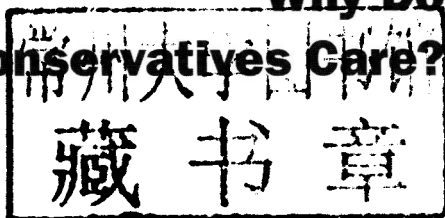
The background of the image is a brick wall with a mix of red and brown bricks. In the lower half, there is a dense growth of green ivy with heart-shaped leaves. The text is overlaid on this background.

**WHY ARE  
PROFESSORS  
LIBERAL AND  
WHY DO  
CONSERVATIVES  
CARE?**

Neil Gross

# Why Are Professors Liberal

and  
Why Do  
Conservatives Care?



Neil Gross

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## Introduction

When one of my research assistants interviewed her back in 2007, Lorena, then thirty-five, was an assistant professor in a department of sociology at a college in the South.<sup>1</sup> A specialist in economic development who focuses on Latin America, Lorena told us that her research interests stem in part from her political commitments. She grew up in California, in an upper-middle-class Mexican American family. Although her mother, a school counselor, was more politically progressive than her father, an attorney, she recalled that in her “bilingual, bicultural household . . . issues of tolerance and justice were . . . big.” In the 1980s, when she was in high school, Lorena underwent what she described as an “awakening experience.” This, she noted, “was a time when there was so much conflict in Central America.” Predisposed anyway to a liberal point of view, she soon came to realize “the role of the United States” in the region and how much better off people there would be if the U.S. government stopped trying to counter leftist insurgencies and prop up autocrats. A year abroad in Scandinavia convinced her that U.S. domestic policies were equally askew, tilted in favor of the rich. After college, she decided to undertake graduate work because she wanted to understand how and why American political power had come to be wielded to such ill effect.

Six years after completing her PhD, Lorena’s political commitments had not wavered. Asked to describe her politics, she called herself “a liberal or a progressive,” which, she said, means that she

tends to “prioritize things like social, political, and economic justice.” She told us that she supports redistributionist economic policies, such as steeply progressive tax rates; favors affirmative action for minorities in hiring and educational admissions; is committed to feminist ideals; and believes ardently in the need for immigration reform. She opposed the war in Iraq, then in its fourth year. Like many progressives, Lorena has mixed feelings about the Democratic Party. Still, she always votes Democratic. And she does more than vote. She belongs to “a progressive faculty group on campus,” is active in community organizations on immigration issues, and is engaged politically through her research and teaching. Although she recognizes that social science and activism are different, and feels that no scholar should be indoctrinating students, she believes that in the final analysis all “knowledge is inherently political and subjective.” Therefore, she told us, she allows her commitment to social justice to figure in her academic writing and lecturing. Her goal is to encourage students to be “more aware and active citizens” and to question social and political orthodoxies.

For many on the left, Lorena would seem to embody academic virtue. At a time when American colleges and universities are falling over themselves to lure students, tuition dollars, and corporate donors, remaking higher education so that courses can be offered on such heady and important subjects as fashion merchandising and video game programming, professors like Lorena might appear to be valiant figures, old-school intellectuals who push students to think critically and in their own writing speak truth to power. Yes, leftists would concede, it is important that researchers not subordinate scholarship to politics. But at a moment in history when not just the university but the media too have been massively corporatized, and with the conservative

movement energized by opposition to President Barack Obama, is it not a good thing that Lorena and other professors like her are plying their trade, offering readers of academic works as well as students some critical counterweight to the usual insidious conservative fare? That Lorena is Hispanic and a woman might, from this perspective, make her even more virtuous. What a testament to the powerful ideal of social justice that a member of a minority group long excluded from the academic ranks would now use her position, a product of decades of collective struggle, to advocate for the rights of others.

So far, Lorena has flown under the radar of conservative activists and commentators like David Horowitz and Glenn Beck, who are much concerned with the politics of American professors. With more controversial figures to take on, such as former University of Colorado ethnic studies professor Ward Churchill and retired City University of New York sociologist Frances Fox Piven, conservative critics have had less to say about individual run-of-the-mill progressive or liberal academics. But it is not hard to imagine that a Horowitz or Beck would feel his blood boil on hearing Lorena describe her work. We all have our biases, a critic might admit. But in what universe is it acceptable for tax dollars to support research that is so unequivocally partisan? How does writing on Latin American development from the perspective of “social justice” even count as research? Furthermore, though Lorena may think she is not practicing indoctrination, is that not what she is doing, really? Stick an impressionable twenty-year-old in a classroom for fifteen weeks with a charismatic instructor who makes the case that conservatives are heartless or deluded and that the United States has evil designs, and the student is likely to veer left. While Lorena and her ilk may not pose the same threat



to the country as radicals like Churchill or Piven, the fact that she is a typical figure in academe means there is something rotten with American higher education: it has become a bastion of liberal groupthink that squanders manpower on irrelevant research and fails to provide students with the education they need to make their way as proud American citizens in a complex, dangerous world.

This book is about professors more or less like Lorena and the conservatives who are angry at them. In one sense, anyway, conservative critics are right: Lorena *is* a typical figure, not demographically (there are few Hispanic female professors) but politically. Liberals, progressives, and those otherwise on the left are remarkably common in the American professoriate. In fact, academe contains a larger proportion of people who describe themselves as liberal than just about any other major occupation.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, many academic liberals work in fields like biology and chemistry, where there is not much room for their politics to affect either their teaching or their research. But in the social sciences and humanities, where the lines can more easily blur, there are plenty of Lorenas.

There is also no shortage of conservative critics. Horowitz and Beck may be two of the most visible current opponents of the liberal professoriate, yet standing behind them are dozens of advocacy organizations and scores of conservative commentators and reporters churning out a steady stream of op-eds, articles, books, blog posts, reports, and sound bites that characterize higher education as in a time of crisis owing to the pernicious influence of the academic left.<sup>3</sup> These complaints echo such classics of the culture wars as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1990), and Dinesh D'Souza's

*Illiberal Education* (1991).<sup>4</sup> Some Americans appear to be listening. Although confidence in colleges and universities remains relatively high, research shows that more than a third of the public believes political “bias” in higher education to be a “very serious” problem.<sup>5</sup> As Republican lawmakers in state after state put higher education budgets on the chopping block, it is hard not to believe that some are relishing the opportunity offered by the recent economic downturn to make sure that liberal academics get their comeuppance.<sup>6</sup>

But why do professors tend to be liberal? And what, besides opportunism, explains why conservatives are so eager to go after them? Much has been written on these questions by advocates, journalists, and scholars. Seven years of intensive social scientific research, however, have led me to believe that the most common explanations for “professorial liberalism” and the conservative uproar about it are either wrong or incomplete. This book explores both phenomena and attempts to provide a more satisfactory account. In doing so, it sheds new light not only on higher education but also on American society and politics more generally.



Liberal professors and conservative critics of the academy do not agree on much. But you would think they could at least agree on the factual proposition that professors tend to sit on the left side of the political aisle. Our interviews with professors like Lorena, though, reveal that many dispute this basic point.<sup>7</sup> Probing faculty views of the liberal bias question, we asked Rick, a fifty-three-year-old associate professor of literature who also describes himself as a progressive, why there are not many conservatives in higher education. Rick was quick to correct us. Professors do

often vote Democratic, he acknowledged. But he insisted that “the Democratic Party is quite conservative and . . . not left wing.” “All you’d have to do to confirm that is look to Canada or any Northern European country,” he explained. For example, he said, “you’ve got a lot of Democrats in this country who are not comfortable with the idea of same-sex marriage.” He added, “I bet that if you check out [academic] administrators a lot of them are voting Republican.”<sup>8</sup> And what about economists, engineers, and business professors? Factor all of them into your equation, Rick told us, and the university is going to start looking like a much less liberal place.

This line of thought is not illogical. It is true that by the measures political scientists use, the Democratic Party is to the right of left parties in many other nations.<sup>9</sup> And there are indeed pronounced differences in faculty political views across disciplines. Any adequate explanation of professorial politics has to account for this, but more relevant here is that some of the most conservative fields, such as business and the health sciences, have seen major gains in student enrollment in recent decades and, as a result, in faculty numbers. Business is now the most popular undergraduate major, and business professors make up 8% of the faculty.<sup>10</sup> Surely these changes push against whatever liberalism may be found elsewhere in the academy.

But people who advance this argument act a little like an ostrich with its head in the sand. Survey research shows that 51% of professors are Democrats, as compared to 35% of the voting-age American public.<sup>11</sup> Among Independents, who compose a third of the faculty, those leaning Democratic outnumber those leaning Republican by more than 2 to 1. That leaves the Republican Party only a 14% solid share of the professorial population, mean-

ing that the professoriate is less than half as Republican as the country as a whole. True, you are not going to find many hammer-and-sickle flags at Democratic Party rallies. But professors are not just garden-variety Democrats; many are extremely liberal Democrats. Six out of ten Democratic professors would use the term *progressive* to describe themselves, and on a range of matters, from equalizing wealth to the death penalty, environmental protection to combating terrorism, most hold views that place them squarely to the left of most other Democrats nationally.<sup>12</sup> And these numbers take into account recent changes in the disciplinary makeup of the professoriate. By my calculations, between 50% and 60% of professors today can reasonably be described as leftist or liberal, at a time when only 17% of Americans fall into that category.<sup>13</sup> And while professors on the far left are often keen to distinguish themselves from their merely liberal peers, the fact is that a great many in the left/liberal camp would fit quite well in Canada's genuinely leftist New Democratic Party or among the Social Democrats in Sweden.

While some on the left are prone to denying that professors are a liberal lot, many on the right exhibit the opposite tendency: exaggerating professorial liberalism. This takes several forms. Some conservative social scientists, producing research on the academy that, like its counterpart on the left, involves as much advocacy as scholarship, have used questionable methodologies to suggest that nearly 75% of American professors are leftists or that the professoriate is growing vastly more liberal over time.<sup>14</sup> Still others write about the university as if it were an undifferentiated place politically, with professors of all disciplinary stripes marching in political lockstep.<sup>15</sup> Then there are over-the-top commentators like Ann Coulter, who depict academia as a breeding ground

for radicalism. Writing about William Ayers, the controversial professor of education at the University of Illinois–Chicago who, in the 1960s, was one of the founders of the radical organization Weather Underground, which orchestrated a series of bombings to protest the Vietnam War and in support of an overthrow of the capitalist order, Coulter observed, “Ayers is such an imbecile, we ought to be amazed that he’s teaching at a university . . . except all former violent radicals end up teaching. Roughly 80% of former Weathermen are full college professors—99% if you don’t include the ones killed in shoot-outs with the police or in prison—i.e., not yet pardoned by a Democratic president. Any other profession would have banned a person like Ayers. Universities not only accept former domestic terrorists, but also move them to the front of the line.”<sup>16</sup>

These claims are wrongheaded, too. For one thing, while conservative professors are a rarity, there are a significant number of academics on the center left or who have even more moderate views.<sup>17</sup> Half are Independents, although they do typically vote Democratic. Particularly when it comes to economic matters, however, center-left and moderate academics are quite different from their more progressive colleagues. To the extent that views of the economy affect professors’ research, teaching, and public service work—which, again, may be more the case in some fields than in others—these are differences that matter.

On the question of change over time, academia *is* more liberal today than in the 1960s, but not dramatically so. And conservative commentators downplay the fact that professors my age, in their late thirties and early forties, are *less* likely than their predecessors to consider themselves radicals and are often critical of what

they perceive to be the excesses of the 1960s-era academic left. Do professors in all disciplines agree politically? The answer is no. Invite some anthropologists and professors of engineering to lunch at the faculty club to talk politics and see what happens. As for Coulter's charge, it is hard to know whether to respond seriously or laugh. What the data here show are that self-identified radicals make up about 8% of the professoriate and are concentrated in a select number of social science and humanities fields.<sup>18</sup> Nearly all abhor violence.



If partisans cannot be trusted to offer accurate depictions of professors' politics, neither can they be relied on to explain why professors have the views they do. On the left, among those willing to acknowledge that the academic profession is more liberal than conservative, two explanations dominate. The first holds that liberals are smarter than conservatives. Is it therefore surprising that academia, which selects for smart people, contains a disproportionate number of progressives? If you want proof that liberals are smarter, this way of thinking goes, just compare President Obama to President George W. Bush and draw some inferences about the mental ability of the people who voted for each. Smart people gravitate toward the left, liberals like to assert, because a little clear thinking is enough to show just how foolish most conservative ideas are. The second argument concerns values. What do liberals value? Social justice and truth. What do conservatives value? Preserving their distorted vision of the American way of life and making money. So who is more likely to go into academia, where the quest for truth reigns supreme and salaries are lower than in the world of business?

On the right, a different argument is made, one that is equally self-serving. Many conservatives would like to get academic jobs, claim critics of the academy. They just cannot. Why? Because over time liberals have taken over higher education and refuse to hire people with dissenting views. Political bias and outright discrimination keep conservatives out of the academic fold.

None of these arguments holds much water. There is a statistical association between verbal intelligence and political liberalism.<sup>19</sup> But it is not as strong an association as liberals would like to believe, and quantitative research I will report shows that the higher than average cognitive ability of professors accounts for little of their liberal orientation. As for values, some of the liberal stereotypes are wrong: surveys find only minor differences between liberals and conservatives in the importance they place on making money.<sup>20</sup> In terms of a commitment to science and truth, it is correct, as surveys also show, that conservatives have less confidence in science than do liberals.<sup>21</sup> The primary reason is that about half of political conservatives in the United States are theologically conservative Protestants, many of whom are biblical literalists who do not believe in evolution.<sup>22</sup> A secondary reason is that many religious and secular conservatives—and among them, white men in particular—are skeptical about the science of climate change.<sup>23</sup> These facts should not be downplayed, but in other respects liberals and conservatives are fairly similar in their knowledge of and appreciation for science.<sup>24</sup> Views of evolution and global warming undoubtedly keep conservatives from flocking to fields like evolutionary biology and climatology, but there is no evidence that most conservatives have an intrinsically anti-scientific worldview—and in any event this could not explain why

conservatives are more underrepresented in the humanities than in the natural sciences.<sup>25</sup> On the bias and discrimination claim made by the right, while some liberal academics can be hostile to theories, methods, and ideas that they believe to be conservative in nature, a controversial experiment I conducted, which I will also describe in detail, suggests that in academia there is less discrimination against conservative scholars than critics charge.

It is not only partisans who have taken up the question of why professors tend to be liberal. Sociologists, for their part, have long been interested in explaining the left-leaning, democratic tendencies of academics and other intellectuals, including writers and journalists.<sup>26</sup> In recent years, the leading theoretical approach, associated with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, has argued that intellectuals' politics stem from their distinctive position in the class structure: intellectuals have only moderate levels of economic success, but their education and experience leave them in possession of a great deal of socially valued cultural knowledge and taste.<sup>27</sup> Ostensibly, this inclines them to the left for two reasons. First, the only way a group with more cultural than economic capital could acquire greater power and authority in society would be by convincing people that knowledge is more important than money. This means it is in the interests of intellectuals to attack the business class whenever possible, and what better way to do this than to be out front in supporting a program of economic redistribution and regulation?<sup>28</sup> Second, intellectuals have material interests: they would like to be paid more and have more financial support for their work. It is therefore natural that intellectuals would want to grow the state so that more money could be put into higher education budgets, research, funding for the arts, and so on—a liberal agenda.



Bourdieu's theory has much to commend it, but it does not suffice as an explanation. Americans who are better educated than they are paid do tend to be more liberal, but research shows that this explains only a modest share of the liberalism of professors.<sup>29</sup> What is more, evidence I will present indicates that most liberal professors formed their political views in the main well before they became academics—before they even developed the aspiration to step behind the lectern. To the extent that this is so, their politics are not really traceable to their social or economic interests as intellectuals. Nor can professorial liberalism be accounted for by focusing on the class backgrounds from which academics hail.

What, then, explains why professors are more liberal than other Americans? While cognitive ability, values, and factors related to social class have *some* role to play—alongside education and personality, as discussed in Chapter 2—my research suggests a more important factor is self-selection based on the political reputation of the academic profession. Professors are not just liberal in fact; they are also liberal in our stereotypes about them, and have been for a long time. Academic characters do not make frequent enough appearances in film or television for their portrayals to serve as reliable indicators of cultural views, but for the sake of illustration, think about some recent depictions: Jeff Daniels as novelist and literature professor Bernard Berkman in *The Squid and the Whale*; Mark Ruffalo and Peter Krause, also playing English professors, in *We Don't Live Here Anymore*; Janeane Garofalo as real-life women's studies professor (and then Democratic politician) Catherine Connolly in *The Laramie Project*; Maggie Gyllenhaal as the farcical, breastfeeding-obsessed professor LN in *Away We Go*; Dallas Roberts as math professor Owen Cavanaugh