When Activism Is Worth the Risk

Academics who champion causes may be gambling with their careers. But for some dedicated activists, the choice is clear.

By Audrey Williams June

Justin Hansford lives 10 minutes from Ferguson, Mo., where last summer a white policeman shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager. The incident set off months of protests, as people from all walks of life took a stand against police brutality.

Mr. Hansford, an assistant professor of law at Saint Louis University, just back from a conference in Washington, was among them. When he joined the law faculty at the university, in 2011, it never occurred to him to cast his causes aside: "I was an activist before I was a scholar, you could say."

In the months since the unrest in Ferguson, Mr. Hansford has become a well-known face in the Black Lives Matter movement. He has served as a legal observer during protests, was once arrested and jailed overnight, and was a key organizer of #FergusonToGeneva, a delegation that frames police violence in the United States as a human-rights issue worthy of global attention. Mr. Hansford and others in the group accompanied Michael Brown’s family to Geneva in November to testify before the United Nations Committee Against Torture.

"There’s a tradition of black scholar-activists who fought for justice," says Mr. Hansford, who studies human rights, legal ethics, legal history, and critical race theory. "This particular activism is almost like a calling for me." But he knows it could hinder his academic career.
With issues of social justice dominating the national conversation, some academics identify as scholar-activists, a term typically used by those deeply involved in progressive causes. They take to the streets as part of protest movements, work alongside community organizers, and push for policy changes, applying their research to underserved communities. Yet balancing activism and scholarship can be risky, especially while on the tenure track.

"I was an activist before I was a scholar, you could say."

Scholar-activists must be ready to fend off the perception that their activism taints their scholarship, or that they’re going to indoctrinate students. Another challenge is time: Some academics struggle to contain their work in the community to do what’s needed to advance professionally.

Juggling the two identities isn’t new, but the task seems tougher today. The crowd was perhaps thicker during and just after the civil-rights and political movements of the 1960s and ’70s, which drew in so many young people, future professors among them. Now activists are more visible, their protests or remarks potentially bringing unwanted attention on social media or cable news — and prompting complaints to universities. Meanwhile, the academic job market in many disciplines is tight.

"We all know that the talented, well-educated young people who are getting Ph.D.s today are unlikely to secure tenure-track jobs," says Frances Fox Piven, a professor of political science and sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and a longtime activist for the poor. "If they’re more insecure, they’re less confident. And they’re inevitably more eager to seek the approval of the people who are the senior academics who are going to make the judgments on whether they get the job, whether they get tenured, or whether they get promoted."
Young academics may decide that now isn’t the time to give those committees an excuse to turn them down. Some give up their activism, for a while anyway. Others choose the hyphenated life, aware of the hazards but hopeful that if their scholarship measures up, their activism won’t count against them. Many look for ways to tie that work to their professional goals, optimistic that, at some point, their universities will acknowledge that. On an online forum for sociologists, someone recently asked if activism should count toward tenure, generating mostly responses that it should not.

Still, institutions may find reasons to support scholar-activists, many of whom are women and people of color. Signaling to a new generation that engagement with social issues isn’t necessarily a career-killer could help in diversifying the faculty. Successful role models might be a draw for younger scholars.

A sense of urgency, not a calculation of risk, has guided Mr. Hansford. "When the Mike Brown situation happened, there was no time for me to say, ‘Well, I’ll wait a year until I get tenure,’ " he says. His dean has not discouraged him. The decision on the assistant professor’s bid for tenure should come this academic year, but that hasn’t deterred Mr. Hansford: "It would be too much of a compromise for me to hold back on my activism because of that."

Many describe the life of a scholar and an activist as one of isolation and constant pressure, but also of determination.

When Rebecca Tarlau began a Ph.D. in social and cultural studies in education at the University of California at Berkeley, she was dedicated to both worlds. She helped organize statewide protests of tuition increases and served as a leader in the graduate-student union as it fought for higher salaries and better benefits.

"I wanted to be a part of how higher education was being remade,"
says Ms. Tarlau, now a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education. But even as she built a reputation as a community organizer, she carved out enough time to establish the bona fides — publications in top journals, for instance — that are respected in academe.

"You have to do the scholarship just as well as the activism," says Ms. Tarlau, who studies the intersection of social movements and education and the development of global educational systems, particularly in Brazil. "I knew I had to hit the steppingstones of what’s considered successful in graduate school."

Rajani Bhatia, an assistant professor at the U. at Albany, faced a decision in graduate school: “I realized the very first year that I was going to have to give up certain aspects of my life. For me, it was my activism.”

That’s the time when some aspiring scholar-activists doubt they can pull it off. Rajani Bhatia saw a Ph.D. as a way to enhance her work in the reproductive-rights movement, including a job at an advocacy group. But once in a women’s-studies program at the University of Maryland at College Park, she found that staying on top of her courses, teaching undergraduates, and pursuing a
research agenda stripped her of spare time.

"I realized the very first year that I was going have to give up certain aspects of my life," says Ms. Bhatia, who is now an assistant professor of women’s studies at the University at Albany. "For me, it was my activism."

With her tenure clock ticking, Ms. Bhatia still keeps her activist work at a minimum. She maintains connections to groups she used to collaborate with and tries to attend some academic conferences that draw scholar-activists, but that’s about all she can manage, she says. "My clear priority is getting tenure."

The pressure to tamp down activism can also be external. April L. Few-Demo remembers, as an assistant professor of human development at Virginia Tech, a turning point in her academic career. In her fourth-year review, she was told to publish more, she says, and to cut back on service that had an activist bent.

On the advice of her department chair, she chose community outreach and service activities that could yield strong submissions to academic journals. She altered her teaching, informed by black feminist pedagogy, by giving fewer writing assignments, so as to limit the time she spent grading and focus more on research, she says. Ms. Few-Demo, who chronicled her efforts to balance activism with the demands of earning tenure in a journal article, became a tenured associate professor in the department in 2006.

"People are still facing the same challenges as I did then," she says of young professors today.

Scholar-activists at any point in their careers have to reckon with the perception of bias and watch how they represent themselves to students.

"Calling yourself a scholar-activist, in a way, puts a target on you in the classroom," says Carl S. Taylor, a professor of sociology at
Michigan State University and an expert on youth violence in urban America. A native of Detroit, he conducts research there and works with young people and various organizations to help reduce violence in the community. "You have students who will applaud you for what you do," he says, "and those that won’t."

Mr. Hansford, of Saint Louis University, can relate. After his night in jail, last October, he went to teach his first-year torts class. He didn’t bring up the experience of his first time behind bars, he says. "I didn’t feel as if it was a safe space to mention it."

Some students in that class had already complained to his dean, Mr. Hansford says, that he was difficult to meet with because he was so busy. Others, he knew, agreed with the steady stream of alumni who emailed him, he says, to make clear that they opposed his activism and to threaten to withhold donations to the institution.

In some cases, it can at least appear that a scholar’s activism plays a role in his or her career’s going awry. David Graeber, an anthropologist and radical activist who helped to set up the Occupy Wall Street movement, had trouble finding an academic job in the United States. Yale University decided not to renew his contract in 2005, though it didn’t point to his activism as an underlying factor. Mr. Graeber is now a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Even when the details of a hiring, tenure, or promotion decision are complex or unknown, a denial can deter younger scholars.

For now, if they find support, it’s more likely to be individual than institutional.

Many scholar-activists point to a mentor or role model they looked to for guidance or inspiration early on. Laura Pulido, a professor of American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern
California, is one of those role models.

Over the years, says Ms. Pulido, who is known for her work on social and environmental justice, she has entertained countless questions from young academics about how to navigate their careers. She wrote a chapter for a book on methods of activist scholarship, published in 2008, that featured answers to frequently asked questions.

At the top of the list: How her institution responds to her activist work. For the most part, Ms. Pulido wrote, she hasn’t "faced any real problems with administrators." Producing top-notch scholarship is key. So is landing in an academic home that embraces scholar-activists, she says. That might not always be the most highly ranked destination in a given field.

Noah Berger for The Chronicle

Rose Brewer (speaking), of the U. of Minnesota, says scholar-activists should know what they’re getting into: “There might be tremendous battles and struggles if you go down this road.”

Such a trade-off is often necessary, says Rose M. Brewer, a professor of African-American and African studies at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Also crucial is a group of like-
minded people, to avoid what can become crippling isolation.

Even then, says Ms. Brewer, a founding member of the Black Radical Congress, aspiring scholar-activists should know what they’re getting into: "There might be tremendous battles and struggles if you go down this road."

Some people do manage to find a good fit. Stephany Rose, a newly tenured associate professor of women’s and ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs says her interview in 2010 encouraged her that she could flourish there.

For starters, her future colleagues already understood her area of research, critical whiteness studies. For almost a decade, the university had co-sponsored a national conference on white privilege. She got the impression that activist work was considered appropriate in her line of scholarship. "They had done their due diligence on me," she says. "They were very forthcoming and let me know what they value."

The Women’s and Ethnic Studies Program tries to make that impression, says Andrea Herrera, the program’s director.

"When we created our tenure-and-promotion criteria, it’s implicitly stated that we value community activism," Ms. Herrera says. "Now when we hire people, that’s the kind of people that we attract, the kind who value that kind of work."

Some institutions and academic departments recognize "engaged scholarship," or research done in partnership with communities. Revised tenure policies at Michigan State, Portland State, and Syracuse Universities regard engaged scholarship as legitimate work. Syracuse’s faculty manual says the university is "committed to longstanding traditions of scholarship as well as evolving perspectives" and will continue to "support scholars in all of these traditions, including faculty who choose to participate in engaged
Activism hasn’t reached that level of acceptance. But some scholars see signs that it is gaining traction as a worthwhile pursuit.

Gregory C. Ellison II, a recently tenured associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at Emory University, is still trying to "figure out how to broker" the scholar-activist life, he says. He founded the organization Fearless Dialogues, which brings together unlikely groups of people — pastors, gang members, government leaders, drug dealers, and students, for instance — to discuss the issues that plague young black males and come up with ways to improve their communities.

Traveling to at least 30 cities with that group, trying to change how black men are perceived, he saw his work as risky. But during a recent presentation for some Emory administrators and trustees, the response was more affirming than he expected.

"We are determined to support a wide range of styles of scholarship."

"They began to talk about my role as a professor and my role as an activist," Mr. Ellison says, as well as about how best to measure success for those who are both. "It was humbling, but also gratifying, to know that there are actually allies at the upper echelon of the university who are concerned about this."

Jan Love, dean of Emory’s Candler School of Theology, says its "bottom-line standard" for evaluating research — publications in refereed journals and books published by top presses — accommodates the kind of activist work that is the backbone of Mr. Ellison’s scholarship.

"Within that standard, we are determined to support a wide range
of styles of scholarship," Ms. Love says. "One of our intentions as an entire school is to shape public debate about pressing moral issues of the day. We don’t think there’s a trade-off between very fine scholarly work that’s informed by one’s guild and public engagement."

Such support may grow, if it does at all, only in pockets. Meanwhile, scholars like Mr. Hansford are trying to fulfill personal commitments along with professional expectations. He recently co-wrote a **scholarly article** based on a **report he helped draft** to present to the United Nations. His trip to Geneva also informed the human-rights course he teaches. And as a Fulbright scholar, he is now in South Africa to study the legal career of Nelson Mandela.

During a recent **panel discussion** at the University of California at Los Angeles on the Black Lives Matter movement, Mr. Hansford was pointed about priorities: "How important is this movement, and what are we willing to risk?"

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### 3 Scholar-Activists Balance Passion for Activism With Life in Academe

![Laura Pulido](http://chronicle.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/article/When-Activism-Is-Worth-the/231729/)

**Laura Pulido**

Professor, American studies and ethnicity

U. of Southern California

**Activist work:** Environmental justice; political and antiracism
"Theoretically your activism should not affect your tenure and promotion, but we all know that it can. They may not like what you do as an activist, so you definitely have to have a scholarly record to defend."

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**Stephany Rose**  
Associate professor, women’s and ethnic studies  
U. of Colorado at Colorado Springs

**Activist work:** Antiprivilege movement

"Waiting until after tenure to be an activist is a strategy, but it’s not a strategy for me. I feel like if I can’t be upfront with you from the beginning, I don’t want to be here long term. I need to be able to live life out loud."

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**Gregory C. Ellison II**  
Associate professor, pastoral care and counseling
Emory U.

**Activist work:** Young, black, marginalized men and their communities

"Being a scholar-activist, at its core, is being a bridge builder. I feel like I’ve been afforded some access and resources that I can’t hoard for myself. If that involves me moving between the academy and the church and psychology and the community, then that’s what it takes."

**Audrey Williams** June is a senior reporter who writes about the academic workplace, faculty pay, and work-life balance in academe. Contact her at audrey.june@chronicle.com, or follow her on Twitter @chronaudrey.

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108 Comments

Join the discussion…

12105442 • 21 days ago

I think time is on their side. The view that professors should not be activists came from an age where scholarship was putatively believed to be an objective enterprise that stripped away biases (mostly superstitious biases) to find the truth. That view is simply passé; we no longer have to think that way. Now we recognize that such a project was unattainable and what is important is that one has the "right" biases—the politically correct biases that fly with one's colleagues. Times being what they are, they are progressive biases.

In a little time these professors and all the others will not have to put up with the annoyance of academic achievement, foisted upon them by an earlier pretense. The one rule that will reign is that advancement comes if and only if one adheres to the party line. After all, what we need is research that confirms the party line and that can be turned out in a New York minute.

Professors will one day all be judged politically and that's good. Fie on the attempt for unbiased research, fie. Fie on academic achievement, fie. Fie, fie, fie... the correct kind of activism should be preeminent and eventually the only thing that counts. When that day comes I would like to put in for the party line inspector job.

10 • Reply • Share

zincwarrior • 12105442 • 21 days ago

Alternatively, activist professors don't pay the bills. They will be gone in the new order. :)

http://chronicle.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/article/When-Activism-Is-Worth-the/231729/
What you describe is clearly more and more true every day. It is also sick and disgusting. Those in the professoriate that fit your profile, including many of those described in the article, are boldly leading the way into a world accurately depicted in the movie "Idiocracy." For Mike Judge, it was a comedy that would happen five centuries in the future. But with the unflagging dedication of progressives, community organizers, activists, and, of course, (how did Ms. Tarlau put it?) "higher education. . .remade," Idiocracy is deadly serious and right around the corner.

Yes, because you simply say so, I guess it must be more and more true every day. Thank you, I see you are an activist for discrediting activist scholarship, really, "sick and disgusting," care to expound on that thought a bit more. Without knowing the topic of research, without knowing the author’s credibility, you just say it is all bad. Bad for whom? Anyway, Idiocracy was a piece of shit movie. To say that rotten tomato of a film "accurately depicts" anything casts some shade on your scholarship. Hope you don’t teach Film Studies.

Not because I say so. . . Because it’s happening. Can an activist be objective? Is the goal of higher education to seek the truth? To think critically? Or to be told what to think and forced to accept the "consensus?"

Neither the so-called "activist" or "non-activist" professor is objective because objectivity is a myth for all. Objectivity in political analysis is another word for "majority group consensus."

One goal and an important one is to seek "truth" (but seeking truth does not necessarily mean you can know it). Is the truth of the incredible racial disparities in treatment of minorities by justice and prison system not an "objectivity" you like? See above comments on what objectivity is.

Activist scholars are generally extremely critically aware because they are not living in the fog of "I’m white, I don’t have a race" mentality.

It may not be a "manifest" function of higher education to force students into consensus thinking, but it sure as hell is a "latent" function. But it starts far earlier. By the time you have reached first grade you have lost the ability to think for yourself and your K-12 education doesn’t
prepare you to challenge anything that might diminish the majority’s hold on status, power and money. Everything else might be slightly negotiable.

beedizzle Socratease2 16 days ago

Well said...please understand that livefreeordie didn't just pull that online name out of a hat. The right-wing meme is that group of collective activism is bad, individual activism is a just cause and akin to martyrdom.

sez-who Socratease2 15 days ago

If what you say is remotely true, than it is vital for all universities to ensure a diversity of activist thought. If what you say is true, a university must seek and employ people from as many different worldviews as possible, and those differing worldviews need to be represented in all fields. They are not doing so.

So, again, universities fail.

LorHead Socratease2 15 days ago

objectivity is a myth for all

Yup, gravity and thermodynamics are myths...

Mencius Moldbug was right about the State Religion of Pax Americana.

Socratease2 LorHead 15 days ago

Lorhead, learn to read first and then think. I said very clearly that objectivity is a myth in the social sciences not in the physical sciences. Last I checked physics isn't in that category. But thanks for your insight. No idea what your tangential reference to pax Americana is, but then again I don’t care to know.

Stephen W. Houghton Socratease2 15 days ago

If objectivity is a myth and there is no truth, only the seeking of it, I invite you do have the courage of your convictions and jump off the brooklyn bridge.

Socratease2 Stephen W. Houghton 15 days ago

Thanks, you are another in a long line of people who can't understand what I am saying. I thought this was a comment board for people who can think? Your comments show you have simplified my argument to a level that makes sense to you I guess. So you are arguing that if we can’t have access to "universal knowledge" then we should kill ourselves? That’s pretty perceptive stuff...if you were a cabbage.
Objective (neutrality) is a word used to obscure how easily power moves into fake positions to advantage themselves. Stating your position, biases and openly confronting them is a more honest pursuit. Someone should read how Edward Bernays became the father of public relations (advertising) --- posing as someone objective.... And in terms of being told what to think, there is little evidence (even objective evidence) that your line of thinking cannot be traced back to some defunct economist from Austria...

Wasn’t there this ancient Greek activist scholar whose work so upset the authorities that he was forced to drink poison?

Ah, but that scholar went against the tide, not with it.

speaking of knee-jerk denial . . ladies and gents, may I present: Socratease 2!

If you are too stupid to understand the dangers, nothing will help you until you’re on the receiving end. Use a little imagination, a little observation, read a little history.

Dangers of what? Receiving end of what? What denial? I will use my imagination here because there is nothing in your rambling post to focus on. Care to clarify with some lucid sentences?

O, how I wish your post wasn’t spot-on, but it sadly is. And if our precious little scholar-activists read it all, they’ll either not understand, or knee-jerk deny. More activist than scholar, I fear.

Here is the question: are researchers willing to publish findings that go against their political beliefs and the subject of their activism? Are they willing to let the chips fall where they may and report findings that do not fit the world view associated with their activism? If not, their scholarship will be tainted by their activism.

I think you actually answered your own question, or to quote a certain movie: "I think you know how this will end, don’t you?"
Socratease2  →  zincwarrior  ·  21 days ago

Ah, do you think a black activist scholar needs to replicate the sociological literature on racism or re-do studies within the field of Criminal Justice that focus on the severe racial inequalities that make the American penal system a stench in god’s nostrils? No, they don’t have to re-establish the credibility of their field. Why does it have to be a zero sum game? Activism and academics are not mutually exclusive, sorry if you and livetodie2 find the concept to be threatening to your world view. Theory without praxis or praxis without theory, neither is desirable. Finally, you and the rest who think that scholarship and research done by non-community engaged white folk is objective or neutral, think again. There is no such thing as a “centrist” or “objective” position to argue anything from, all social research is biased by unexamined values, myths, assumptions, norms and power-dimensions. You and livetodie2 are good examples of that.

zincwarrior  →  Socratease2  ·  21 days ago

"Ah, do you think a black activist scholar needs to replicate the sociological literature on racism or re-do studies within the field of Criminal Justice that focus on the severe racial inequalities that make the American penal system a stench in god’s nostrils?"

If the research has been done, then the researchers no longer have to be employed. Go be an activist on your own dime. Tuition costs too much and the push back has started.

Socratease2  →  zincwarrior  ·  21 days ago

I don’t think that is the point I was making, research is never “finished” when it comes to human societies and their behaviors, I don’t think that needs to be debated. I don’t think the “activism” part has to cost the university money either (well, humanities and some social sciences are certainly not the money makers for university). But, really now, by your logic, there is no need to employee professors to teach intro biology, geology or anything else if the research is already done. I think there are plenty of college students who would learn a lot of new information if they took a criminal justice class, some shocking information at that. Better give them some trigger warnings.

zincwarrior  →  Socratease2  ·  21 days ago

Those professors are needed for the moment to teach their students. Frankly, thats strictly, “for the moment.”
On the contrary, humanities and social sciences classes cost a lot less than STEM with their labs and equipment and computers and whatnot, yet tuition is generally the same across majors at most institutions. Ergo, there is usually a bit of cross-subsidization from the tuition dollars of the humanities and social sciences students to the coffers of the engineering and biology departments.

zincwarrior → Unemployed_Northeastern · 21 days ago
This is true.

Unemployed_Northeastern → zincwarrior · 21 days ago
Yes, stagnant real salaries in most of STEM since Bush 43's first term, unparalleled age discrimination, and the increasing offshoring of IT, programming, and R&D departments surely are hallmarks of a classic labor shortage. Uh huh.

Socratease2 → Unemployed_Northeastern · 21 days ago
True, humanities and social sciences cost far less and often times do subsidize STEM fields. No doubt about that, but they also bring in far less money in grants and more and more students are looking at majors within the College of Arts and Sciences a lot more skeptically than before. I am sure there has been a drop in enrollment in "liberal arts" majors, mostly because I have no facts to support the assertion.

Unemployed_Northeastern → Socratease2 · 21 days ago
True enough for most liberal arts disciplines; take a gander at # of majors over time at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/di... Business and vocational stuff like fitness studies, nursing, criminal justice, etc have realized big gains; most humanities and social sciences programs are stagnant to declining.

sez-who → Unemployed_Northeastern · 15 days ago
O, are lab fees a thing of the past?

RichPowers → Unemployed_Northeastern · 15 days ago
Yes, but they actually learn something in STEM. The social sciences and humanities have become schools of left-wing indoctrination.

Does Hansford ACCEPT the fact that the Michael Brown was a thug who attacked the police officer and the police officer acted in self defense.....or does he continue to peddle the lie that Mike Brown was some tolerant little giant? We should not allow SJW in the classroom if they are not interested in the truth......as in any black killed by a white cop is a victim of racism or women don't like...
a white cop is a victim of racism or women don't like about rape.

Unemployed_Northeastern → RichPowers · 15 days ago
Blargh! Random code words! Blargh! Uninformed Rants! Go Away!

I_Callahan → Socratease2 · 15 days ago
research is never "finished" when it comes to human societies and their behaviors

How convenient for the activist professors. The above means tenure, and a lifetime job.

But, really now, by your logic, there is no need to employee professors to teach intro biology, geology or anything else if the research is already done.

Apples and oranges. A lot of people don't know biology or geology. Professors ought to actually teach these subjects, and many do. As for the additional politics that professors throw in - keep that at home and we won't have a problem.

Socratease2 → I_Callahan · 15 days ago
Your first comment is just cynical and your second addresses a point I didn't make.

RichPowers → Socratease2 · 15 days ago
Nice parse there. "...research is never 'finished' when it comes to human societies and their behaviors..."

No. Research is never finished......period. And this includes climate scientist fabulists who claim the research on anthropogenic global warming is settled science. Science is NEVER settled.

Socratease2 → RichPowers · 15 days ago
Evolution too?

11144703 → Socratease2 · 21 days ago
"Finally, you and the rest who think that scholarship and research done by non-community engaged white folk is objective or neutral, think again."

Of course your point is right about so-called objective or neutral scholarship as not neutral at all, but why "white" folk scholarship? Do Asians of color or scholarship and research done by non-community engaged black folk count as well? Why do you suggest that white folk are monolithic? Swede, Arab, and Greek white folk are just as diverse among themselves as among the larger
communities of white folk, along with mixed race folk, black folk, and Asian people of color who are themselves diverse within and without

It's time to interrogate progressive use of "white" as a neatly monolithic entity. Indeed, such use is laughable. With so many bodies of color today desiring of and making love with white bodies and producing children of multiple races, what's a good progressive to do with their essentialist categories???

Socratease2 11144703 21 days ago

Yes, this could be applied to any "bound" cultural group that distinguishes clearly between "in-group" and "out-group" norms and behaviors. And you are right, there is more in-group diversity than between group diversity, always a good point to remember. White academics are still by far the largest percentage of academics, which is why I used them as my default example but I agree the monolith is eroding and there is a multi-racial future coming where whites will simply be a majority minority and then perhaps an actual minority. It is already hard for many people to define their ethnicity easily, well, maybe it is easy for many but it is arbitrary. Look at Obama, our first "Black" president. Someone should tell his mom who was a white girl from Kansas. Isn't he our first bi-racial president?

LorHead 15 days ago

Define "racism."

Socratease2  LorHead 15 days ago

Are you serious? First, I will give you a definition and you try to give me a dictionary entry. What's a word that means "to waste someone's time with a useless question?"

Socratease2  dashwood 21 days ago

You mean like white professors who find ways to argue in support of ideas they want to hold true, but in reality aren't, and then publish the results? That is a good one, watch out for those shifty activists. Anyway, concerning the subject of this activism, race and inequality, what part of their worldview is distorted? Why would you find a black scholar who studies the horrors of the American prison system to be wrong in advocating for prison reform? How does that a priori taint their scholarship? Scholarship is either rigorous and methodologically sound or it isn't, don't think ethnicity of author or topic of research matter.

dashwood 21 days ago

My question is appropriate here. To use your example, if scholars who study the American prison system generate findings that go against their arroument for prison reform. do they
submit those findings for publication or do they discard/hide those findings because they don’t fit the world view upon which their activism is based? If the latter, then their scholarship is tainted by their activism and one cannot trust the "research" generated by that "scholar." We would have to ask ourselves: how many other times did this scholar hide findings because they conflicted with their activism? All legitimate scholars have to be prepared to present findings that we don’t expect, including stories about the real world that don’t comport with our world views. I regularly publish findings that do not necessarily fit with my view of how the world works, including my political views.

There should be no place for those who substitute activism for scholarship in the research university. Period. If one wants to be

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Socratease2 • dashwood • 21 days ago

Of course, fabricating data or evidence in order to promote a cause, even a very worthy one, is academic fraud and should not be celebrated. And it happens, no doubt about it, and the more "squishy" the subject matter, the easier it is to define and explain circumstances to fit your agenda. My argument is perhaps one level back, I find it interesting that people (likely the pale, European descent types) are very "ready" to become indignant over the idea that activist scholars are pushing propaganda rather than social science. But, I see a distinct lack of reflection on the reality that the majority of professors in this country are white but somehow, being a white professor you are not challenged to defend your research in the same manner. No ones says, wow, all these white professors pumping out their limited white world views, I wonder what kinds of biases are rampant in their work? Why is it only when it comes to (mostly) minority scholarship that people want to root out bias? I have some ideas.

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12105442 • Socratease2 • 21 days ago

You make an interesting point that I can take seriously. It seems reasonable to me that there can be ethnic bias in empirical research even if you are seriously pursuing the truth; and that it is possible and maybe likely that "European descent" professors unfairly evaluate research done by other ethnicities...even if it is unconscious. Because of that reality it seems to me that there is a compelling need for ethnic diversity at the world’s universities. But it shouldn’t end there.

There is a general need for intellectual diversity. Its need is widely recognized but legitimate fears of quackery and crackpots and the prized hegemony of authority in all matters that empirical studies has garnered militate against that. It’s not that epirical studies do not
Against this it is not that empirical studies do not produce new knowledge, but that it wants to rule the world of values, morality, metaphysics and religion, too. It’s not qualified to do that.

Socratease2 ➔ dashwood • 21 days ago
Sorry, don’t mean to keep coming back to this but forgot something. I understand your point about "activism" when it has clearly lost a connection to credible scholarship. So, of course, you can’t simply substitute one for the other but, I would argue, if done "correctly" an activist edge should be a welcome complement to good scholarship. How can you study something and have no thoughts how to apply it in society? I think students would benefit from the energy and passion an activist (already getting sick of this word and its connotations) professor brings to their lectures and discussion with students. Such a professor may be a great mentor and motivator. I would rather have an honest professor who doesn’t pretend to be bias-free and puts his or her thoughts right out there for you to engage with. As long as students aren’t punished for opposing views and are rewarded for evidenced arguments that support their counter views. That is a system that reflects human reality and one that students can appreciate if they are interested in learning how to critically think. All this crap about making sure students feel safe in the classroom is so antithetical to actual learning.

12105442 ➔ Socratease2 • 20 days ago
There’s at least two serious problems with your proposal. 
1) Students are regularly and enthusiastically punished when they do not go along with the prevailing progressive party line. Some of the "punishments" are so-called microagressions (it swings both ways), other punishments include but are not limited to keeping you out of the academic club, withdrawal of support and so forth. It does make a difference. Not that there aren’t fair people on both sides of many of these issues, but it isn’t 50/50 or 70/30. It’s more like 90/10 and 95/5 favoring progressive ideology at elite universities.

2) We can agree that, "...making sure students feel safe in the classroom is antithetical to actual learning." For one, I went through without "protection" and it helped sharpen my critical (and diplomatic) skills. I’m thankful for that.

We can also agree that "white" profs have biases that affect their work but we should also be able to agree that...

Socratease2 ➔ 12105442 • 20 days ago
Good points. I certainly am not trying to advocate that minority biases be privileged over those of the dominant...
major nor that the scholarship of activist scholars get some kind of hall pass just because they are working to create "social justice" in some shape or form. There are no easy answer to these questions and "truth" remains a very malleable concept. However, I see one flaw in your argument. You can say that "minority bias" is no better or worse than "dominant culture bias" and in the abstract of course I agree. But are the two forms of bias equal? Up until very recently Anglo-American culture has been the sun around which minority cultures had to orbit their satellites. They are now trying to change the trajectory of those orbits but for a long, long time minority activists and theorists have had to use the language and methods of the majority and received little in the way of social traction on many issues. I have some sympathy, not for academic fraud but for the perspective of some groups who may feel they have to yell a bit louder or push their agendas a bit more forcefully in order to even be heard. sometimes, I think it is not "bias" so much as "presentation" that makes certain groups uncomfortable with activist academics.

12105442 Socratease2 19 days ago

There is a lot to agree with what you said above. There are possibly a technical issue or two that could be usefully clarified, but that’s probably too technical for these sort of comments. The issues have to do with metaphysics and epistemology and clarifying which we’re talking about when we discuss notions like “truth” and “knowledge” and so forth.

But on a less technical issue I find I can agree with your analysis of the Anglo-American culture being the sun around which minority cultures have had to orbit their satellites. And I appreciate the fact you see my concern of trading one set of biases for another.

Sadly my train of thought from there on isn’t as clear as I would like it to be and I am, therefore, also sad my views are not completely convincing, even to myself. Having conceded that, I presently want to say I think that the problem of biases is made considerably worse when

sez-who dashwood 15 days ago

Call me cynical - but based on what’s come out of universities in the past 20 some years, I do not believe scholarship and actual research takes place much anymore. The so-called researchers seem to begin with their bias and look for or twist evidence to fit it.

zincwarrior Socratease2 20 days ago

Please give us a trigger warning before displaying your bigoted statements about white professors. Your micro aggressions
against the melanin unprivileged are hurtful.