



THE DEATH SPIRAL OF AMERICAN ACADEMIA

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About the author

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Earlier this year, Eric Kaufmann of the University of London published a remarkably detailed and comprehensive study of bias in academia, *Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Political Discrimination, and Self-Censorship*.^{*} Kaufmann's writing is a product of California's Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology, a small think tank set up to do research that is forbidden in today's academy. His finding of rampant left-sided political bias in publication, employment, and promotion in the academy – and discrimination against anyone right-of-center – qualifies as forbidden scholarship.

What follows below is (I think) a generalization of the process that climatologist Judith Curry has described with regard to the Wuhan coronavirus.^{**} I hope readers will come away with the notion that the process of institutionalizing, and then defending, bad, politicized science is fractal – the internal geometry is very similar for nearly all such instances. The reason is because mainstream practitioners of science have a demonstrable political bias and discredit or reject the work of anyone whose beliefs are inconsistent with that bias. Been there.

In the academy, the free interchange of competing ideas creates knowledge through cooperation, disagreement, debate, and dissent. Kaufmann's landmark study proves that the last three in that list are severely suppressed and punished. The pervasiveness of such repression may be a death sentence for science, free inquiry, and the advancement of knowledge in our universities.

I am led to that dire conclusion because the universities appear to have no way to prevent this fate. No solution can arise from within the academy because it selects its own lifetime faculty, which is largely left wing – increasingly so – and makes the promotion of dissenters highly unlikely. Kaufmann demonstrates profoundly systemic discrimination by leftist faculty against colleagues whom they find disagreeable.

It is important to note that Kaufmann concentrates primarily (but not exclusively) on the social sciences and humanities, in part because that's where most previous research on bias applies. Data for STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) are not as common. However, there is no *a priori* reason to believe that these fields are unaffected by systemic biases influencing entire institutions. Sure, one can make the argument that math is apolitical, but one can't say the same for the many branches of science that now have considerable and controversial policy implications. Even a casual reading of both the academic and popular literature on environmental science and climatology reveals rampant politicization.

Kaufmann's study is shocking in its depth, even to academics (like me) who experienced for decades what he describes. He documents all aspects of an academic career, from advanced graduate study to landing a faculty position, research funding, publication, and promotion. That normal career progression is all but derailed if a person expresses a scintilla of non-left views in casual conversations, faculty meetings, public discourse, teaching, grant applications, submitted publications,

* <https://cspicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AcademicFreedom.pdf>

** <https://judithcurry.com/2021/05/23/collapse-of-the-fake-consensus-on-covid-19-origins/>

or the promotion process.

He surveys the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, using different markers for liberal and conservative views. Among others, in the US he used Trump-versus-Biden support, while for the UK he centered upon 'Leave' or 'Remain' in the controversy over membership of the European Union.

Kaufmann starts by distinguishing between 'hard' and 'soft' discrimination. The former includes the direct use of university disciplinary procedures against dissenting academics, internally generated campaigns for ouster, or simply making life so uncomfortable that a scholar feels compelled to leave. More specifically, he defines it as 'being fired or threatened for one's views', while the 'soft' version includes 'not being hired, promoted, awarded a grant, or published in a journal'.

There is some good news here, but the past tense may be more appropriate. Kaufmann found that 'most academics reject the "hard" version' of discrimination, though he also found an alarming order-of-magnitude increase in the number of reported cases in recent years.

It is the soft version that has been more prevalent.

Promotion is largely determined by a record of academic publication, summarized by outside reviewers, who may number up to a dozen or so. This decision on promotion is especially critical in the sixth year of an academic appointment, when a candidate is either promoted from assistant to associate professor, the latter carrying an appointment without term (i.e. tenure), or is terminated within a year. This review is an 'up or out', which means that denial of promotion ends employment not only at the candidate's institution but at its peer institutions. For candidates denied by top-shelf schools, the opportunity to play ball at a lower level usually remains. But who wants to be damaged goods playing for the Tennessee Smokies after six years in Wrigley Field?

One critical letter among the large number submitted is often sufficient to result in a denial. And in highly politicized fields such as my own (climate change), unsolicited letters from a big power in the field can appear out of the blue. ('I heard you are considering Dr Blow for tenure. Might I offer some commentary?') If the writer is of sufficient status, that's a death sentence for the candidate and his heterodox views (pronoun and adjective explicitly chosen as matters of probability).

Kaufmann writes that 'there will be, on average, 2–5 voices in the room [i.e. fellow faculty or review letters] discriminating against a right-wing candidate'. With regard to all-important academic publications, he finds that a 'paper is unlikely to be judged strictly on its merits since most journals require at least two referees plus an editor to take a look. This means there is a 60–90% chance of a right-wing paper being rated lower' (i.e. rejected), lowering the chances for promotion.

There is already a tremendous numerical disparity between left- and right-leaning faculty; approximately 14 to 1 in the US, as shown in Table 4 in Kaufmann's paper. This is for the social sciences and the humanities; Kaufmann (personal communication) indicates the number for STEM is 5.7 to 1, still an outrageous imbalance.

Kaufmann did find that discrimination by the right against the left occurs at about the same rate, but since there are so few on the right,

the disparity in favor of the left will continue to grow as the papers, promotions, and grant applications of right-leaning faculty are rejected by the ever-increasing proportion on the left. Interestingly, the percentages for conservative discrimination against left-leaning faculty are the same with regard to hiring, but the left discriminates slightly more than the right in reviews of academic papers and grant applications, and in promotion decisions. Because hiring decisions largely rest with the faculty members themselves, discrimination against conservatives is only going to continue increasing.

Maybe academic discrimination is an inherent human quality, but having it entirely on one side of the political spectrum is a result of institutional hiring and retention choices.

What's happening is a naked threat against the diversification of knowledge, with a future that looks even worse: Kaufmann finds that the youngest cohort on the academic ladder, PhD students, are the most intolerant of the few faculty who are right-of-center. Eighty-two percent of these students say they would discriminate against right-leaning faculty in hiring, promotions, and grant applications. Kaufmann writes that in 'North America, 24% of all PhD students would [downrate] a right-leaning paper...30% would mark a right-leaning promotion application lower, and 33% would rank a right-leaning grant application down'.

But that's only the 'admitted' bias. Kaufmann designed his surveys to also reveal hidden bias, which, he notes, approximately doubles the figures for admitted prejudice. Discrimination against conservatives by PhD students then becomes 48%, 60%, and 66% respectively – this from the next generation of faculty.

This is an ominous sign, suggesting that discrimination against the few remaining right-leaning teachers will become even worse. Universities might as well start to advertize positions with the caveat that 'right-of-center candidates expecting promotion need not apply'.

Kaufmann concludes, 'There is a climate of political discrimination inside the contemporary university' and adds that 'findings accumulated over a decade convincingly show that a majority of conservative academics experience a hostile environment for their beliefs...This is a rational appraisal of the significant structural discrimination against them in the higher education sector'.

This climate is eroding free speech, with overt censorship through the rejection of results with real (or simply apparent) connection to right-of-center policies, as well as tremendous self-censorship both in the classroom and in published academic papers. Scientists (including me) rationally submit papers that will not ruffle feathers, which itself has the obvious effect of reducing the disagreement often required for scientific progress.

The result is a systematic poisoning of the peer-reviewed literature, which society accepts as its canon of knowledge. Fewer trends in the world of ideas could be more dangerous. This is The Frankfurt School on steroids.

The scientific literature is the basis for the development of paradigms in the disciplines. As Thomas Kuhn repeatedly demonstrated in

his famous 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (which continues to be republished!), paradigms are highly resistant to change. It took 100 years for mainstream geology to accept continental drift, even though most observant five-year-olds see that many of the world's continents fit together like jigsaw pieces.

Publication of results showing anomalies in a paradigm (such as drifting continents in a paradigm of stationarity) is difficult enough. In today's highly politicized arenas (gender, diversity, and climate change, for example), results that may indicate that a paradigm is inaccurate will be systemically suppressed, and their authors harassed, cancelled, or worse.

For instance, it is somewhat easy to download upper-atmospheric data from the climate models that serve as the (only) basis for assessment of future climate in the literature. These data reveal massive systematic overprediction of warming in the last 40 years for the entire four-dimensional global tropics.^{***} Yet publishing that fact in the scientific literature has proven nearly impossible. For whatever reason, it is viewed as a right-of-center finding and is treated as such.

The increasing systemic bias against such findings makes paradigms even more resistant to change than they were. To belabor the point, the reigning paradigm is that these climate models supply reliable guidance for the future, but the implication of the global tropical error is that they don't. Nonetheless, the literature either doesn't note this or downplays its meaning. It's hard to see how politically consequential this is. Why viewing the planet as existentially imperiled is 'left,' and seeing the climate as a modestly warming metastable system is 'right,' is a mystery, but the ensuing discrimination is a reality.

In my experience, climate science is as systemically fraught with bias as the social sciences and the humanities; indeed, Mitchell Langbert in 2018 found that the ratio of Democrats to Republicans was 25:1 among environmental scientists and 27:1 in the geosciences. His results were based upon voter registration.

Despite its obvious political prominence, in Kaufmann's entire 195-page (single-spaced) document, the word 'climate' (used 195 times) only describes the social milieu that academics experience. Only once does the subject of global warming come up – and in a pejorative way:

...[T]hose who refuse to recognize the reality of political discrimination and chilling effects are not dissimilar to those who initially denied the leftist makeup of the professoriate (up to the 1990s), or who say that the earth is no warmer today than it was a century ago.

To be clear, the average surface temperature is certainly warmer now than it was around 1900. But there were two warming periods in the 20th century, and the first, from 1910–45, is unlikely to have been largely because of carbon dioxide, as atmospheric concentrations at its initiation were barely – only a few parts per million – above where they were when global temperature records begin in 1850. If that teeny change could kick off the half-degree (Centigrade) of warming that ensued, current temperatures would be so hot that there would be little

^{***} Three dimensions in space plus time.

debate about imminent disaster.

But there is a legitimate discussion about long-term climate records. Almost all of the warming in the history of the US (which contains the best-maintained and most dense stations) is a result of 'adjustments' and 'homogenization.' (I love that word as applied to ostensibly independent data records.) So the true warming is actually unknown. While it is certainly a stretch to say the earth's temperature is the same as it was a century ago, it is not one to say that surface temperature records have been molested to overestimate any warming, which is easily confirmed by examining independent records from ascending weather balloons and orbiting satellites.

I speculate that Kaufmann knows these problems beset the 'environmental issue of our time,' but chose to avoid conflict by conflating skeptics of an imminent apocalypse with those who deny left-wing bias in the academy. He may have sensed that touching the rather prominent electrified rail of climate change would have fried his credibility, no matter how well-grounded his work. Kaufmann often speaks of 'self-censorship' among academics. Did he do the same on climate to protect his work from the type of attacks he so thoroughly documents? For whatever reason, in 'Academic Freedom in Crisis' mum's the word on climate change.

A practical example of the consequences of this intolerance is instructive. For whatever reason, scientists who view modern warming as modest, harmless or even beneficial are viewed as right-wing. If they let their sympathy for this so-called 'lukewarm' hypothesis be known in graduate school, it's unlikely they would ever gain an academic position. If hired, and they express this view at faculty meetings, they will be stigmatized, greatly diminishing their chances for promotion.

Further, revealing a 'lukewarm' perspective in a research-grant application would be extremely risky. Kaufmann's results 'suggest close to *two-thirds likelihood* that each reviewer of a right-leaning grant application will engage in political discrimination' [emphasis in original].

Given that there will be at least three reviewers of a grant application to, say, the National Science Foundation, and that one bad review will spell death, anyone not espousing the establishment view (*established*, that is, by the enormous disproportion of left-leaning faculty who view climate change as deadly) had better self-censor.

Better to avoid hot-button issues and concentrate on nugatory research. I did that during my first decade in the academy. The dean told me it was a great work, but I thought it was terrible. Kaufmann predicts that this kind of self-censorship, or *research dilution*, must be common among those who dissent from left-wing orthodoxy.

This is perhaps most obvious in studies of gender/sexuality and, of course, the unholy trinity of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

There is surely research in the publication stream today demonstrating the benefits of increasing permutations of the gender tree and the obvious salutary effects of asserting white fragility. Conversely, rest assured that anyone foolish enough to have submitted an academic counterargument has already had that manuscript rejected and is likely under suspicion.

Self-censorship applies to what one says to colleagues as well as to what research is applied for or written. According to Kaufmann, '70% [of the non-left] in the US say there is a hostile climate for their beliefs in their departments and a similar number report self-censoring in teaching and research.'

Kaufmann concludes:

Discrimination leads to self-censorship, curbing the freedom to investigate and debate ideas that is the lifeblood of a properly functioning academy. With just 10–20% of Trump- and Leave-supporting academics in the social sciences and humanities willing to air their political beliefs, the views of half the electorate are effectively being silenced, limiting the kinds of conversations that are needed for mutual understanding.

The erosion of the academy is obvious. The implications are clear. The opportunity costs to society of handicapping, slowing, or preventing publication of new knowledge can only be staggering, prompting the obvious question: 'What is to be done?'

Kaufmann details two approaches. One, I fear, is wishful thinking: good ideas – tolerance, academic freedom, and a true ideological diversity with real impact on the future composition of the faculty – will prevail. They will drive out the bad ones.

Why is it wishful thinking? University faculty members, at the end of six years during which the right-of-center teachers leave or are fired after the promotion review, are permanent lifetime employees who choose the new hires, whether tenured or not. Kaufmann shows whom they do *not* choose, which implies whom they do. Like begets like, and people don't often move philosophically from left to right, when the left is preferentially rewarded.

Kaufmann's other approach is what he calls 'interventionist'. He gives an example in which a US president or a state governor, backed by the legislature, mandates that universities prioritize academic freedom, with all other goals and programs subservient. On the insightful British video podcast *Triggernometry*, he noted that the UK government under Boris Johnson has instituted reforms that could help break the ideological uniformity of the academy.

But that's the UK. In the US, no president or governor could successfully order universities to hire and promote more right-leaning teachers. Nor could he or she order faculty members to affirmatively review right-of-center journal submissions, grant proposals or applications for promotion.

Surely, one might argue, that is similar to what occurs now with affirmative action and 'diversity, equity, and inclusion'. But no-one promoting these, from lobbyists to legislators to university administrators, is pushing anything that the existing faculty don't

believe in already.

A university administrator would get no further than a president or governor. The easiest way for a university president to be deposed is for him or her to incur mass disapproval of the faculty. Further, faculty members directly vote on who should be offered academic positions. While deans, provosts, and presidents can overrule faculty votes, they simply can't cram an alternative appointment down a noncompliant faculty's throat without a major giveback. The most they can usually do is offer a department a 'free' position (one that doesn't cost a department a designated 'slot') in addition to the hire that the dean wants.

That might slightly dilute the hegemony of the left-of-center faculty, but the math is clear. It will not replace it.

This is depressing, for it seems that the death spiral of American academia is inevitable. Our problems are structural and intractable. Because the university faculty is empowered to dictate who its members are and what is permitted in the canon of knowledge, it will retain that corrupt absolute power. Self-selection by the faculty ensures an increasingly leftward tilt, and not just in the social sciences and humanities; the infection has now reached STEM. Political intolerance will increase, as will de facto and direct suppression of academic free speech. It encourages heinous self-censorship that silences teachers who might dissent – until they can no longer speak.

About the Global Warming Policy Forum

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