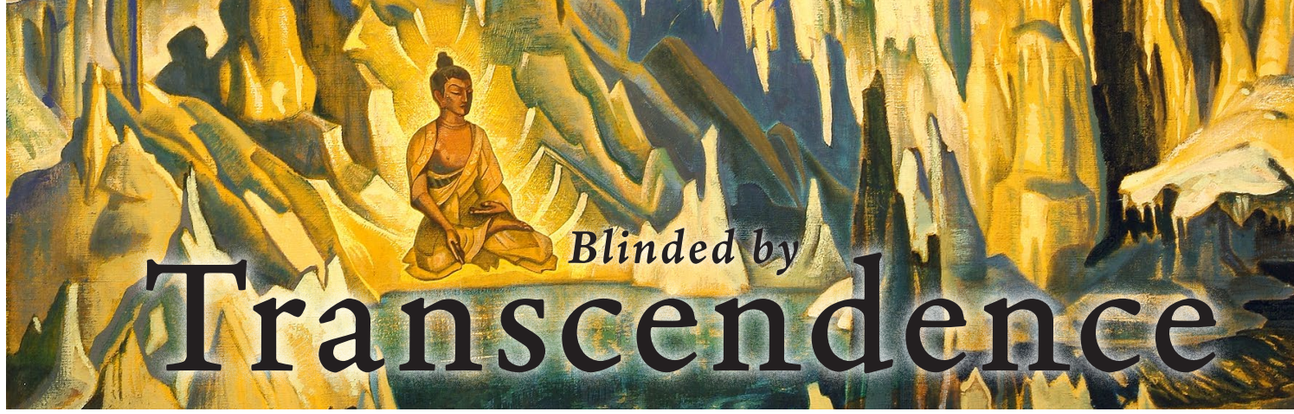

"Buddha the Winner" by Nicholas Roerich, 1925. WikiArt, Public Domain.

Blinded by Transcendence

Teaching Religious Studies via class.

BY STEVEN ENGLER

The spark for using socioeconomic class to teach Religious Studies came to me about six years ago. I had joined a small-group conversation of my students on the day's topic of Liberation Theology. Discussion was heating up between one student, who insisted that prejudice against "visible minorities" represents the key social problem of our times, and another, who insisted that the concentration of power in the hands of "global elites" amounts to a bigger problem.

Looking to move their ideas forward, I asked whether they might bridge their disagreement by talking about power and oppression – usually thought of as issues of "class." The first student insisted that this was exactly their point, but it had nothing to do with the other student's view. The second dismissed any talk of oppression as communist. Both were blind to the potential for common ground.

If we ask how people use religion in struggles for more access to resources and opportunities, students can begin to understand both class and religion as they are experienced in societies around the world.

Despite not succeeding in getting those two students to use "class" to think about religion, I have spent a lot of time since thinking about how to frame that idea in more accessible and less polarized terms – starting with the distinction between haves and have-nots. I've also thought a great deal about how discussions of class can be useful in some of my Religious Studies courses.

For those unfamiliar with Religious Studies, the discipline seeks to understand religions through the lenses of the humanities and social sciences. Of course, not every academic in the field approaches material the same way. For my part, I make an important qualification in the first session of every class I teach: Perhaps the most important questions we can ask from *within* a religion are "What does God expect of me?" or "How should I walk the path of my tradition?" But, if we accept the task of comparing *all* religions on something like an even playing field, we are limited to exploring religions as public, social forces in the world.

Even with that opening caveat, it isn't easy to talk to undergraduate students about "class." Many view socioeconomic class simply as a narrow form of indelible group membership, yet another box to be checked off. Students are used to seeing themselves in terms of different registers of identity: race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, nationality, language, neurodiversity, political beliefs, lifestyle choices – and sometimes religion. So, it makes perfect sense that they would read class, too, just in terms of identity politics.

When students do encounter more sophisticated concepts of "class" – typically in humanities and social-science electives – the ideas often come in

a confusing theoretical package. Like many of my colleagues, I could take the scholarly path and try to explain to my students concepts of false consciousness, commodity fetishism, surplus-value extraction, hegemonic discourses, and ideological state apparatuses. I could explore how class and religion intersect in Bourdieu's view that "theodicies are always sociodicies" (as I have done before). Or I could think like a teacher and meet my pupils where they are.

After much thought and a few false starts, I now work with students to move away from thinking of religion as focused on a perfect world, whether beyond this one or in our hearts. Looking at religions as we do class – that is, in terms of political forces – helps students think about social hierarchy. If we ask how people *use religion in struggles for more access to resources and opportunities*, students can begin to understand both class and religion as they are experienced in societies around the world.

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As an example, in my End of the World class in Religious Studies, in the section on East Asia, we discuss White Lotus groups. For well over a thousand years in China and more recently Southeast Asia, millennarian movements of this type combined social, economic, and political critiques of existing institutions and authorities with supernatural expectations for a coming utopian age. As I teach my students, if European Marxism is an echo of Judeo-Christian apocalypticism, then Maoism is an echo of White Lotus millennarianism.

Class comes into the picture here as we discuss a point made by U.K. scholar Seb Rumsby who observes that, in south-east Asian cultures, ethnicity – formerly seen as fluid – has become "a fixed, primary and primordial identity." This development reflects European social Darwinism and was reified by communist governments in China and Vietnam. Millennarian social unrest had previously spread *across* ethnic and national boundaries, in part because distinct cultural groups saw themselves as *sharing* a subaltern *socioeconomic* position. But supernatural utopianism was siloed and contained as the reification of ethnic identity firewalled various sites of potential social unrest. The growing contrast between ethnic groups undermined previous socioeconomic solidarity. As I frame the point for students, where class once united, identity now divides.

Another effective example – discussed by scholars of religion like Russell McCutcheon – is the famous self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức. In June, 1963, Quảng Đức burned himself to death in a busy intersection in Saigon in an act of protest against the persecution of Buddhists. In my course, we begin by asking, "How was this a *religious* event?" But the idea that "Buddhist" was an identity worth dying for in such a painful way raises more questions than it answers. The stereotype that Buddhism is a religion of peace gets us nowhere.

The conversation moves forward when students do some research and find that the ruling elites in Vietnam at the time were Catholics, who tended to distribute power and opportunities among themselves. But a comparison of Catholic and Buddhist beliefs and practices also sheds no real light on the matter.

We then reflect on the words that have been popping up in our discussion. Why is it that words like "persecution," "power," and "oppression" seem more relevant here than "God," "dharma," "salvation" or "nirvana"? Then we read a few pages by Matthew Day, who explains:

> ...the Catholic-Buddhist boundary in post-colonial Vietnam was energized by the antagonisms between an urban, expropriating elite and a rural, expropriated peasantry. Miss that and you've missed almost everything.... The slipup is ... asking whether there is something uniquely "Buddhist" or "religious" about setting oneself on fire.... The most obvious questions, it turns out, are often the least revealing.

We split religions away from social and economic realities when we treat them as sets of ideas, symbols, and rituals about divine beings, afterlife salvation, and transcending this world, and when we teach religious history by focusing on ancient origins, sacred institutions, and diverging theological systems. Understanding class helps us fully understand religious life as an actual lived experience.

Obviously, most religious studies scholars teach and write about real-world issues: religion and society, politics, violence, gender, sexuality, economics, and popular culture. But the "religion and" frame does not help my students understand these topics if it presents the religion part as uniquely spiritual, pure, and other-worldly, if it treats religion as ultimately transcending these other issues, even as it bridges to them.

We address this more explicitly in my course in a session where students research and present on religion as a mode of politics, choosing from a menu of topics like Engaged Buddhism, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Gandhian Satyagraha, and Nigerian Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah's critique of the "weaponization of religious identity." These examples all show religions engaged in struggles between those with great power and those with less.

Ultimately, we arrive at a view of class – defined in general terms as social stratification according to material conditions and access to opportunities – by looking at how particular religions *work* in the world, not at how religion in general stands beyond it. If I succeed, students come to see that religions are not above the world but in its trenches. Their core ideas, values, and rituals are a particularly effective set of tools for both propping up and challenging disparities of power and opportunity. They are also effective pedagogical tools for *recognizing and discussing* disparities of power and opportunity.

Classroom discussions become more energetic when students and I approach religions as sites of shared political and economic – not only prophetic, scriptural, or soteriological – struggle. Some of that energy comes from recognizing that religion is also like politics in another way: there is no way to muddle through the contradictions and tensions that we face without getting our hands at least a little dirty. Purity and transcendence are myths – as active and ideologically double-edged as all myths are. There is a lesson here, too, for political views across the spectrum: the mutual demonization of polarized discourses are also problematically transcendent in their self-perceived ideological purity.

For various reasons – not hard to imagine – some students thrill at this trajectory of discussion while others do not. That divide sharpens and leads to further productive discussion when we bring it home to identity politics. Recognition, respect, and support for different racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, disabled, and other identities are important and valuable, but bring risks. Thinkers like Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, Mark Lilla, Francis Fukuyama, Charles Murray, and John McWhorter suggest that identity politics fosters social division and undermines shared discourse.

In the end, can the relation between "religion" and "class" help students approach topics like social solidarity, tradition, and communities of shared values? The answer is "no" if students see religion and class as two more banners of siloed identity and difference.

But it is a qualified "yes" if we refuse to insulate religion from the world by wrapping it in a shroud of holiness, sacrality, and purity. If the essence of true, pure, orthodox religion is its other-worldly nature, then its social, political, and economic effects are pre-defined as secondary.

Over-emphasis on transcendence in Religious Studies blinds us to the real-world work of religion and, so, to its relationship with class. And, if any ideological stance – whether revolutionary socialism, identity politics, nationalism, or libertarian meritocracy – adopts a rhetoric of purity in order to reject competing views as less than morally immaculate, then it, too, is blinded by transcendence, and in need of more "class."

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

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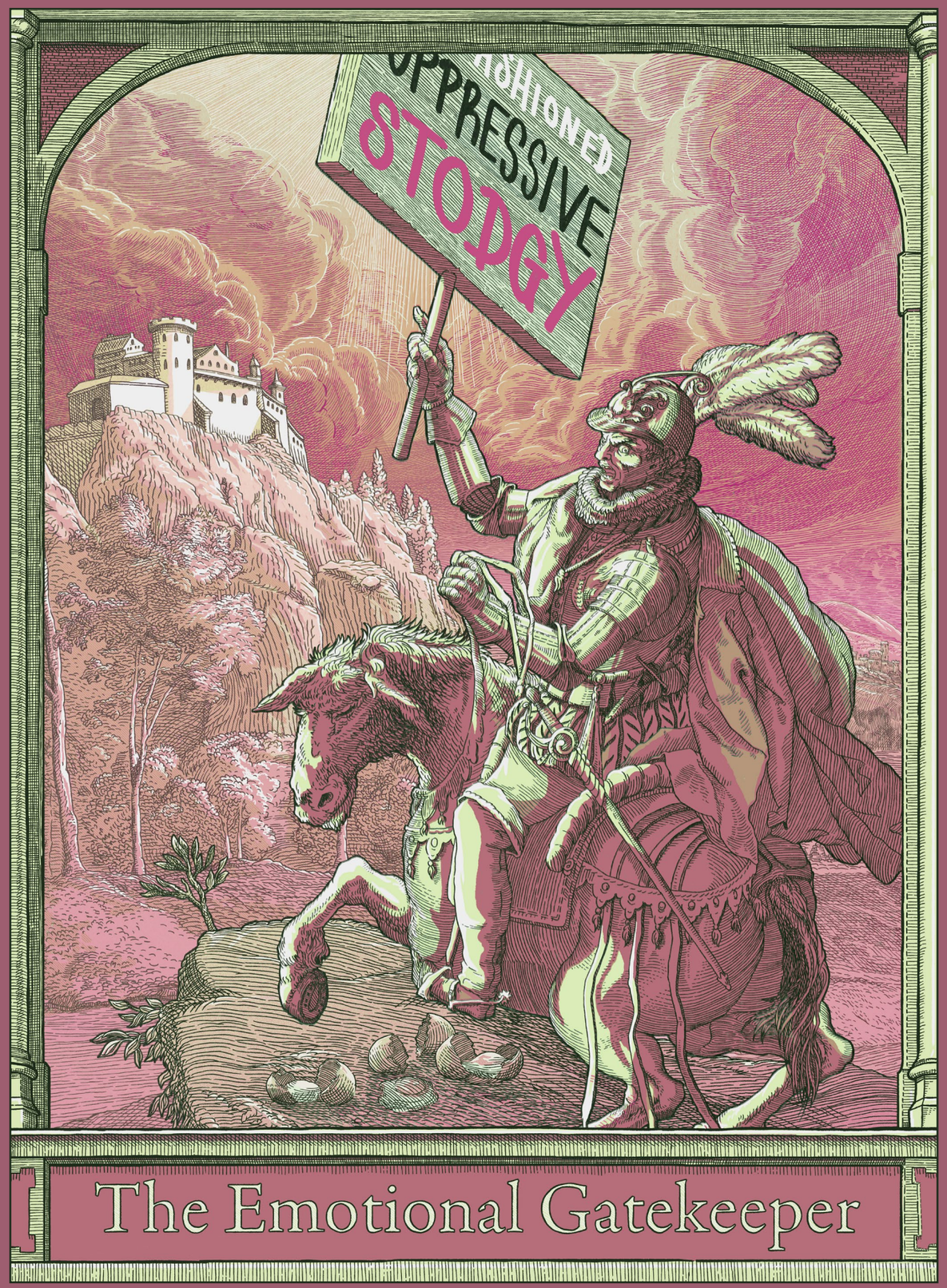

Illustration by Studio Duco (used with permission).

Class culture, micro rituals, and generational divides in higher ed.

BY SCOTT DAVIES

Just over ten years ago, a Canadian social science department set within an industrial city was choosing its next chair. It had never been harmonious, once suffering a decades-long split between mainstream researchers and Marxists/Socialists. That old factional battle had recently calmed, but another was threatening to erupt.

One side was composed chiefly of aging Canadian public university graduates, people comfortable living in a steel town. They focused on topics like socioeconomic disparities, classical sociological theory, and qualitative studies of everyday life. The other was led by younger graduates of American private universities, people who seemed to resent their unglamorous employment. They studied identities shaped by skin color, sexuality, and gender identity, which they articulated in nouveau discourse peppered with activist jargon.

> **When expressed with intensity, emotionalism elevates certain individuals and/or groups to a sacred status, one that is beyond reproach.**

The department was seeking an external chair who might soothe rising tensions. But both factions had their preferred candidates. The older one chose a left-leaning social scientist, one with a wealth of administrative experience in a state university and considerable familiarity with Canadian scholarship. The younger championed two Gender Studies scholars, one from an elite private college and one from a public "social justice" university, both new to administration and to Canada. The dean was also relatively new yet very ambitious. Once a self-described socialist feminist, she had recently replaced her scholarly attachment to social class for one more attentive to gender, race, and sexuality. She favored the newer faction's candidates.

Hiring an external chair is a gate-keeping act *par excellence* in academe. All parties in this search process had the requisite professional credentials – Ph.D.s, peer reviewed publications, and tenure-stream appointments – and so most expected deliberations would focus on core if dry matters, such as candidates' track records and experience. And indeed, the old guard's did.

But members of the newer faction voiced their preferences in tones that were then peculiar: they emphasized their *emotional* and *personal* reactions to the candidates. During formal discussions, quivering voices warned of psychic threats if the wrong candidate was elected. They vehemently opposed the older candidate, variously accusing him of indifference to their own research agendas, gruff interpersonal manners, and lack of requisite social skills needed to "read the room." In what was supposed to be a high-level academic deliberation, these emotional displays seemed to the older faction surreal, self-indulgent, and overly precious.

The new faction appeared poised to win. But the old guard eked out a surprising victory, perhaps an implicit complaint by some against the new faction's emotional tactics. The dean, incensed by the outcome, threatened to overturn it, but eventually relented. Leaders of the new faction were distraught, doubling down on their personal pleas.

This vignette illustrates the partial replacement of longstanding standards of professional decorum in universities by newer and more emotion-laden norms. Some hail this emotionalism as an egalitarian impulse that gives voice to various minority identities. But it could be interpreted differently in light of its context. Such outbursts occur mainly on affluent campuses, most of their enactors have upper middle-class origins, and they involve attempts to stigmatize contrary views and circumvent rational deliberations.

Might such episodes represent novel styles of gatekeeping, with subtle *class* dynamics?

Pierre Bourdieu was an internationally acclaimed sociologist of social class. Unlike most social scientists, he defined class in terms of groups' varying volumes and compositions of different kinds of resources, or "capital." Bourdieu contended that social classes (and their sub-groupings, or "fractions") forged lifestyles as they drew on their distinct combinations of economic and cultural resources. "Cultural capital" – Bourdieu's signature concept – involves practices that attain value in competitive arenas such as universities.

At the macro-level, genres like classical music, art and literature have long been imbued with prestige, patronized by the upper classes, and consecrated in higher education. According to Bourdieu, this longstanding valuation feeds into the micro level. People steeped in the *beaux arts* are hailed as sophisticated, refined, knowledgeable and distinguished, and hence their familiarity becomes cultural capital.

Bourdieu also described other micro-level correlates of class, such as displaying cultivated manners and feelings of "ease" and confidence in stratifying institutions. Many of the same traits have been historically associated with professional norms of face-to-face conduct, such as suppressing impulsive emotions, avoiding ad hominem name-calling, or engaging in preening moralizing, in favor of measured judgement.

However, what counts as cultural capital can vary over time and across space. Groups compete to impose their own valuations of prestige and status, especially in highly contested fields. This process is partly driven by the evolutions of class cultures over generations, as successive cohorts encounter different historical events and surrounding conditions during their formative years (see Davies and Rizk 2018; Davies 2024).

Bourdieu himself described changing cohorts of French academics, highlighting the events of May 1968 as a particular watershed. Despite sharing similarly advantaged class origins with their older peers, younger cohorts in the early 1970s were entering a French academic system that was undergoing modernization and expansion, and was steeped in New Left politics and 60s' era cultural mores, unlike conditions faced by cohorts who entered earlier in the postwar era. Likewise, today's younger academics are entering university systems that are even further expanded, far more transnational in scope, and much more competitive.

One marked change across academic generations has been the rise of various 'Critical' approaches in the humanities, social science, and professional fields. Beginning in the late 1960s and taking root in the 1980s and 1990s, Critical scholars have challenged conventional valuations of academic prestige. They seek to redefine notions of scholarly rigor and depth, often explicitly devaluing traditional conceptions of research and teaching as old-fashioned and stodgy at best, and socially oppressive and inhumane at worst. Once upstarts in academe, Critical scholars have battled mainstreamers in many universities, sometimes encountering stark opposition, but other times becoming dominant.

Gatekeeping events have provided a key staging ground for these contests. To understand these micro-level events I blend Bourdieu with Randall Collins' (2004) ideas about interaction rituals. For Collins, successful interpersonal gatherings generate solidarity, pumping participants with enthusiasm and social confidence. Over time, chains of such rituals encourage participants to feel part of a well-defined group with a collective identity. In contrast, rituals that fail to energize their participants generate apathy and boredom and little solidarity.

Two species of rituals have different implications for larger patterns of stratification. "Egalitarian" rituals are relatively spontaneous and unscripted, lacking central figures that guide interactions. "Status" rituals, in contrast, forge and reinforce hierarchies among participants, with higher-status actors adopting commanding demeanours, engaging in order-giving, and eliciting deference from lesser-status followers.

For Collins, face-to-face rituals and broader social structures have mutual impacts. In top-down fashion, participants with greater resources have more opportunities to dominate interactions, perhaps turning some into status rituals. Yet, in bottom-up fashion, interactions can have unpredictable and emergent dynamics that can create, maintain, or undo patterns of group solidarity and/or dominance. For instance, high-stakes gatekeeping, especially in contested fields, often involves unscripted deliberations and open votes. Actors who adhere to older norms and are blessed with conventional resources like solid research track records might prevail in such rituals.

But as many academic fields have witnessed in recent decades, the value of those norms and resources has been challenged, often in idioms that evoke Social Justice. Importantly, not only have genres of academic work been challenged, but so too has the legitimacy of different styles of debate. Emotionalism challenges longstanding norms of academic professionalism by using a theatrical urgency to implicitly establish a moral hierarchy in which some actors are more deserving of consideration. When expressed with intensity, emotionalism elevates certain individuals and/or groups to a *sacred* status, one that is beyond reproach.

Some hail this emotionalism as an egalitarian impulse that gives voice to various minority identities. But it could be interpreted differently in light of its context.

This mode of gatekeeping, once deemed unprofessional, is increasingly accepted in universities. And when norms for gatekeeping are unsettled, conflict ensues. Academics raised in a previous generation who expect conventional deliberations are put off-guard when they encounter aroused and visceral emotions. In turn, advocates of Critical Theory/Social Justice, believe that their moral convictions provide a license to dictate the rules and bounds of acceptable debate, and view any challenges to their authority as ill-mannered and insensitive, even *immoral*.

Many see "wokeness" as an evolving manifestation of a particular class culture (see al-Gharbi, 2024; Kaufmann, 2024). Surveys suggest that progressive politics are espoused largely by affluent and highly credentialed "symbolic capitalists" from advantaged class origins. But unlike previous generations of upper middle class professionals, they express themselves in rather novel ways.

Bourdieu's classic depiction of "bourgeois" culture a half century ago highlighted its understated refinement and cultivation, which he contrasted to working class crudity and coarseness. He also examined the *avant garde* fraction of the middle class, that which possessed middling levels of economic capital but large volumes of cultural capital. That fraction further boosted its cultural capital by engaging in valuation struggles that aimed to downgrade traditional bourgeois status markers, characterizing them as stodgy, old-fashioned and even oppressive, and by promoting their own as edgy, novel and liberating. Fifty years later, that fraction's cultural valuations dominate institutions such as universities.

While this fraction continues to express refined cultivation (e.g., in the area of food) and understatement (e.g., in the area of clothing), other elements of its culture are more emotional, particularly in political and moral arenas. Woke or "social justice" culture in elite universities, for instance, is marked by its politics, intense "in-your-face" moralizing, and therapeutic ethos.

Class politics have re-aligned over several decades. New symbolic capitalists, unlike previous generations of professionals, have adopted left-wing identity politics. Today, professionals, not workers, adopt the most stridently progressive views. Their staging grounds are elite universities and coastal urban media, not factories or union halls. They loudly voice their politics in unsubtle tones, often with a moral grandiosity in which they declare themselves as being on the Right Side of History, saviors of democracy, and guardians of universal emotions like joy, caring, and empathy. They police their politics and morals with ever-evolving terms that mark group membership. And most curiously, this culture encourages its members to portray themselves not as victorious or aggressive, but as vulnerable and besieged, even amid its professional affluence.

These tactics, according to Collins, can generate emotional dominance in immediate situations. Emotional virtuosos can deplete opponents of social confidence, compelling opponents to self-consciously "walk on eggshells," wary of giving offence. Guilt-tripping can intimidate its targets, putting them on the defensive, and stigmatizing alternate views, even squelching debate.

Dominating others' emotions in gatekeeping rituals requires confidence. The upbringings of symbolic capitalists can make such confidence feel natural. Annette Lareau (2011), applying Bourdieu, described upper-middle class parenting as "concerted cultivation," a set of practices that nurture children's feelings of entitlement and abilities to absorb evolving mores and vocabularies (which in academe today are often supplied by political activists). Both facilitate the ability of symbolic capitalists to signal their status over the masses, whether by fueling their feelings of assurance in interpersonal situations, and/or their authority to engage in language policing. Both are akin to class etiquette, like raising one's pinkie while sipping tea.

Increasingly, the implicit "Cultural Other" in the symbolic capitalist imagination is not an all-powerful bourgeoise, but a large fraction of the working class – white, rural, and socially conservative.

Increasingly, the implicit "Cultural Other" in the symbolic capitalist imagination is not an all-powerful bourgeoise, but a large fraction of the working class – white, rural, and socially conservative. Arguably, symbolic capitalists are now re-expressing age-old put-downs of working people as crude, vulgar and uncouth using moral-political idioms, laundering their class prejudices in the process.

These class dynamics can be decisive in academic gatekeeping. At the macro level, symbolic capitalists have successfully imposed new norms for gatekeeping in many university fields, sometimes imposing formal job ads that require candidates to adopt various 'Critical' or 'Social Justice' approaches. They have consecrated certain terms, phrases and underlying assumptions, stigmatizing skeptics as beyond the pale, equating disagreement with sacrilege. These surrounding conditions tend to restrict expressions of viewpoint diversity at the micro-level. The acceptance of emotionalism by gatekeepers, such as allowing orators to present their case while morally grandstanding or demanding purity oaths from otherwise heterodox candidates, can create a double standard for the latter, putting them on the defensive, encouraging them to self-censor. Uttering the wrong word can make or break their chances.

Understanding that heterodoxy suffers in one-sided "status rituals" that demand deference can help us avoid situations where participants who have much to contribute end up self-censoring. Attending to the micro level with a robust theoretical framework could allow heterodoxy to thrive as we work to favor egalitarian rituals that follow norms of healthy exchange among moral equals, rituals in which no one usurps the authority to dictate terms of acceptable debate.

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Literature was never "Progressive"

"A world of disorderly notions, picked out of his books, crowded into his imagination" by Gustave Dore, 1863. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Great literary texts do not fare well under the conditions of cultural revolutions.

BY JAMES SIMPSON

A graduating former student who was compiling a "life-reading list" recently asked me to contribute a shortlist of favorite books. Being asked the question sharpened my sense of what texts I love best: those that are inconsistent, undecided about the right side of history, and that are not dully, predictably progressive or reactionary. I love texts that resist the simplicities and repressions of cultural and political revolutions, whether those revolutions are produced by the right or the left.

Don Quixote (1605, 1615) tops my list. Cervantes' novel (one of the first!) is apparently true to the English word "novel," which derives, I don't need to say, from Latin "novella," meaning "new things." And that's how *Don Quixote* has been received for the most part: as pointing to the new. Mark Twain, ever the trenchant spokesperson for the new world of equality, crisply characterized the dominant strand of Cervantes-reception. With *Don Quixote*, Twain avers in his *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Cervantes "swept the world's admiration for the medieval chivalry-silliness out of existence."

The first instance of this take had in fact been no less trenchantly stated almost 300 years earlier by Cervantes himself. In the Prologue to *Don Quixote*, Cervantes favorably reports a friend saying that "this book of yours aims at no more than destroying the authority and influence which books of chivalry have in the world." So, in Part 1.6, Don Quixote's housekeeper has it right: she makes a big bonfire in the don's courtyard and promptly gets to work tossing his books of chivalric romance into the flames.

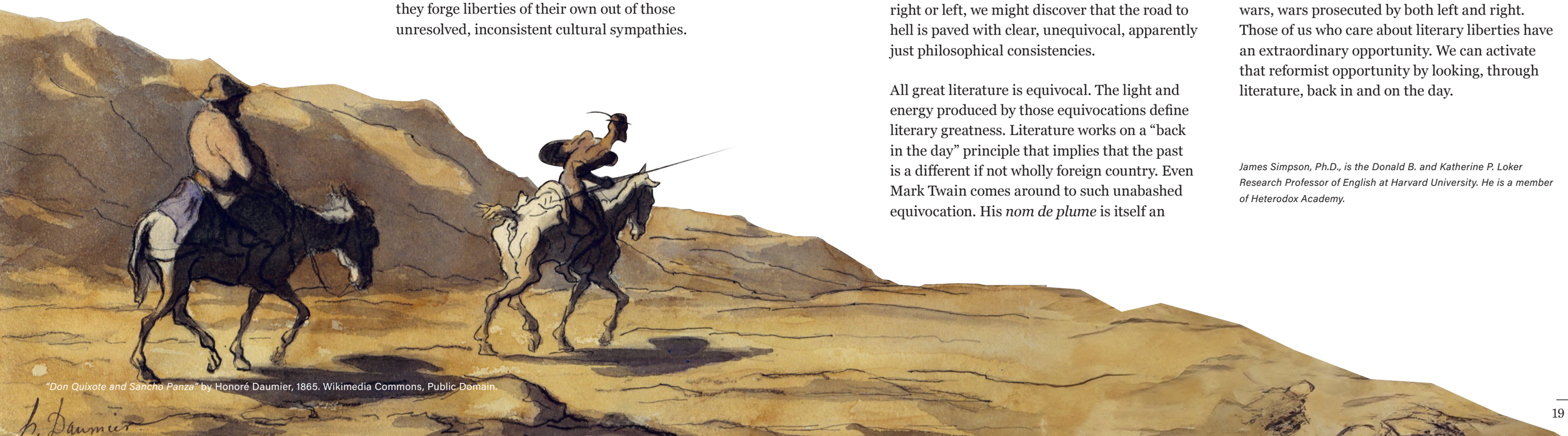
After the dominance of questionably idealistic chivalric romance for three centuries, the action makes plain that it's time for some decisive canon reformation, making way for the world of anti-aristocratic, empirical reality. Time to light the bonfire. Back in the day we had knights saving damsels in distress, but now we're done with that genre; a new day has begun. The novel is unequivocally on the side of modernity.

Or is it? Don Quixote himself is indeed hopelessly, comically absurd as he defies the hard-edged, disenchanted world of early modern Spain. But maybe the "new thing" of this novel also expresses protest of sorts *against* a modernity that has no place for the honor-bound world of chivalry. Cervantes' rationalized, bureaucratized, increasingly centralized early modern Spain was the revolutionary modernity of the Holy Office of the Inquisition (including its book burnings), the expulsion of unconverted Jews and Muslims, legislated purity of blood requirements limiting access to government and ecclesiastical posts, and ethnic cleansing by the expulsion from Spain of all those with Muslim ancestry. Many of these repressive measures find muted but unmistakable and ominous echoes in the novel (see the housekeeper's book burning!).

Literature addresses our situatedness as historical creatures; it prizes the past that has brought us to the promise of the present.

Don Quixote is in fact poised *between* worlds, looking backwards as it moves ineluctably forwards. Of course, enlightened criticism has words for the backward look that turns away from the home base of the novel (i.e. Reality) as a genre. Severe words like "escapism," "sentimentalism," and (the real knock-out) "nostalgia" warn us against the retro look, lest we succumb to multiple, inconsistent sympathies. Such words prohibit the experience of finding oneself *in* history, as they command a progressive, consistently forward-looking view.

Cultural revolutions repudiate multiple sympathies and equivocation, which is why they always institute their own form of book burning and reformulate a sanitized canon according to their pure dogma. It is no accident that the revolutionary philosopher Plato, in his reactionary *Republic*, should ban most literature from his ideal utopian society of pure Justice. Great literary texts (i.e., texts with multiple, often inconsistent cultural sympathies) do not fare well under the conditions of cultural revolutions. Instead, they forge liberties of their own out of those unresolved, inconsistent cultural sympathies.



"Don Quixote and Sancho Panza" by Honoré Daumier, 1865. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Philosophy, by contrast, promises to guide our political choices, and yes, of course we must try to be enlightened and consistent in those applied, real-world political choices. Of course. Literature, however, disobediently refuses to conform to the standards of the cultural revolution. Literature addresses our situatedness as historical creatures; it prizes the past that has brought us to the promise of the present, even if we might ultimately feel obliged to reject that past. Literature is the Janus-faced discipline, drawing on the past to forge future liberties.

Cultural revolutions repudiate multiple sympathies and equivocation, which is why they always institute their own form of book burning.

By the light of great literature, then, things were different back in the day. Without recognizing that difference, we can't understand where we find ourselves now, or the route traversed to arrive here. The moment we apply the standards of a relentlessly revolutionary present to our past, we quickly end up rejecting most of that past.

By that very rejection, indeed, we may even ensure that the promising, utopian present stumbles immediately into repressive censorship. The longed-for present turns out not to be so progressive or loveable after all. From the evidence of some (most?) cultural revolutions, right or left, we might discover that the road to hell is paved with clear, unequivocal, apparently just philosophical consistencies.

All great literature is equivocal. The light and energy produced by those equivocations define literary greatness. Literature works on a "back in the day" principle that implies that the past is a different if not wholly foreign country. Even Mark Twain comes around to such unabashed equivocation. His *nom de plume* is itself an imperative to see things from a double perspective ("mark twain!"). He follows the command in his time-travel novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889): Hank, a gunmaker, imports and imposes enlightened American modernity into and onto medieval Britain only to end up destroying medieval Britain in a murderous storm of technological terror. Hank comes from outside to introduce modernity, democracy, civilization, and equality, and to sweep "the mediaeval chivalry-silliness out of existence."

Instead, however, he brings terrifying destruction. The equality he imports is most evidently the equality of indiscriminate, electrified death. Hank's soldiers, victors in the final battle, will themselves die, killed by "the poisonous air bred by those dead thousands." The conquerors, who deploy revolutionary violence in the name of utopia, end up contracting the virus of history against which they had tried to inoculate themselves. Clean breaks in history turn out to be not so clean.

We find ourselves, and seek to find ourselves, within the warring battles of revolutionary culture wars, wars prosecuted by both left and right. Those of us who care about literary liberties have an extraordinary opportunity. We can activate that reformist opportunity by looking, through literature, back in and on the day.

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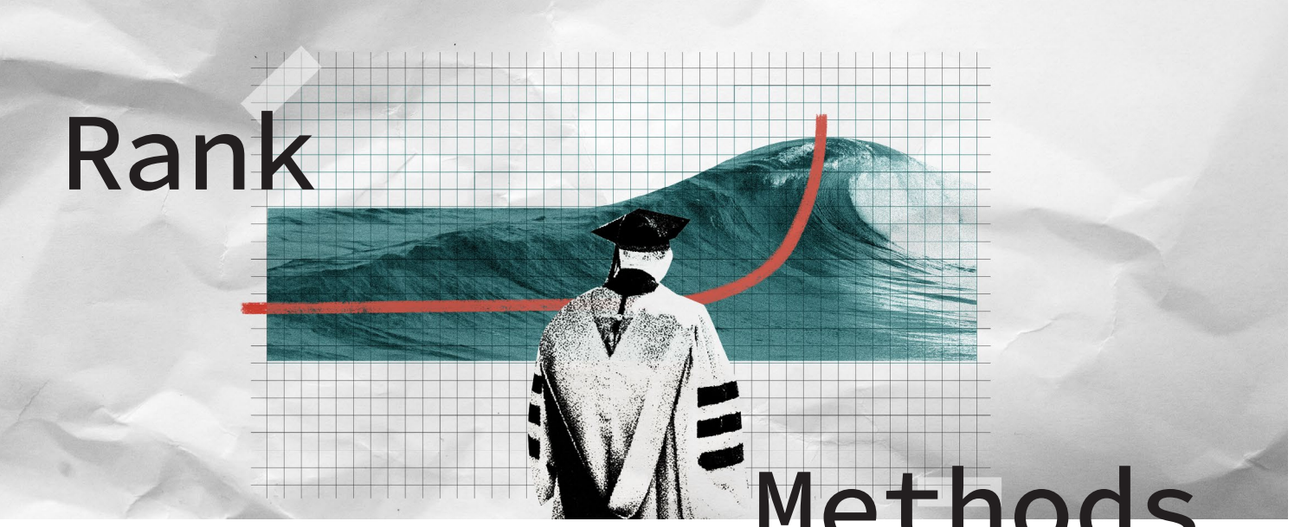

Rank Methods

It's time to replace college rankings with something better.

BY DANIEL DIERMEIER

Higher education has a curious relationship with college rankings. Almost no one thinks they're valid. University leaders openly criticize them. A handful of universities and a number of leading law schools and medical schools refuse to even participate in them. Yet most universities still go along with the process and use rankings to their advantage when they can. Collectively, we are at sea: far from the time when rankings had a veneer of credibility but not yet arrived at a post-rankings era.

We must move faster toward that opposite shore. With their use of low-quality data, subjective standards and flawed, ever-shifting methodologies, college rankings too often do the opposite of what they purport to do. They make it *harder* for students to find the right school.

One of the most comprehensive critiques of rankings can be found in former Reed College president Colin Diver's 2022 book, *Breaking Ranks: How the Rankings Industry Rules Higher Education and What to Do about It* (Hopkins Press). Diver had good reason to reflect on the subject. Reed College was the first school to pull out of the rankings on principle, in 1995.

Among other issues, Diver focuses on the muddled methodology employed by *U.S. News & World Report* and other rankings publishers. He points out the problems inherent in arbitrarily selecting and assigning weight to the variables that rankings schemes measure and looks skeptically at the peer assessments, financial measures, selectivity rates, and other factors that go into rankings. "The pseudoscientific precision of the mathematical formulas used in the most popular rankings," Diver notes, "is really quite comical."

Three years after the publication of Diver's book, further analysis is showing criticisms like his to be no laughing matter.

Last year, a report published by NORC at the University of Chicago and funded by Vanderbilt University assessed the construct validity of five prominent rankings systems, including that of *U.S. News*. Among the issues it found were subjective weights, proxy measures of questionable relevance, inconsistencies in data quality and a lack of transparency. Key data points were missing, while data for other important metrics, such as graduate outcomes, were incomplete. A major problem, the study found, is that there is no shared definition of what "good" looks like for colleges. Each ranking creates a target and then purports to hold colleges to that subjective standard.

These flaws matter for the students and families who look to rankings for some semblance of guidance. The rankings obscure one of the great strengths of U.S. higher education, which is the range of institutions that can serve students with very different wants and needs. Students are instead steered toward one view of what makes a good college that may not reflect what matters to them.

Illustration by Janelle Delia (used with permission).

In addition, data issues lead to a situation where important attributes of colleges are misrepresented. Consider how *U.S. News* treats affordability and graduate indebtedness — the amount of loan debt students incur to pay for an education at a given school. Its assessment is based on data solely about students who receive federal aid. But at some top-tier private schools, including Vanderbilt (where I serve as chancellor), many students receive loan-free aid, and some lower-income students may even be able to attend for free.

At Vanderbilt, that holds for families making less than $150,000 a year, about 4 in 5 American families. By ignoring students without loans in its methodology, *U.S. News* makes these schools seem less affordable. Ironically, students may be persuaded to instead choose colleges that could cost more, or conclude college isn't for them at all. In this way, *U.S. News* exacerbates the problem researchers call "undermatching," which can inhibit the futures of high-achieving students from lower-income households.

> **What we need is not another rankings system, but a ratings system, one that quantifies true measures of academic quality and accessibility.**

Problems with rankings are not limited to domestic rankings systems. A forthcoming NORC analysis of global systems finds that they are similarly flawed, with additional challenges stemming from comparing institutions across cultural contexts and more.

What should we do with rankings in light of their flaws and negative impact? Diver says, "Their costs have outweighed their benefits, and my primary advice to both applicants and educators is to ignore them." Recognizing that most students and university leaders won't be able to do that, he offers suggestions for grappling with these flawed systems.

This advice is useful, but ignoring or making the best of rankings isn't enough. The fact is that students and their advisers need a way to make sense of the complex decision about college options. We need to go further and develop an alternative that eventually displaces rankings. What we need is not another rankings system, but a *ratings* system, one that quantifies true measures of academic quality and accessibility. It should be data-driven, transparent, stable, and applied to every institution, public and private, in the country. It should also allow students to personalize their list based on what matters to them, rather than relying on someone else's subjective idea of what "good" should look like.

Such a system would give students and their families the ability to make choices based on clear, accurate information about cost and quality, not on the self-interested, shifting methodologies of profit-driven rankings organizations.

At Vanderbilt, we are working with other U.S. higher education institutions and are funding NORC to develop and pilot such a system, collecting and analyzing data in a new way. Our goal is to provide richer and more usable information so that students can find the best college for them. The challenge of setting up this system is considerable, but we believe it is necessary to support the next generation of students.

Back in 2001, Bard College president Leon Borstein pulled no punches in his assessment of college rankings. Diver quotes him: "It is the most successful journalistic scam I have seen in my entire adult lifetime. A catastrophic fraud. Corrupt, intellectually bankrupt, and revolting." Almost a quarter-century later, enough is enough. Many universities have mastered the art of playing the rankings game. But rankings regimes are failing students and their families. We owe it to them to build something better.

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

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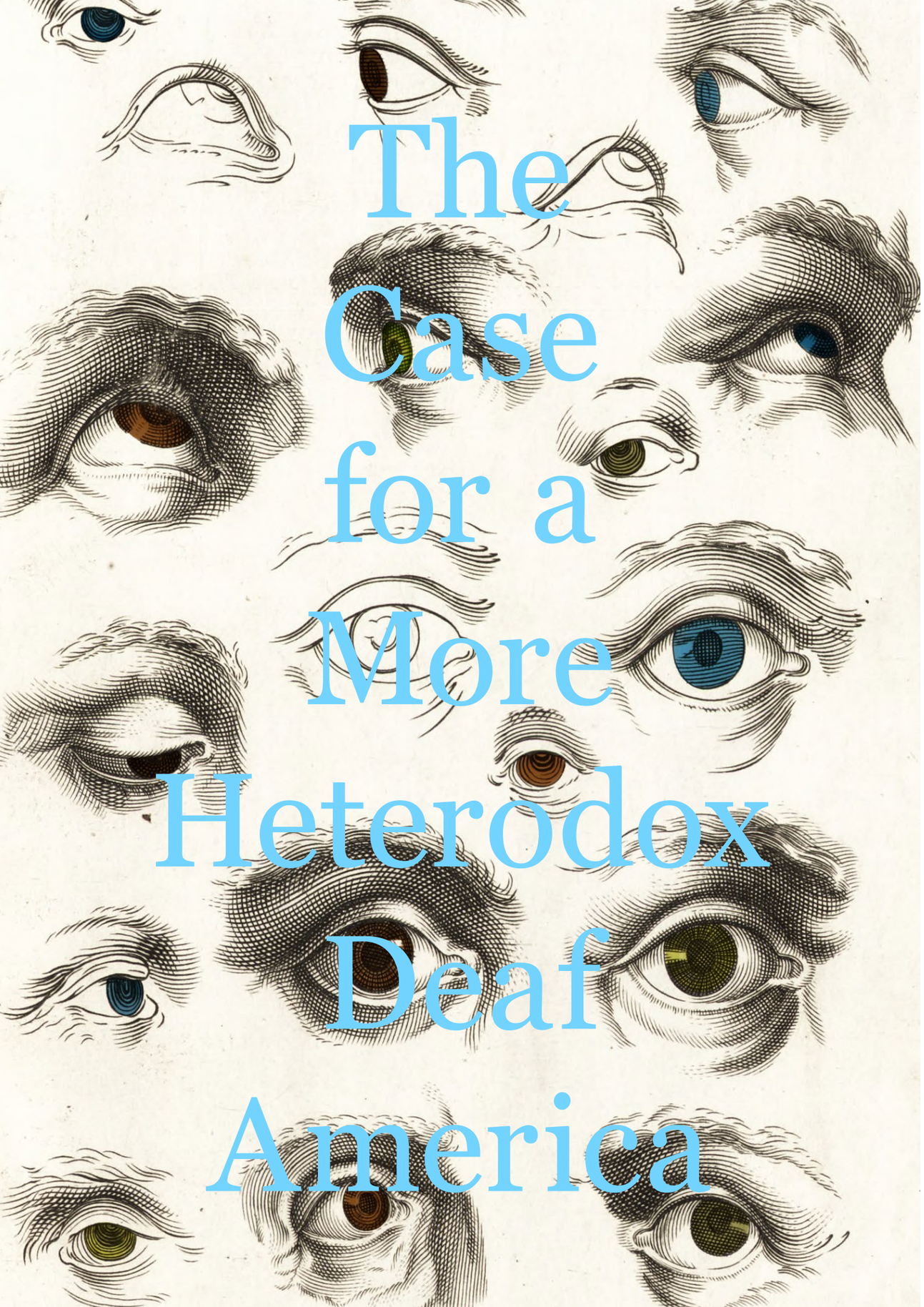


The Case for a More Heterodox Deaf America

"Ars pictoria: An academy treating of drawing, painting, limning and etching" by Alexander Browne, 1669. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Heterodoxy remains our best hope for shaping our destiny.

BY BRENDAN STERN

To understand what is happening in Deaf America, we must first understand a paradox.

Deaf culture has never been more visible. American Sign Language (ASL) is now the third most popular language in American higher education. Deaf scientists and creators regularly receive public acclaim. And the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) promises equal access.

Yet Deaf people – those who see themselves not merely as individuals with hearing loss but as members of a minority community who use ASL – have rarely felt more vulnerable. Cochlear implants, which aim to improve hearing, are spreading. Gene therapy threatens hereditary deafness. Deaf schools are shrinking. Even as researchers stress early language acquisition, deaf children still experience the social, emotional, and intellectual costs of language deprivation.

Visibility hasn't brought safety. Deaf people once believed we could control our collective destiny. But demographic, technological, and political shifts have shaken that faith. The future of Deaf America feels fragile.

We know from social science that, as institutions weaken and trust collapses, groups "bind and blind" into righteous tribes. Deaf America is no exception. Increasingly, Deaf people are embracing a moral orthodoxy with the religious fervor of modern secular movements. Hearing privilege has come to be seen as a kind of original sin; "hearing allyship," repentance; Deaf culture, the promised land.

A moment from my own life at Gallaudet University – the world's only four-year university for deaf students, where I teach – reveals how rigid this orthodoxy can get. Several years ago, I proposed inviting the Alexander Graham Bell Association (AGBell), which prioritizes helping deaf children to hear and speak, to debate whether parents should be required to teach ASL to their deaf children. A colleague was outraged. Slamming his fists down, he signed: "That's like asking Nazis to debate slavery." The proposed debate wasn't just misguided. It was heresy.

The Deafhood movement is a vivid example of how well-intentioned quests for equality can backfire and harden into orthodoxy. The pull toward moral certainty and performance didn't begin with Deafhood; it reflects broader shifts across society. Yet, its evolution underscores Emile Durkheim's warning that threatened groups often sacralize beliefs, stifle debate, and trap themselves in ritual.

> **Deaf identity is not a single story. It's a tangle of loyalties and lives that make Deaf America a microcosm of the nation. That's exactly why it needs heterodoxy — to grapple honestly with the real mess of who we are.**

Deafhood began by challenging audism – the belief that hearing people are superior – and rejecting the medical deficit model of deafness. Adherents reframed Deaf people as a cultural minority with exceptional advantages for humankind. This was a vital corrective, helping many reclaim dignity and pride. But over time, Deafhood has sometimes shifted from contested theory to ritualized theology, and it is now preached in first-year programs, yoga studios, and activist discourse. (Even the name sign for its founder mirrors the sign for Jesus Christ.)

Not all deaf people may claim Deafhood, but many still swim in its currents, pulled by broader forces. Too often, what might be persuasion gives way to denunciation, and concrete progress to merely symbolic display. AGBell advocates are condemned as ableist or Nazis. Medical researchers trying to reduce or prevent deafness are accused of "cultural genocide." Deaf educators

who prioritize written English are branded internalized audists.

In 2024, various leaders protested CBS for not featuring ASL performers on the main Super Bowl broadcast, despite there being a dedicated ASL stream. The outrage was less about access than absence from the altar. Today, visitors make pilgrimages to Deaf-centric spaces like the Signing Starbucks near Gallaudet, some weeping as they order coffee in ASL beneath a plaque celebrating Deaf culture. Of course, real pluralism means tolerating dramatic actions like these. Sometimes they spark needed change. But the danger is when moral theatrics flatten complexity and stall reform, forcing people to conform just to belong. That's how communities grow brittle and truths disappear.

What began as a liberation movement in Deaf America has hardened into dogma, where pluralism is expected to yield to orthodoxy.

The irony is that Deaf America is a living example of pluralism – the hard work of forging bonds across deep differences. This pluralism is not just accidental or cultural. It is profoundly political. Landmark victories like the passage of the ADA arose from pluralistic practices that drive minority progress.

Deaf America is America in microcosm. With roughly a million signers, it holds a vast range of views that reflect America's diversity, because deafness is a biological lottery, or what Andrew Solomon calls a "horizontal identity." About 96% of deaf people are born to hearing parents, dropped into families, regions, and world views not of their choosing. Deaf people span every race, class, and ideology.

By necessity, Deaf America creates what much of the nation is losing: meaningful contact across differences, or what social scientists call cross-cutting ties. When just one in 500 Americans shares your language, you either build bridges or risk isolation.

This pluralism is sustained by translocal networks of schools, friendships, and voluntary spaces rooted in ASL. But it is not passive coexistence. Deaf America depends on dissent, forged by rejecting one of modern life's deepest assumptions: that hearing and speech are prerequisites for a full life. Like fish unaware of water, most hearing people never recognize this orthodoxy until they meet someone who refuses it. Deaf people reject that premise simply to sign and belong. Over time, that necessity becomes culture.

Unlike spoken languages, which allow tone softening and looking away, signed languages are direct and total. Signing monopolizes the body and mind. If speaking is strategic and detached like chess, signing is wrestling: gritty, inescapable.

The result is a pluralistic Deaf America where friction is common and even affirming. Students tell me I look old on the first day of class. We laugh. In class, a Deafblind Trump supporter sits next to a Deaf genderqueer Marxist. They argue. They roll their eyes. They keep going. This bluntness-in-togetherness forges community and pushes Deaf America forward.

Cass Sunstein argues that nations require a "culture of candor" to check myths and extremism. Deaf America already lives it, offering a civic model the country badly needs.

But that strength is under strain. Across America, neighborhoods, newsfeeds, and institutions have sorted into echo chambers. Even places that champion free thought struggle to spark genuine collisions of ideas. In place of pluralism, we get sameness and with it, the slow death of civic life.

Too many forget that progress depends on organic viewpoint diversity and real disagreement. Without those, diverse spaces slip into polite performance. Well-intended initiatives often end up drained by self-selection and a curious politeness where moderates show up, speak carefully, and then leave. Without people who disagree honestly yet still live together, pluralism collapses into posture.

Deaf America won't be spared. Its future depends not just on demographic diversity, but on sustaining the very openness and friction that built Deaf America in the first place — habits that fuel discovery, teach the young, and build coalitions bold enough to persuade and prevail.

Heterodoxy is a practical necessity for Deaf America. Progress in Deaf Studies, Deaf education, and Deaf politics requires people who welcome uncomfortable questions and resist conformity. ASL wasn't widely recognized as a language until the 1970s, when William "Stubborn" Stokoe, a hearing linguist, defied resistance from hearing and deaf people alike. The recognition happened because open inquiry prevailed.

> **We know from social science that, as institutions weaken and trust collapses, groups "bind and blind" into righteous tribes. Deaf America is no exception.**

But today, across the social sciences, ideology often substitutes for investigation. Lived experience can sharpen insight, but it is not infallible. When scholars are elevated for allyship over rigor, research shifts from probing questions to protecting doctrine.

Even Deaf Studies – a field devoted to intersectionality – is narrowing. Stories that complicate the oppressor-oppressed script often get sidelined. Scholars increasingly borrow the moral architecture of minority struggles while glossing over obvious differences. Fluent in liberation rhetoric, the field imposes a rigid storyline. That can empower, but it also flattens. Deaf identity is not a single story. It's a tangle of loyalties and lives that make Deaf America a microcosm of the nation. That's exactly why it needs heterodoxy — to grapple honestly with the real mess of who we are.

The irony runs deeper when we compare how America and Deaf America are imagined. Few today tie being American to speaking English or chasing some civilizational destiny. Most reject American exceptionalism, scoff at calls for national unity, and poke holes in the myth of "the West." Yet many of these same people champion Deaf exceptionalism, elevate signed language as the "natural" language of Deaf people, romanticize Deaf solidarity, and construct a "Deaf World" with moral binaries.

Heterodoxy can help us guard against this hypocrisy. It reminds us that no identity, ideology, or experience is above scrutiny. By welcoming inconvenient cases and contrarian views, it exposes contradictions and keeps Deaf Studies honest and relevant.

Heterodoxy is just as critical in Deaf education, where leaders care about learning but often mistake means for ends. Deaf children are not a monolith. Some lack sign language, others reading and writing, some neither. The danger is when schools fixate on desirable methods and lose sight of the only question that counts: is the child actually learning?

Bilingualism and representation matter. But having Deaf teachers who sign doesn't guarantee Deaf students will thrive any more than having hearing teachers who speak guarantees hearing students will.

Similarly, speech-only programs confuse process with progress. They treat spoken language as the goal, delaying ASL under the myth that it blocks literacy. Evidence says otherwise. Early exposure to language – signed or spoken – drives cognitive growth. The cruel irony is that hearing babies are often taught ASL, while deaf babies often are not, deepening harmful gaps.

This is why heterodoxy matters. It forces us to test assumptions, confront counterevidence, and focus on what actually works. It can help replace ideological allegiance with a hard-nosed commitment to each child's education. That means relentlessly asking: Is the deaf child flourishing? Deaf education should be judged by learning outcomes, not allegiance to a process.

Deaf America faces the same maladies eroding the nation. But it also confronts deeper threats: a post-human future where difference itself is engineered out. That's not just a Deaf crisis; it's an American one. Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw it: a country of timid, uniform people stripped of their "little platoons."

When the stakes feel existential, it's tempting to respond with orthodoxy. That nearly always backfires. A minority community that treats its beliefs as sacred and beyond question will see honest disagreement as a threat and won't survive confronting life's deepest orthodoxies. Deaf people don't need insulation from conflict. We need the practice and toughness that come from working through it.

That strength demands reciprocity. Deaf advocates ask society to rethink deep assumptions, but that falls flat if we won't do the same. Defending free speech for those who prioritize hearing and speech isn't betrayal. It's how persuasion begins.

That's why heterodoxy remains our best hope for shaping our destiny. Knowledge is its intellectual power; persuasion is its civic force. And it starts with showing up where we feel least comfortable to learn, refine, and build coalitions, which a horizontal minority group making up less than 0.5% of the U.S. population must do in a democracy built on consent.

Landmark victories like the Deaf President Now movement that led to the appointment of Gallaudet's first Deaf president didn't happen by preaching to the choir. They succeeded because leaders adapted across divides and persuaded outsiders. When people can disagree and stay in the room, coalitions happen. But when beliefs turn sacred, advocacy becomes a sermon. The unconverted nod politely, then drive home muttering what they'd never say aloud. That's not a winning strategy.

The unconverted nod politely, then drive home muttering what they'd never say aloud. That's not a winning strategy.

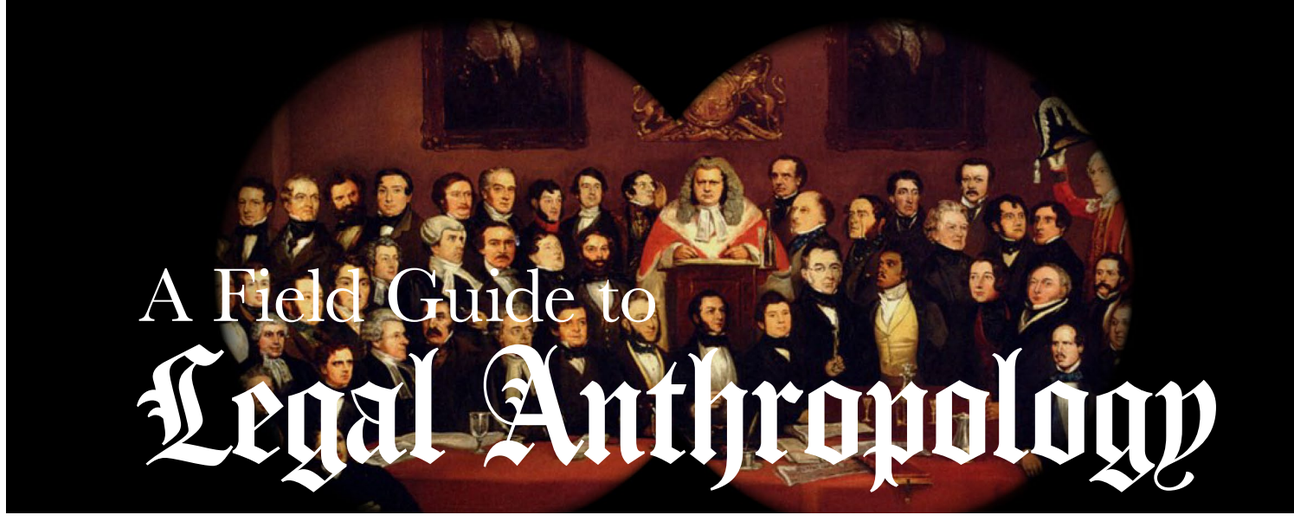
This is personal. My Deaf parents attended one of the few M.A. programs that offered sign language. I earned my own M.A. at a hearing university, relying on ADA accommodations. Today, my Deaf children go to a Deaf school at a time when these schools are struggling, not because bilingual education is failing, but because we've looked for easy answers and lost sight of the hard questions — and failed to persuade families who now have more educational options than ever. If we don't turn this around, Deaf schools will continue to decline or even disappear.

Hannah Arendt called freedom "the space between people." That's where risk lives. And progress, too. Deaf people know this better than most. Our pluralism, born of necessity and habit, is what heterodoxy demands. But if Deaf America is going to endure, we'll have to keep outthinking and out-persuading not only those who would erase us, but also those who think they're saving us. That will take more than moral certainty and performance. It will take the heterodox spirit that built Deaf America.

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

Brendan Stern, Ph.D., is a tenured associate professor of American politics and the Executive Director of the Center for Democracy in Deaf America at Gallaudet University, where he also serves as the debate team's head coach. He is a member of Heterodox Academy.

Hands showing the sign language alphabet. Coloured line engraving. Wellcome Collection, Public Domain.



Collage by Janelle Delia featuring *"The Judge And Jury Society In The Cider Cellar"* by Archibald Henning, 1843. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

A Field Guide to Legal Anthropology

Anthropologists think we're lawyers. Lawyers think we're anthropologists.

BY DEEPA DAS ACEVEDO

What is legal anthropology? Ask three people and you'll get five answers.

This is to be expected given the two parent disciplines involved. Anthropologists are chronically averse to definitions: we study culture — or cultures (note the artfully italicized plural) — but many of us disavow the very concept. Lawyers, meanwhile, find definitions powerfully addictive, which may explain why the U.S. Supreme Court quotes dictionaries more often than grade school essayists.

Small wonder, then, that the interdisciplinary child created by these two fields can't even settle on a name ("legal anthropology" versus the "anthropology of law"), much less a central animating concern. Do we study law in context? Law across contexts? (Is there such a thing as law?)

Sir Henry Maine (d. 1888) is a decreasingly common originator. He has the virtues of having been a white male colonialist, which has allowed him to blend in nicely with the disciplinary forebearers that anthropologists must ritualistically bemoan. Other ancestors are no less male and mostly no less white, but their colonial credentials are varied. All of them walked and talked with "the natives" to discover if they, too, had law. Can you have law without states, law without judges — law without courts, or cases, or writing? For the most part, these early legal anthropologists decided that you can. "Law," they decided, simply meant the rules that were used to resolve "cases."

For nearly a century after Maine, legal anthropologists set about inventorying and comparing rules from around the world. At its best, this approach was stamp-collecting with a heart. It largely showed how "they" had "law" even if what they had looked nothing like our courts, our codes, and our judges. But it also doubled down on what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called anthropology's obsession with filling the savage slot — pursuing the exotic Other in faraway lands.

This rule-centered approach also failed to explain exactly how those Others went about their business *without* the courts, codes, and judges that "we" so heavily rely on to maintain social order. To account for the existence of order without rules, legal anthropology turned to studying dispute-resolving *processes*, reasoning that maybe processes were at the heart of this thing we like to call law.

Eventually, legal anthropologists concluded that "law" consisted of *both* rules and processes — and that, regardless of what law really was, they were tired of asking if everybody had it. In fact, by the 1980s, legal anthropologists seemingly grew tired of talking about anything too law-ish, because law, much like anthropology itself, was obviously an oppressor's tool. (Never mind that many progressive icons were lawyers, too.)

At the end of the twentieth century and into the early years of the twenty-first, anthropologists largely worked as if legal technicalities were best left for lawyerly tradespeople, whether they were employed by law firms or law schools. *Lawyers* could remain fixated on formal law — on city ordinances, state regulations, national constitutions; on judicial opinions and on administrative rules. The Magic Eye of anthropology would look beyond the immediate realities to see the more interesting, underlying patterns.

Then a few of the tradespeople got Ph.D.s and a few doctorates went to trade school. Some more who fell into neither of these categories nevertheless found themselves housed in interdisciplinary "legal studies" departments where they encountered colleagues still interested in talking about law. And, over time, all of us have found each other.

What kinds of research do we produce?

Some examples: We show why the declining frequency of jury trials in the United States has not resulted in the declining influence of jurors. (As Anna Offit has noted, that's partly because prosecutors rely heavily on imagined — and therefore often caricatured — jurors while crafting their litigation strategies.) We show why worker classifications that are widely panned for both their unfairness and their inefficiency are nevertheless so hard to dispense with. (As my own work has indicated, that's partly because the employment classification system we love to hate rests on an understanding of freedom as negative liberty — "freedom from" — that is deeply compelling even for those it hurts.) Put simply, we show how cultivating attentiveness to the ideas and infrastructures of formal law can help us understand society.

The best among us are, I think, relearning a very old anthropological lesson: that "insider" (*emic*) knowledge matters at least as much as its "outsider" (*etic*) counterpart. Anthropology that uses anthropological categories to study power, justice, inequality, and so on, does important work — but it's work that's often unrecognizable to law folk, and even to ordinary people dealing with ordinary laws. Meanwhile, anthropology that takes seriously the categories, practices, systems, and rules that lawyers recognize and that all of us are subject to — however unevenly — well, *that* kind of legal anthropology stands apart because it actually has a chance of "making the familiar strange" in a world where nothing is truly strange anymore.

By the 1980s, legal anthropologists seemingly grew tired of talking about anything too law-ish, because law, much like anthropology itself, was obviously an oppressor's tool. (Never mind that many progressive icons were lawyers, too.)

Being this kind of legal anthropologist is not unlike being a second-generation immigrant. Among anthropologists, we are considered lawyers (whether or not we are licensed to practice law); among lawyers, we are most definitely anthropologists. We can blend into both disciplines' gatherings, but because there are usually more blazers among us than either suits or scarves, we are often either the most casually dressed lawyers or the most formally dressed anthropologists. And our command of disciplinary vernaculars is predictably uneven: my Anthropologese is as rusty as my Malayalam even though both are my mother-tongues and first languages.

Liminality, in other words, defines us. This should please our anthropological forebearers, since some of them — most notably Victor Turner — are responsible for popularizing that concept as applied to social interaction. The very promise of any definition should also make our lawyer-ancestors ecstatic — if only they could find an appropriately Bluebooked citation for it. For those of us who occupy this liminal state — whether by choice or necessity — the task of speaking across the aisle, in both directions, to each of our parent disciplines, is both the best and the hardest part of being a legal anthropologist.

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

Deepa Das Acevedo, J.D., Ph.D., is a legal anthropologist and author of The War on Tenure *(Cambridge, September 2025). She is a member of Heterodox Academy.*

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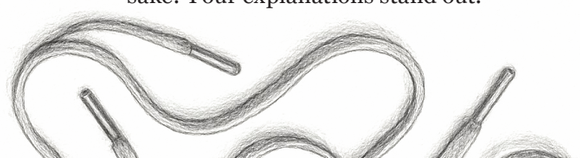
Class Matters

Why do universities avoid addressing class disparities in admissions?

BY RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

Editor's note: This is a lightly edited excerpt from pages 120-26 of *Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at America's Colleges* (Public Affairs, 2025).

Efforts around the turn of the twenty-first century to add into college admissions considerations of socioeconomic diversity on top of racial diversity – an idea supported by many of my liberal friends – failed mostly because it did not grapple with the fundamental forces that drive university behavior. Universities deserve credit for recognizing that racial diversity is part of what makes them excellent, and they have woven a commitment to it into their DNA. But why did all the statistical analyses of admissions – including from strong supporters of racial affirmative action – find that universities pay so much less attention to class diversity for its own sake? Four explanations stand out.



First, because achieving class diversity is more expensive than racial diversity (which can be accomplished by recruiting upper-middle-class students of color), attention to class cuts against all the other interests universities are trying to advance. Nonprofit colleges compete for prestige, which requires attracting the best students and faculty. Schools need to spend a lot on faculty salaries and campus amenities to recruit high-achieving students. Enrolling high-achieving low-income students doesn't help – indeed, it hurts – because the financial assistance they require "diverts" resources. As the former president of Reed College explained, why spend $50,000 in aid on a promising low-income student when you can instead give five $10,000 grants to non-need-based merit aid to recruit students with high SAT scores who will boost the college's standing?

A big part of university prestige today is associated with rankings in a guide put out by *U.S. News & World Reports*. Students follow it, boards of trustees pay attention to it, and college presidents' compensation can even be tied to schools' *U.S. News* ranking. "Think about the incentives," said former Vassar president Catharine Hill. "Every

dollar you use for financial aid could have been used otherwise to improve your ranking. Spending on every other thing ups your score."

Another big reason that college presidents have avoided using class preferences (at least while racial preferences were legally available) is that it poses a risk to dip into endowments to pay for financial aid. After consulting with multiple college presidents, Georgetown University's Anthony Carnevale said in an interview with me that presidents fear "they will get fired" if they are seen as allocating a significant portion of the endowment's earnings to financial aid.

All of this means colleges have a self-interest in limiting economic inequality concerns to those associated with race, which are more manageable to address. As social critic Walter Benn Michaels argues, focusing on race rather than class tells the wealthy "what they want to hear – that the only poverty they need worry about is the poverty that's the effect of racism." It renders white poverty "invisible." Colleges then double down on this approach by admitting Black and Hispanic students from upper-middle-class backgrounds rather than those from poor communities, saving even more money.

Second, as a practical matter, universities focus more on race than class because it is easier for selective institutions to mask a lack of socioeconomic diversity on campus than a lack of racial diversity. Race is far more visible to the naked eye than class. And while the federal government requires universities to detail the racial makeup of student bodies every year, it does not require those same universities to provide a socioeconomic breakdown by income quartile or quintile.

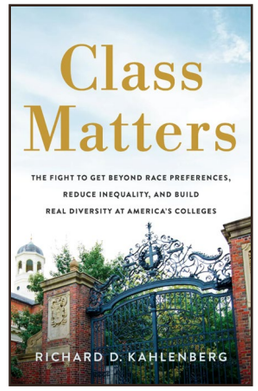
Third, as Larry Summers has pointed out, elite universities are subject to strong bureaucratic forces pushing for racial diversity, legacy preferences, and athletic preferences, but comparatively few institutional forces promoting socioeconomic diversity. Professors may be Black, Hispanic, or female, but because they are often graduates of elite colleges, few come from working-class backgrounds. Indeed, faculty members are twenty-five times more likely than the general population to have a parent with a Ph.D. It is telling that even with strong support for socioeconomic diversity at the presidential level at Amherst and Harvard, data reveal that overall socioeconomic profiles of their student bodies remained enormously skewed toward the wealthy.

Fourth, it appears that America's selective colleges may reflect ugly cultural attitudes that flow from an excessive embrace of a meritocratic ideology. As the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel has noted, American meritocracy gives rise to what he calls "the last acceptable prejudice": a disdain for families with less formal education. Social scientists have found that highly educated elites "may denounce racism and sexism but are unapologetic about their negative attitudes toward the less educated." A study conducted by five psychologists concluded that well-educated elites in the United States exhibit no less bias than those who are less educated; "it is rather that [their] targets of prejudice are different." Given this milieu, it is not surprising that legacy applicants receive more plus points in admissions than students from families without college-educated parents.

Most people experience a daily reality marked by rising economic inequality and a slow decline in racial inequality. And yet on campus, race utterly dominates discussions.

As a result of these four forces, the culture on America's elite college campuses has become disconnected from that of everyday Americans. Most people experience a daily reality marked by rising economic inequality and a slow decline in racial inequality. And yet on campus, race utterly dominates discussions. Although it is commonly said that "we don't like to talk about race," Walter Benn Michaels argues, "in fact, we love to talk about race. And in the university, not only do we talk about it, we write books and articles about it, we teach and take classes about it, and we arrange our admissions policies in order to take it into account." He contends that we do so to avoid talking about class, discussion of which remains largely off limits.

Michaels captures the mindset in the story about a Harvard student who felt discouraged by his classmates' lack of interest in supporting the efforts of custodians and food workers to win higher wages. But then the student used a racial angle and began to get traction. "The only way I can get them at all interested in this thing is by saying, 'Most of these people are black,'" the student said. Michaels concludes, "Harvard students can't see underpaid workers as a problem unless they can see the problem as racism."



Data show just how socioeconomically skewed higher ed has become. A 2011 study of the top twenty law schools found that just 2 percent of students came from the bottom socioeconomic quarter of the population, while more than three-quarters came from the richest socioeconomic quarter of society. The study's author, Richard Sander of UCLA Law School, noted that the underrepresentation of low-income students at selective law schools was "comparable to racial representation fifty years ago, before the civil rights revolution."

Subsequently, a blockbuster 2017 study by Harvard researcher Raj Chetty and his colleagues released a detailed breakdown of the income representation at virtually every college in the country. Chetty was given special access to IRS tax returns (with names removed) belonging to tens of millions of Americans. Because families often take tax deductions for tuition paid, Chetty was able to link data on more than thirty million students to the colleges they attended. The results were breathtaking. The data indicated that at prestigious colleges, if you took a casual stroll around campus, you would be twenty times as likely to bump into a wealthy student as a student from a low-income background. The uber-rich – students from families in the top 1 percent of income nationally – often took up more seats than students from the bottom 60 percent by income combined.

While racial diversity has improved over time at places like Yale, socioeconomic diversity has actually worsened. Between 1927 and today, the share of students coming from the richest fifth of the population increased by twenty-six percentage points, from 47 percent to 73 percent.

As David Brooks has noted, "Elite institutions have become so politically progressive in part because the people in them want to feel good about themselves as they take part in systems that exclude and reject." Privileged students at schools like Yale adopt what critic Rob Henderson has called "luxury beliefs" – such as defunding the police and the idea that marriage is outdated – which "confer status on the upper class but often inflict real costs on the lower classes."

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

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Illustration by Xinping Li (used with permission).

Why I opted out of academia after my Ph.D.

BY FRANCES AN

The examiners' reports for my Ph.D. thesis in Psychology came while I was queuing up at Norwegian immigration after 26 hours of flying from Sydney to attend a conference. Despite the favorable result, this was also the moment I heard the doors of an academic career closing: I had reached the end with little to show for it on my CV.

I didn't author the "right" articles that would land into prestigious peer-reviewed journals. In earlier years, my supervisors reassured me that success would come with time. Don't worry, they told me, you'll be able to find a journal in the second year, third year, fourth year...

> **I had grown skeptical of the peer-review system, which promised an objective path to "truth" but seemed to simply feature anonymous academics taking a power trip to share their opinions.**

This deadend didn't surprise me, because obtaining success in academia seemed impossible. An academic's worth depends on the number of peer-reviewed publications, which requires peer reviewers – but academics are notoriously overworked and unable to volunteer their time for peer review.

It didn't help that my research topic (data falsification among market researchers) was quite niche. Yet somehow my classmates were able to get at least one or two papers out of their theses. I could only assume that failure reflected my own subpar scholarship.

But was I the failure? I had grown skeptical of the peer-review system, which promised an objective path to "truth" but seemed to simply feature anonymous academics taking a power trip to share their opinions. One hour before my first thesis submission attempt, I received a rejection and brutal criticism from ten reviewers on an article (adapted from my thesis's second chapter) that had already undergone a round of edits before being sent out for review again. My primary supervisor reassured me it was unusual for articles to be sent out for two rounds of revision and end up with a total of 10-12 contradictory reviewer comments. Yet my Ph.D. examiners' written comments on this chapter had been the most favorable compared to the other chapters.

It wasn't just the written work. On the professional front, I didn't go to the "right" conferences and enter the "right" networks. None of my internships or funded conference opportunities came through my Ph.D. Most were from activities conducted with conservative and libertarian think-tanks.

Part of me wishes this was a red pill story about how woke academia discriminated against my political beliefs. That would allow me to blame "the system" and minimize the sense of personal failure. However, my supervisors were very aware of and open towards my political beliefs and interests, even if not aligned with theirs.

Occasionally, there were awkward moments with classmates who asked, "Why the fuck would anyone vote 'no' on the Voice To Parliament referendum?" (a constitutional amendment that gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives a say in certain laws and policies) or equated terms like "right-wing" and "conservative" with "evil" and "scary." I lied about attending "the launch of my supervisor's textbook" when I was really going to seminars on libertarian economics or conservatism. My wardrobe gradually divided itself into outfits for left-wing and right-wing events. Looking in the mirror, I laughed at the dramatic irony, like an audience member watching a play she was acting in.

To be clear, my ultimate decision to exit the academic circuit was entirely voluntary and due to aspects mostly within my control: I took too long to understand the metrics game, then, upon learning, refused to play. I was fine with being ordinary. But there didn't seem to be any

opportunities for dime-a-dozen Ph.D. students in academia. All my postdoc applications had failed. Ordinary was equivalent to mediocre.

Having already decided against an academic career, the first 20 minutes of my viva voce (oral defense) resembled a hostage situation. During my opening ten-minute summary of the thesis, I put on my best intellectual register, which is really just a budget British-Australian accent. My aim was to scrape into the pass zone, finalize my thesis, and then permanently leave the university environment. Already queasy from overeating sugar-free marshmallows, I waited for the examiners to humiliate me with impossible questions, then kill me with the suspense of waiting for their verdict.

Instead, the examiners praised my theoretically attuned approach to a relatively overlooked topic. We collegially discussed the history of marketing and grounded theory approaches, concepts that I had explored primarily through independent reading due to the lack of expertise within my university's psychology department on these topics.

At some point, one examiner rolled back to grab a glossy book from his shelf to show us over Zoom, saying, "This textbook is basically the marketing bible. It's over a thousand pages long and only one page is dedicated to data falsification. Your thesis could be the start of a long and interesting academic career. This is completely tangential but what do you want to do after your Ph.D.? Do you want to continue in academia?"

I paused. The discussion reminded me of aspects that had attracted me to academia: connections with people who were interested in methodology, abstract thinking, and logic.

Then I remembered the bleak prospects for people like me in academia and resorted to a diplomatic answer: "I'm interested in academic research but may spend a few years in industry first."

My final grade was "pass, subject to substantive amendment," which the examiner said "sounded bad but wouldn't be too burdensome." The changes required mainly included reformatting results and exploring my lived experience as a former market researcher, to the amusement of my supervisors who often (half-)joked about qualitative data being made up.

While looking up the steps to prepare a revisions report for the board, I came across Ph.D. forum threads of others who were devastated about their "pass with major amendments" result. What was the huge fuss between "minor" and "substantive" about? Was I stupid for being happy with my pass grade? Was there some unspoken element in my examiners' seemingly positive evaluations that I should have decoded as "This is the worst piece of shit I have ever seen"?

I had nested into a circle of theoretically minded mentors who saw my value as a person even when my performance on paper dropped. I had believed I was destined to become an academic, to pay back the favor.

The snobbery about different pass grades reminded me of the standards of academically selective high schools in Sydney. Anyone with a university admission ranking below 95.00 (out of a possible 99.95 ATAR score) was a disgrace. Being from a family of medical professionals and students, I was the only one of my cousins who fell below the 95.00 mark. My job was to slink into the shadows and live in shame.

Instead, I had nested into a circle of theoretically minded mentors who saw my value as a person even when my performance on paper dropped. I had believed I was destined to become an academic, to pay back the favor.

Although a failure by conventional measures, I wrote a thesis that transported me outside of my discipline and into the messy world of political tribalism and op-ed writing. Fumbling through unfamiliar research literature made mistakes inevitable. An economics professor sniggered during a presentation when I referred to Adam Smith a "neoliberal thinker." But the feedback and occasional humiliation enhanced my intellectual agility and personal resilience. I learned that authenticity trumps prestige when my close allies and I defended one another during cultural and political wars. They stuck by me, even when others saw me as a deplorable with no trophies to make up for it.

By the end, shaping oneself into a model academic sounded like the high school drudgery of learning syllabus dot points and using arbitrary numbers as measures of one's intelligence and self-worth. I had diplomatically told my examiners that I would spend a few years in industry. But what was out there for Ph.D. students who opted out of the game? Employability workshops are either aimed at Ph.D. students aiming to push through the bottleneck of postdoc hiring processes or early undergraduates trying to get their first office job. I was a loser under academic criteria but also had no idea how to market the research skills I had gathered to make me an attractive candidate for a "regular" job, based on the hundreds of rejections I received on Seek.com.

Ph.D. students fall prey to the Instagram versions of their classmates' success. We only see the classmate who somehow in their second year impressed the Nobel Prize-winning sage of their subdiscipline and became their pet co-author. We focus on peers who land overseas postdoctoral opportunities before theses submissions. We focus on those who have landed massive grants allowing them to jet off to prestigious conferences and come out first-authoring ten award-winning papers in top journals.

Lost in the humblebragging of stellar students' LinkedIn and Twitter posts are all the ordinary, the mediocre, the dime-a-dozen Ph.D. students. They disappear, knowing that others will scoff about the "wasted four years of life."

A friend who finished a Ph.D. in the natural sciences and also decided against a career in academia told me, "I don't regret doing my Ph.D., but if I could go back, I wouldn't do it." I wouldn't say that I wish my Ph.D had never happened: it was the best option at the time. But the exit options are bleak, as though a curse chases those who try to leave the circus.

Frances An is a freelance writer and core member of Heterodox Academy East Asia. She completed her Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Western Australia in July 2024.

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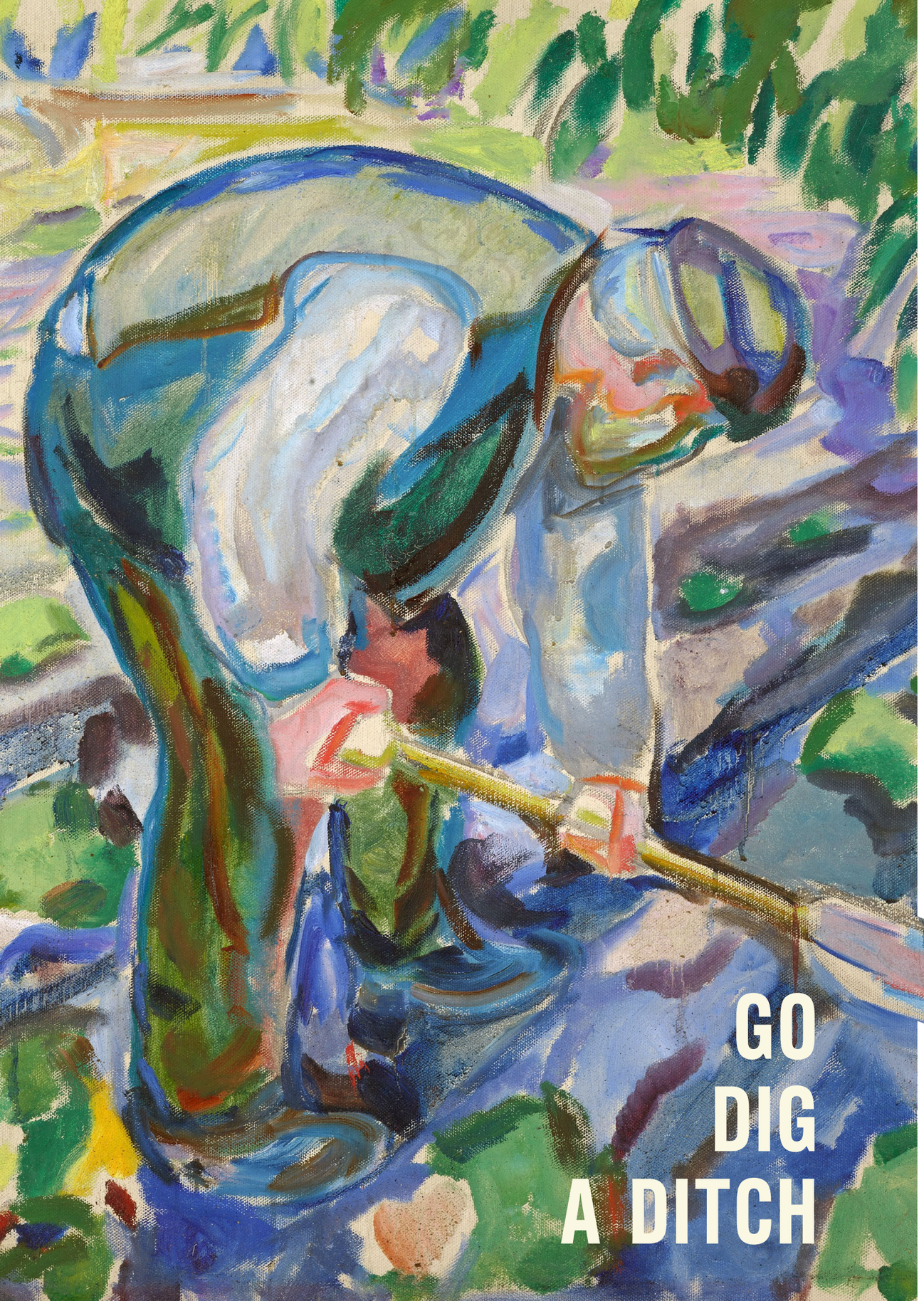

"Man Digging" by Edvard Munch, 1915. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

A convocation love letter to my students.

BY SARAH HARTMAN-CAVERLY

It's a new year in academe, and we mark the occasion with convocation, gathering the scholarly community to welcome our initiants and rededicate ourselves to the shared pursuit of truth. Every year I nod enthusiastically to the wisdom bestowed from the dais: *Be curious. Ask questions. Forge relationships. Seize opportunities. And for goodness sake, show up to class.*

And yet, I can't help but feel there is advice our students need to hear but is left unsaid. Were I to deliver a convocation address, my advice would be this: Go dig a ditch.

As I was growing up, there was a saying in our family: "Get your education or you'll be digging ditches for the rest of your life." Many in my extended family, the men in particular, made a living by breaking their bodies. They labored in a wide range of industries, but the thing they have in common is worrying that their backs will give out before their retirement accounts do.

These elders wanted something better for my generation: the kind of comfort that comes from achieving financial security through desk work. And so, at a time when our broader society assured everyone that a college degree was the meal ticket to a seven-course life, my loved ones took it upon themselves to characterize working-class labor as the punishment for a failing grade.

My loved ones took it upon themselves to characterize working-class labor as the punishment for a failing grade.

The admonition – *Get your education or you'll be digging ditches for the rest of your life!* – was nevertheless incongruent with my kinsmen's relationship to their own work. Every errand in my dad's '84 Ford Ranger was also a local tour of his craftsmanship: "I replaced that roof," "I did that siding job," "I built that family-room addition."

That pride in the product of a hard day's work is not the only hitch in my family's story. The promise of economic mobility by degrees is no longer guaranteed. Eldest among my siblings, I've accumulated the most wallpaper with a bachelor's and two master's degrees, followed by my youngest brother holding an associate's and our two middle brothers having left college to pursue some combination of manufacturing and military service. The dirty secret is that they are all either earning more money than me or are on their way to doing so. (The youngest, a heavy equipment mechanic seventeen years my junior, got a larger bonus by winning his company's holiday raffle than I received by earning tenure and promotion.) All the while, they are doing literally earth-moving work while I await a pink slip from ChatGPT.

Then there's the matter of ditch-digging itself – the meanest of menial labor – exhausting, dirty, literally degrading, at times even dangerous. On the surface, ditch-digging seemingly offers nothing to the life of the mind we're all here to pursue.

But dig a little deeper and you'll discover an entire syllabus on ditch-digging, beginning with canals that irrigated the Fertile Crescent 6,000 years ago, hydrating an agricultural revolution to which we owe 90% of the calories we still consume today.

It didn't take long for our forebearers to recognize that if you can dig ditches to move water, you can move other stuff on the surface, spurring the history-shaping technology of modern-day canal transportation. There's no better teacher of the mechanical advantage of simple machines than liberating a hunk of granite from Pennsylvania red clay: screw = auger, wedge + lever = shovel, wheel + axle + fulcrum + lever = wheelbarrow.

Digging is so critical to military survivability that it has its own chapter in a 2009 NATO technical report, and the biomechanical demands of digging inspire innovation from the earliest simple machine – the digging stick – to today's autonomous flying excavators.

The degree isn't a ladder rung, but a fork in the canal. It doesn't guarantee ascendancy, but it does create opportunity, giving you options you wouldn't otherwise have.

But I wouldn't recommend outsourcing digging to your robot replacement just yet, lest you miss an encounter with the earth's most wondrously biodiverse environment: the soil, home to nearly 60% of known species on the planet. Woven through that biome is more than four million fiber optic route miles of bundled glass threads thinner than a strand of hair that move the data that moves the world as subterranean pulses of light.

Agriculture, biology, physics, physiology, engineering, industry, and information technology: civilization is built on a tapestry of hollowed ground that exists thanks to the noble work of ditch-digging.

But let's not merely intellectualize ditch-digging. One of the risks you run in pursuing your education is developing a habit of holding the world at arm's length as a specimen to be pinned down and studied rather than an invitation to experience. I don't just want you to think about ditches – I want you to *seriously consider digging one*, should the right opportunity arise.

It's only by digging a ditch that you'll come to realize that work which appears strictly physical can actually present intellectual challenges. Ditch-digging, like other forms of labor, is really a series of problems to solve, and the more back-breaking the labor, the more challenging the problems, and the more important the quality of their solutions.

You'll also discover that as you carve into the earth, the earth carves into you: working is the original working out, and physical labor like ditch-digging involves complex functional movements that the best HIIT routine can only approximate. Ditching exercise can also be good for your diet: a lucky digger will ingest incidental amounts of soil caught under her fingernails or flung into her face, at which point some beneficial bugs will migrate from ground to gut, joining the microbial community comprising half-to-90% of the cells making up the average human and affecting everything from our metabolism to our mood. I know you are here to do amazing things with your mind – those worthy goals are only furthered by nurturing your body.

I feel blessed that ditch-digging is something I can do for fun and not survival. Like the Nobel prize-winning poet, Seamus Heaney, I traded in my heritage of manual labor to earn my keep with my mind. In his poem, "Digging," Heaney memorializes his family's roots in tubers and turf while explaining he exchanged his spade for a pen: "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it." When a colleague noticed that the letter labels are worn off of nearly half of my laptop keys, I told her that was my equivalent of callouses on my hands; that just because I work with my mind, doesn't mean I don't work hard.

And if, like me, you're here thinking that a college degree is a rung on the ladder of economic mobility, I want to offer you a different metaphor: the degree isn't a ladder rung, but a fork in the canal. It doesn't guarantee ascendancy, but it does create opportunity, giving you options you wouldn't otherwise have.

Look at the person next to you: current studies suggest that one of you will land a job that requires your degree, and the other will not. And – assuming you haven't dug yourself into a student debt-hole – that's entirely ok. You can't waste a college education by earning money in an unrelated field. The only way to waste a college education is by reducing it to a means of making money in the first place.

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

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The Pipeline

Political discrimination is acting as a proxy for class discrimination.

BY SCOTT PELL

A friend who is a union carpenter once told me college is nothing more than very expensive networking. The 52 percent of college graduates now underemployed would probably agree. Higher ed's dirty secret is that the "knowledge economy" has not produced enough well-paying jobs to compensate for the decline of industrial manufacturing, and the universities that act as pipelines into this economy have evolved their norms and customs to protect their traditional upper-middle class clientele against competition from potentially socially-mobile Americans.

When I enrolled at Ivy Tech Community College in 2018, I was 26, having bounced from one low-paying blue-collar job to another. I hailed from a mid-sized deindustrialized city, Terre Haute, located in an Indiana bellwether county that swung from Democratic to Republican in 2016. Lacking much exposure to elite culture, the "woke" concepts I encountered in college — particularly once I reached Indiana University in 2020 — were entirely foreign to me, and indeed would have struck most people from my hometown, even self-identifying leftists, as absurd.

But such concepts are not presented on campus as controversial ideas to be examined and critiqued; rather, they are presented as concrete truths only backward and ignorant people could disagree with. That sentiment is subsequently used to justify keeping Americans of lower socioeconomic status out of universities and the broader professional sector.

Surveys consistently show conservative college students self-censor at much higher rates than liberals. And a survey by Eric Kaufmann showed that 4 out of 10 North American professors would not hire a known Trump supporter, suggesting they also would not write a letter of recommendation for one. Yet many of the students designated as conservative by virtue of being non-woke are in the lower socioeconomic classes, just the people who need successful college networking to secure access to opportunities.

Political discrimination is acting as a proxy for class discrimination. And the discrimination is justified on the grounds that "conservatives" are simply bigoted and therefore not deserving of the benefits conferred by a college education. Faux egalitarian sentiments about protecting the marginalized are being deployed to protect the interests of the privileged few in an increasingly inegalitarian society.

For references, see inquisitivemag.org.

Scott Pell is a graduate student studying history at the University of Indianapolis. He is a member of Heterodox Academy.

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