

Assorted Replies to Criticisms Made by Commentators and Editors

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1. When people ask me about the recent AEI conference, one thing that I found quite remarkable were the comments on the papers in the early afternoon session.

What particularly stands out in my memory was the commentator's litany of "not a single citation, not a single study, not a single syllabus." I must say that I have never seen that rhetorical strategy used in such an unvarnished way before, although I know that the charge of "only anecdotal evidence" is a quite common one. As various panelists responded to him the point was made that standards for an essay are different from those that might apply to a social science PhD thesis. It was also remarked that the request to document every assertion is as chilling on debate as are speech codes. And, I might add, leads to an infinite regress.

Let me now turn to the Golem example. First, I believe the commentator was not persuaded by my remark that *The Golem: What You Need to Know About Science* is a "pretty" popular/influential book (don't remember which I said). Some readers would assume that since it's a book in the field of history, philosophy, and sociology of science, that I might have some expertise in this area. But I will surely add a footnote saying that it won the 1995 American Sociological Association Robert K Merton Book Prize, a prize in Britain, and that Cambridge University Press has now brought out a new edition that includes an epilogue in which Collins replies to his critics.

But perhaps the commentator's major objection was that I did not trace a direct line of influence of this particular book on science curricula although I did quote from the National Science Standards to the effect that 9-12 students should become less naive about how science works and that recent work in the area of science, technology and science studies may provide resources. He would like references to syllabi or science teacher training literature that specifically mention the Golem book. A similar demand was made regarding Ebonics.

This is exactly the kind of detailed work that Sandra Stotsky did in her paper on the teacher's manual for the most popular HS English Literature book in California. But even Stotsky's paper cannot answer other skeptical questions that such a commentator might raise: But do the teachers pay any attention to the teacher's manual? And does it have any impact on the students?

Which brings me to an attempt to clarify for myself the standards that ought to pertain to "essays" such as the ones presented at this conference. I would NOT favor striving for a more scientific (or scientistic) approach. Speculation should be treated as such, but not discouraged. (For example, I found interesting the commentator's conjecture that there were fewer Republicans in the academy today because that party had recently made such a fetish of opposing abortion and gay rights.)

I guess what both sides (or should I say all sides?) of the PC debate are doing is a mixture of "climate" studies and sermonizing. Let me take what I take to be a rough analogy that is less politicized. Suppose we start hearing about some egregious cases of student cheating on tests. Suppose that certain "progressive" scholars are also writing that when students cheat on tests it's often an indication that there is something wrong with the design of the tests and the pedagogical techniques of the professor. Other "conservative" scholars are doing detailed comparisons between student attitudes towards cheating and cynical remarks of their professors. Now, in such a situation I hope we should welcome anecdotal studies of student cheating and the responses of the academy to such misbehavior. We would not claim that until empirical studies are done on the extent of the cheating and how it has varied over time and the relative efficacy of various responses, we should remain silent. If we think cheating is wrong and antithetical to our education mission, we speak out. Maybe we're exaggerating the problem, but as long as we aren't imposing any draconian measures, we are simply directing attention to a deplorable situation. It would be silly to ask the whistleblowers/Cassandras/whatever to shut up until they can document the extent of the problem.

Now to draw a moral from the analogy: Both sides of the PC debate think there is something wrong going on. For "progressives" it is residual racism/sexism/classism in the academy; for academic conservatives it is things like speech codes and relativism. Both complain of a chilly climate for whatever they are most interested in. But here is what I see as the crucial difference. At THIS moment in time (this would not have been true in 1950), the remedial measures that are being taken in the academy to remedy the RaceClassGender problem are worsening the problem for the anti-PC types. I would hope that both sides would recognize that the other folks have worthwhile goals. People who defend Larry Summers are NOT saying that they want fewer women in science. Rather they are saying that they don't want political constraints placed on hypotheses about *why* this is the case.

They are also saying that they are worried about the imposition of Title IX measures. Why are they worried? I can think of two reasons. First, there is a fundamental conflict between the norms of science (e.g., the merit of the work is *not* to be judged according to the RCG of the person who does it) and the norms of affirmative action. That needs to be recognized by all concerned. It may be that we need to tweak the scientific educational practice in order to make science more female-friendly but that requires a LOT of argument and there, unlike the commentator, I think the onus is squarely on the RCG-ers, not on the academic conservatives. Having more women scientists is a desirable goal, but not all proposed means of attaining such goal are *prima facie* acceptable.

Compare the goal of having more male primary school teachers. One way to accomplish that goal is by paying teachers more. That doesn't obviously conflict with any entrenched social or professional values. Setting up an affirmative action program for prospective male teachers, however, would conflict with all sorts of basic professional and social values so one would have to make a very strong case for doing it.

So I think the first step is to try to make science more People-friendly, not simply more Female-friendly. Sometimes women and/or minorities can serve as the canary in the coal mine. They can alert us to conditions that have negative effects on everyone. But setting up affirmative action programs for canaries is not the way to solve the problem -- canaries are not going to reform the system from within.

2. More on the role of anecdotal evidence. In the introduction to the conference something was said to the effect that some well-known conservative critiques of universities were flawed, incomplete, and therefore unlikely to bring about the desired changes. "For starters, too much of the case suggesting that academia is hostile to conservative ideas has been anecdotal rather than systematic."

My brief e-mail reply: I would not diss "anecdotal evidence". There is a long tradition already recognized by Francis Bacon of using what he called "shining instances," cases where the underlying nature of the phenomenon under examination "shines through."

Here is an example of a systematic statistical study that the editors wanted me to include that I personally find *less* persuasive than well-chosen, documented anecdotes/singular cases that illustrate PC math education:

<http://www.ibdeditorials.com/IBDArticles.aspx?id=284682578519146>

The study compares the number of course descriptions in fifty Schools of Education that mention "math" with those mentioning "diversity" or "multicultural." Until I know *what* is being said about diversity or whatever, I have no idea as to whether I should be concerned. I dare say that "math" occurs less frequently than "quality" also, but this by itself does not mean that quantitative reasoning is being slighted.

3. Another case where my experience is radically different from that of the organizers. One person correctly remarked that it's just not true that most academics are as bad as the typical black/womens/lesbigay etc studies professor. However, he then went on to say: "From what I've seen those types are as marginalized in academia as we [conservatives] are. The difference, in my view, is that they *should* be since they tend to be non-empirical and singularly minded."

To my mind the sort of identity politics that causes so much mischief in education today is in fact rooted in "studies" departments. Certainly the *ideas* developed by these professors are *not* marginalized. (Just ask Larry Summers!) And again, I am troubled by the suggestion that only empirical studies are worthwhile.