ProfScam:
PROFESSORS
AND THE DEMISE
OF HIGHER
EDUCATION

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A FRESHMAN composition class at Auburn University was reading the comics. Next time, they might study the newspaper's Home and Garden Section or even watch soap operas.

Their teacher, Kris Lackey, knows that some of his more traditional colleagues might assign something like E.B. White's *The Elements of Style* to a class on writing. But Lackey has written that exposing his class to such classics might overwhelm them and remove "the text farther and farther from the students' critical ken." So he has them read newspapers, specifically the various literary offerings in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*’s sports pages, its Dixie Living and Home sections, and funny pages.¹

Perhaps even more than the critical deities at schools like Yale or Brown or the University of California at Irvine, the new face of the humanities is personified by a new variety of classroom reading material. Lackey said he was sympathetic to some of the ideas of Robert Scholes, a professor at Brown University, the author of the seminal *Textual Power* and a very hot lit crit indeed. Kris Lackey cites Scholes on "critical strength":

"In an age of manipulation," he quotes Scholes as saying, "when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the
continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts. . . .”

Lackey uses the newspaper, specifically, to “cultivate a hearty skepticism based on the broadest assumptions of deconstruction.” When his students read the paper, he has them look for “the central binary subtexts and how can they be dismantled.” He gives his students a crack at an armed forces recruitment brochure, an episode of *As the World Turns*, and a college catalogue of the student’s choice.

Lackey also has the students take their own flings with theory. He acknowledges that the products of such exercises might be system-ridden and heavy-handed. But, Lackey says, “better that than the studiously self-detached, self-effacing and apolitical persona so often encouraged by our own behavior as exegetes of the secular scripture.”

Lamentations have arisen from many quarters in recent years over the sorry state of the humanities in our universities. Since 1970, the number of English majors has dropped by 57 percent, philosophy majors declined by 42 percent, and majors in modern languages were cut in half. The National Endowment for the Humanities noted with alarm that students can obtain degrees from nearly three-fourths of American universities without ever studying American literature or history, and concluded darkly that “Too many students are graduating from American colleges and universities lacking even the most rudimentary knowledge about the history, literature, art and philosophical foundations of their nation and their civilization.” Almost invariably, the exodus has been blamed on economics, the new social mores, the values of students and even in one notable analysis, the advent of the Walkman radio. The proposed solutions have largely been to get students back into the classrooms where the liberal arts are taught.

But perhaps the flight from the humanities had something to do with what the students found in those classes.

In fact, what passes for the study of literature in many college classrooms would be nearly unrecognizable to anyone who graduated before the new critical fads came to dominate the universi-
sities. Today, the state of the art literature classroom is a laboratory where the cutting edge is not literature or the dry, musty business of reading and understanding Great Books. It is Theory. Nor do the scholars of the humanities of the New Age digress into what the National Endowment for the Humanities calls “life’s enduring fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base? Why do civilizations flourish? Why do they decline?” Who has the time to muddle on about such sentimental archaisms when the *litterateurs* have to devote themselves to such speculations as whether words mean anything at all, or only refer to other words?

The Triumph of Theory

The theory that dominates the university classroom today goes under the general rubric of “post-structuralism,” an import from French literary critics who are still marveling at its prairie-fire spread through the American university. The new continental critical fashions first crept into the academic village in the late 1960s, dazzling professors of literature with an array of abstruse, intimidating, and impressive-sounding terminology like meta-
texis, paralogic, non-referential, and logocentrism. The new theo-
ries were ideal for academics who (a) were bored by traditional approaches, (b) saw the new theories as a way to insinuate their political/social agendas into literary criticism, or (c) latched onto the new fads as a way to fast-track themselves into academic glory.

Originally, this strange critical hybrid from across the Atlantic was more or less limited to Yale University, but the proliferation has been breathtakingly rapid. By 1984, French writer Jacques Derrida, the godfather of deconstructionism (one of the several permutations of the movement), declared that the movement “was stronger in the United States than anywhere else.” In the years since, various forms of post-structuralism have not only come to dominate many of the leading literature departments but even more important, most of the academic journals in the field.
"Today it is not possible to escape from theory anywhere within the provinces of academic literary study," proclaimed Professor Murray Krieger of the University of California at Irvine. His colleague, J. Hillis Miller, a former president of the Modern Language Association, has declared: "We are in the presence today of the triumph of theory." What all this means is that, where once upon a time the study of literature was dominated by particular books or poems, "texts" are now chosen arbitrarily to help elucidate whatever the theory of choice happens to be. If Chaucer happens to fit, all well and good. If not, he's out, and the same for Shakespeare, Shelley, Byron, and company.

The definition of this new theoretical movement is difficult, not only because it takes so many different forms, but because, quite simply, it strains the credulity of anyone not immersed in the academic village itself. Many of the most influential theorists argue, for example, that words do not really mean anything at all; that a poem, for example, is not about anything except itself. One of the founders of deconstructionism, Paul de Man, for example, argued that literature was little more than linguistic "noise." (This is a problem for critics of the movement. After one academic wrote a scathing critique of the avant-garde theories, a vice president of his university called him and asked whether he had made it up—because the situation he described was so bizarre).

The founders and leaders of the new movement make up an eclectic group, including such luminaries as Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, de Man (who spent World War II writing articles for a pro-Nazi Belgian newspaper), and Jacques Derrida. Of these, Derrida has been the most influential. Derrida's great contribution to literary studies is his slogan "There is nothing outside the text." One author summed up Derrida's deconstructionism thusly: "In sum there is no such thing as communication or knowledge that is guaranteed to be successful, there is no undistorted perception of the truth, there is no identification, as Hegel would have put it, between subject and object. Truth is not prior to error, capable of being grasped by itself; the two go hand in hand."

None of this, of course, discourages Professor Derrida from writing books, articles, or papers, and it certainly has not dampened the fervor of his followers in their pursuit of academic advancement. The realization that "error and nonsense, the impossibility of determinate meaning, are built into the very essence of every code of communication," as one formulation of the new creed puts it, opens infinite new vistas for the academic literatarios, especially those devoted to eras or authors that have been scratched and pawed over for centuries by determined critics who have left only scraps for the newly minted tenure-striving young junior prof to gnaw on. Theoretician Roland Barthes declares that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." Well, then, off with their heads, especially if that translates into full employment for literature professors, world without end.

The problem with Professor Derrida is that he is both an inspiration and a mystery to his followers. Many people, in fact, are never quite certain whether Derrida is serious in some of the things he says, or whether he is putting everyone on. In either case, he has been remarkably successful. His magnum opus, Glas, for example has been called an anti-book, because it bears little resemblance to anything traditionally associated with books. Glas is merely two columns of type; a column of quotations from Hegel's Philosophy of the Right juxtaposed with Genet's Journal of a Thief. A defender calls it "a purely speculative chain of words and associations," but critic Rene Wellek is more direct when he says of Glas that it is really "a series of puns."

But Derrida's followers do not emulate his own odd sense of humor and apparent sense of irony. Instead, they have overlaid Derrida's "insights" with the ponderous, elephantine gracelessness that has for generations characterized the literary scholar. In College English, for example, the publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., a visiting assistant professor at Tulane, penned an opus titled "Rhetoric, Projection, and the Authority of the Signifier." Alcorn's prose is typical of the breed: "If we dismiss the importance of the author and think of the text as an autonomous linguistic artifact, the text
with the alluring advertisement that "Feminist critical theory has recently introduced the concept of the reader as 'transvestite,' suggesting that the gendered subject is not fixed but produced in the process of reading." And academic researchers with all their newly minted theoretical apparatus can have their way with Emily Dickinson, pulling apart the Dickinsonian texts to discover that Emily was variously a "modernist, feminist, symbolist, linguist, philosopher, crypto-politico, cultural inebriate, unrequited lover, aging adolescent, inverted astronaut, and ravished romantic. The consequence of all this truly remarkable attention is a thoroughly deconstructed Dickinson . . . ."21

In an age in which theory is all, not even "Beowulf" is safe. One scholar recently complained that hitherto Old English Literature "appears remarkably resistant to the influence of contemporary theory. With few exceptions, structuralism, post-structuralism . . . and deconstruction have barely grazed Anglo-Saxon studies."22 But this oversight is already being corrected.

On campus, the Age of Theory has taken many shapes, but none quite so distinctive as at Brown University, where semiotics became the trendiest new field at the nation’s trendiest school, its classes filled with students wearing black and smoking clove cigarettes and brandishing terms like post-Marxist, poststructuralist, the absent other, and the imaginary signifier.23 Technically, of course, semiotics is the study of signs, but under the inspired guidance of guru Robert Scholes, it is a convenient catch-all for all sorts of critical arabesques. At Brown, semiotics broke off from the English Department in 1978 to form a department of its own. By then the old English Department had become remarkably crowded, teaching all manner of self-expression, including dance and theater as well as such archaisms as Milton and Donne.24 Freed from such baggage, semiotics is the ultimate in "emancipated subjectivity."

At Brown, subjectivity is most often emancipated on film. As Brown’s course brochure says, “Film has been a particularly productive site for semiotic analysis both because it activates different types of signs (image, voice, music, text, etc.) and because the cinema is a social institution with significant ideological effects."25
There is a course in "Introduction to Cinematic Coding and Narrativity," which not only lets students watch movies but also exposes them to a vast area of contemporary theories, including psychoanalysis, linguistics, feminist theory, and ideological analysis. And "Film Noir," in which the class grapples with "the inscription of subjectivity," and "Film and the Monstrous," which promises to relate German expressionism to modern slasher flicks.

True to the inspiration of Professor Scholes, young Brown semioticians do not merely languish decoding inscriptions of subjectivity or linguistic ideological subtexts. They make their own "texts." One such was the 1987 production by one senior titled, "Mommy, Mommy, Who’s My Brain?" The semiotic told the Brown Daily Herald that "he stole to finance the film and, at one point, stayed up for five days straight editing." He described it to the paper as "rocking, dated, post-modern trash." Another product of the program was the film "Jupiter Shoes," described glowingly by semiotics Professor Leslie Thornton as a "60s art happening." The movie is described as a short subject about a man whose feet are immobilized in cement. The emphasis on film reflects the breadth of Scholes’ vision. In fact, Scholes defines deconstruction as a latent desire to turn the whole world into a "text." At Brown, they take that very seriously.

Several times every week, students have been climbing aboard buses for a ride into the heart of Providence, Rhode Island, to spend the day shuffling about dry cleaning shops, wig stores, and City Hall. Under the tutelage of their professor, they’ve been looking for "signs which apparently mean Providence," architecture, urban design, things like that) which they can then proceed to organize "into a system which can be shared and hence discussed among ourselves." The professor explains the semiotic insight into the otherness of Providence this way: "This city, like all cities, is a compaction of ideological signs, ordinarily naturalized and made familiar as part of our natural environment. We will want to make this compaction strange, to realize that Providence is a foreign place and we are strangers in it...."

The Abolition of Man: The Humanities

In 1987, Brown’s semioticians in effect formalized the dissolution of their lingering ties with the world of mere literature when they created a new concentration to be called "Media and Culture." When challenged to describe just what the new melange might be about, one of the semioticians allowed as how the meaning of the major "was beyond language." For anyone familiar with the program, this did not come as a surprise. But its influence was already national in scope.

One scholar wrote a doctoral dissertation at the University of California at Irvine in 1985 on "Ideological Productions in the Food Service Industry." In it, he strikes every conceivable semiotic note. This cutting edge study involved four types of chain restaurants, including Denny’s, Winchell’s Donut Houses, the 94th Aerob Squadron, and Carl’s Jr. Where others might see a place to get a quick, cheap bite, the young semiotician discovered in them "a cultural artifact, a text, which can be decoded." As the author explained it: "A semiotic method is used to examine the juxtapositions, dissociations, emptyings and condensations of sign relations within the restaurant text. This is preceded by a separation of the text into components of front and back regions, entrances, doors, windows, lighting, landscaping, menus, photographic technique and other elements." Once this "text" was thoroughly pulled apart, the scholar then demonstrated how this "commercial ideology of systemization fits into a developing postmodern culture."

The Cults of Illiteracy

None of this gibberish and critical doublespeak would really do much damage, of course, as long as students still had a chance to be exposed to authors like Shakespeare or Austen. Given a fair shot, the classics would more than hold their own against the new barbarians. But a central aim of the new movement in literature is the abolition of the traditional canon of literary study and, to date, its adherents have been remarkably successful.
Much of the push for dismantling the foundations of liberal education is based on political arguments: The traditional authors are too white, too male, too old, and too hard.

But the attack on the canon is also, inevitably, an attack on traditional standards of excellence and taste, even on the very idea of taste. Houston Baker, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that choosing between authors like Virginia Woolf and Pearl Buck is “no different from choosing between a hoagy and a pizza.”

“I am one,” Baker declared to a reporter for The New York Times, “whose career is dedicated to the day when we have a disappearance of those standards.” Baker has plenty of allies.

Robert Scholes, for example, has rejected the notion that students need exposure to masters like Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, or Shakespeare, because he has rejected the idea that there are any “sacred texts” and has even gone so far as to suggest that the abandoned cathedrals of Western tradition could be replaced by the subway as a temple of learning.

“No text is so trivial as to be outside the bounds of humanistic study,” Scholes declared. “The meanest graffito, if fully understood in its context, can be a treasure of human expressiveness.”

Scholes gets some unexpected support from E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who is popularly viewed as among the champions of a return to a more traditional understanding of cultural literacy. Hirsch’s Cultural Literacy, which includes a lengthy listing of facts that an educated person should know, enjoyed a brief vogue and even made the best seller lists. His emphasis on knowing “things” was greeted with suspicion and even outrage by his colleagues. But almost from the moment the book came out, Hirsch has been pleading that all is not as it seems. Not only did Cultural Literacy not mean anything as reactionary as a core curriculum, Hirsch hastened to assure the ruffled scholastics, but it didn’t even mean reading much of anything besides his own work.

To be culturally literate, Hirsch insisted, “one does not need to know any specific literary texts,” (Hirsch’s italics). Hirsch declared that while it was perhaps desirable that someone know who Romeo and Juliet were, they certainly didn’t have to go to all the bother of actually reading the play. Lest there be any misunderstanding, Hirsch insisted that “it’s acceptable to take one’s entire knowledge of Romeo and Juliet from Cliff Notes,” not to mention television, comic books, or even graffiti.

The agents of the illiteracy lobby within the academy, have thoroughly and systematically infiltrated the study of reading and writing in the modern university.

In the late 1970s, the Committee on the Undergraduate Curriculum of the College English Association handed down the sacred tablets of curricular reform, proving again that whenever literature professors get together, the resulting befuddlement and confusion of language can be immense. The committee began by rejecting the idea that English literature was about any particular English literature, certainly not any specific authors, like Shakespeare, Donne, or Milton. “The undergraduate curriculum should not be defined as mastery of a body of knowledge about literature,” it recommended. It elucidated that remarkable proposition with its second recommendation, which declared that “the nature of literary experience and interpretation is falsified if the work is conceived as an object.” Which (apparently) is to say books are not to be regarded as having any set or objective meaning that can be taught or learned.

In its third recommendation, the committee sought to strike a note of up-to-date egalitarianism, pointing out that one of the benefits of not treating literature as an “object” was that teachers could be freed to recognize “the multiple contexts which our students actually use in their experience of reading,” a phrase effulgent with fashionable and ideologically correct buzzwords.

Note, for example, that the committee does not talk about students reading but about students engaged in the “experience of reading,” a Deweyesque touch that has a special meaning all its own to the literary hierarchies. Substituting “experience” for mere “learning” and “knowledge” in elementary and secondary education some decades ago marked the first great triumph of the professional educationists over the public schools. The ardor of the true believers for the transcendent value of “experience” has not been quenched by the intellectual junkyard such curricular fads
have left in their wake. The committee also hit an appropriate up-to-date note with its reference to "multiple-contexts," which is a nice tip of the hat to the ideal of pluralism and diversity with which educationists have dismantled the notion of a shared body of knowledge or common tradition that should shape the educational curriculum. Its very vagueness is its strength. "Multiple contexts" can mean everything from the need to recognize ethnic diversity to a caution not to unduly burden semiliterate students with something as thorny as Melville when comic books would do the job just as well, and without the danger of wounding poor Johnny's delicate self-image. But by the time the Committee of the College English Association reached its fourth recommendation, it had abandoned all pretense that it was doing anything more than enshrining the latest trendy theories in the curriculum.

"It may be possible," the learned professorial congregation declared, "to see 'resymbolization' or 're-enactment' in the readers as the basis of the intellectual and affective experience of reading and teaching." All of which is to say that it was less important to teach Hamlet or to regard reading as trying to learn from the authors than to evoke the right kind of emotive "responses" and even "re-enactment," whatever that should mean.

"To a large extent," crowed Professor Christopher Gould of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in one of the academy's few genuine understatements, "the promise of this ambitious agenda has been fulfilled..." especially among the departments of literature that have "come gradually to view literature as a manner of response rather than a body of privileged texts..." The use of the word "privileged" is yet another crucial addition to the lexicon of the academic newspeak: the genius of the use of the term is the economy with which it insinuates the idea that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare have been read over the centuries not because of any inherent merit or value, but merely as part of an elitist and therefore arbitrary imposition on unsuspecting readers—the proletariat of literature. Breaking down the barriers of literary privilege is thus placed on the same

level as breaking down barriers of political, social, or economic "privilege."

Glory and Riches in the Academic Villages

But the real triumph of theory, mediocrity, and insanity cannot be measured by official statements or articles in the learned journals alone. The real battlefield is the academic marketplace, and there the struggle has long since been decided. If there was any doubt that Theory is not only hot, but verily The Thing To Do in English today, it was dissolved by the goings-on at Duke, which rushed headlong into the stratosphere of the literary establishment by hiring some of the trendiest theoreticians money could buy—in the process paying out salaries of $100,000 or so for the honor of rubbing shoulders with theoretical hotshots. Using money from a $200 million endowment campaign, Duke's English Department decided to take respectability by storm. The school first picked up Professor Stanley Fish from Johns Hopkins in 1985, installing him as the chair and the center around which the constellation of luminaries would be formed. Fish's credentials for the job were impeccable: His best known criticism roundly denies any notion of what he calls "textual objectivity." Fish made himself into a giant in his field by conceding that, yes, words do exist—"Fish grants that signifiers are material objects, 'marks on the page,' and that they are materially present, thus objectively present for reading," one colleague writes. But, he notes approvingly, Fish also insists that "there isn't a text that remains the same from one moment to the next." The what did remain the same was Fish's determination to surround himself with like-minded theorists and to remake Duke's once proud program into the image of this Brave New World of Theory. Nor did he have any apparent doubts about the objective reality of money and the need to pay it out to attract stars like himself. He snagged Barbara Herrnstein Smith, the incoming president of the Modern Language Association, and Frank Lentricchia, the author
of After the New Criticism, one of the seminal texts of the Faith. Perhaps his biggest steal of all was Frederic Jameson, who is certainly the best known Marxist literary scholar in the nation. Before he was hired by Duke, Jameson wrote:

"To create a Marxist culture in this country, to make Marxism an unavoidable presence in American social, cultural, and intellectual life, in short to form a Marxist intelligentsia for the struggles of the future—this seems to me the supreme mission of a Marxist pedagogy and a radical intellectual life today." 40

Where does literary criticism fit into this? Says Jameson:

"American Marxists have clearly recognized that the production and consumption of pleasing, exciting and 'beautiful' stories and images has a specific and very effective role in promoting acquiescence to, and even identification with, the relations of domination and subordination peculiar to the late-capitalist social order... Nothing can be more satisfying for a Marxist teacher than to 'break' this fascination for students..." 41

Discussing the new face of the Duke English Department, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported: "Several new professors are paid in six figures, although part of that is in the form of benefits and personal research budgets for travel and supplies. "They are the richest Marxists in the country," said one of the colleagues of Duke's new stars. 42

Fish explained his success in the new free-agent market of literary stars thusly: "It's analogous to what's happening in the NBA. You no longer have the firm assumption that a star will play his whole career with one team." Professor Fish hired his own wife, Jane Tompkins, for the department. 43 Together they are very much the New Couple of literary criticism.

Under Fish, Duke has abolished many of its longstanding requirements for English majors. No Duke graduate need ever touch Shakespeare, or Donne, or Marvell, to say nothing of T. S. Eliot. Even graduate students will no longer be required to familiarize themselves with the traditional works of English and American literature. Ms. Tompkins reflects the new shift from the old ways most flamboyantly. She wrote her dissertation on Melville but, according to the Chronicle, began concentrating on the pulp fiction of Louis L'Amour, the king of the cowboy novel. 44

The husband-wife combos are actually the rage at Duke. Both Lentricchia's and Jameson's wives were hired to work in the department, and in 1986 the department hired Annabel Patterson from the University of Maryland along with husband Lee Patterson of Johns Hopkins. Like most of the other literary supernovas, Ms. Patterson is associated with what is euphemistically called "materialist criticism." Ms. Patterson, for example, teaches a course called "Shakespeare in His Own Time," a course in which she shares her insight that King Lear is really an economic critique of 17th-century England. 45

The transformation of Duke did not pass unnoticed or unchallenged. Phillip Anderson had entered Duke as a graduate student in 1971 and received his Ph.D. from its English Department in 1975, "back in the days before it went insane," he says. 46 Anderson's frustration with the new trends in the humanities had been building for years. He found some of the new theory interesting, "rather less of it useful and, I'm afraid, very little of it finally convincing."

"If you feed King Lear into the meat grinder and it comes out looking like baloney and if you feed McDonald's into the meat grinder and it comes out looking like baloney, that should say something about the critical methods, that they are inflexible, insensible, and unhelpful." 47

His contacts with the giants of the field did not reassure him. "I was in a seminar once with a distinguished deconstructionist," he recalls.  "I listened for several weeks, then asked him to actually analyze a poem by Baudelaire. You've never seen a more uncomfortable man. He said he hadn't read it in many years, but it was only 36 lines long. After that the seminar more or less broke up." 48

"It's unfortunate that professors of English should have come to this pass," Anderson says. "For years we have been the Peck's Bad Boy of academia because we believed that experiences not reducible to scientific or pseudoscientific analysis were still valuable and meaningful. As a result, most of the other fields didn't know what to make of us. In a lot of ways, we have gone from a period in
which English professors were at least minor men of letters who had a sense of the literary experience as irreducible and that has intrinsic value, to people who feel desperately anxious about their status as professionals. They are concerned that unless they change their approach to literature—through theory—they will not be taken seriously by colleagues or administrators.”

He had followed the progress of Duke’s department through its newsletters, noting the slickness and tone of cocky complacency, superficiality, and self-congratulation that increasingly dominated the communications from his alma mater. The Chronicle of Higher Education’s story about Fish’s new team at Duke and the completeness of his transformation of the department inspired Anderson to write an 11-page open letter to his old department, in which he remarked that “it is quite clear that we are dealing with an entire department that cannot distinguish between the trivial and the important.”

“I am, I suppose, intellectually conservative,” Anderson said. “I do most certainly believe that the great tradition of English and American literature, and of Western literature in general, is of immense value... these views form the vital and dynamic principle of every class I teach, even every administrative decision I make. I know that the reading of Homer, Dante, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, or Yeats is of great and unique value not because of any argument, nor from any theory, nor from training, but rather from deeply felt experience.”

In contrast, he said, the Duke English Department was part of a trend that was turning departments once devoted to the study of literature into departments of “our personal interests at the moment.” Courses that were “trivial, pretentious, vague in conception, lacking in serious intellectual stimulus, and inappropriate for an English Department,” were being added, Anderson noted, even though, “given the realities of modern academic life, they have to take the place of a Shakespeare course, or a Milton course, or a course in Romantic poetry.”

But the heart of Anderson’s critique was his analysis of the mechanisms of the academic marketplace at work in the rarefied halls of Duke. “Where I might see merely intellectual confu-
formulation, which looks for the abolition of man, denies the self, and sees language as a free-floating system of signs, the theory leads to total skepticism and ultimately to nihilism.”

Even a few stray university presidents have entered the fray. Frank Rhodes, the president of Cornell, threw down a gauntlet of sorts at Harvard’s 350th birthday party when he declared that “Traditional liberal arts courses have lost much of their ability to exert a transforming and enriching influence on students... Many of those who profess to be humanists devote their lives to areas of high abstraction, decoding texts and deconstructing poems while the larger issues of the world and humankind’s place in it elude them. With notable and commendable exceptions, humanists are not demonstrably more wise, more committed, more humane than their neighbors.”

But neither a critic of Wellek’s standing nor a university president can stand against a theoretical tide at full flood. Despite Wellek’s stature, the reaction to his dissent has scarcely even been civil. At the Modern Language Association’s 1983 meeting, Wellek was summarily dismissed as an “old fogey,” by the keynote speaker, Professor Helen Vendler of Boston University, herself a former MLA president.

And despite Rhodes’ lofty perch at Cornell, he carries little weight in the groups that set the tone for literary fashions, such as the MLA or its flagship publication, the Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA), which bristles with examples of the New Age, from “Hermeneutics versus Erotics: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Interpretive History,” (“This conspicuous ambidexterity, compounded by our declining tolerance for such deftness, has made them famously problematic.”) Or “Dialogic Midwifery in Kleits’ Marquise von O and the Hermeneutics of Telling the Untold in Kant and Plato” (“We often speak of a text ‘pregnant with meaning.’ But how does it give birth?”) Or “Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self: A New Direction for Reader-response Theory” (“An examination of the similarities between the experience of reading and the transference process of psychoanalysis demonstrated that, by activating the mechanisms of projection and identification, reading litera-

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ture can function to re-form the self.”) And when the scattered tribes of English professors gather in December for their annual meeting of the MLA, the topics of the papers invariably reflect the dominance of the new sort of scholarship. Harvard professor Susan Suleiman delivered a paper titled “Metatextual Labels and Textual Properties,” indicating that even Harvard, that one-time bulwark against Theory, has succumbed to the new fashions.

Perhaps the most poignant account of the intersection of professional ambition and the befogging clamminess of the new theory is told by Professor Robert Greer Cohn. He encountered one of his former students at a conference where she was presenting a paper on the French poet Mallarme. She projected a passage on an overhead projector and pronounced the meaning of the “text” to be “irrecoverable.” Cohn was stunned because he had taught this very poem for years and, indeed, had written extensively on its meaning.

“I began, in the question period, to point out the perfectly obvious (even to the uninitiated) meaning in the beautiful text up there... Taken aback by the audience’s clear sympathy for making some sort of sense in Mallarme’s work, my former student limply admitted that she had gone that route because it was the ‘in’ thing to do and she needed to swim with the tide in order to get a better post.”

“Today, ‘doing’ a Lacanian reading of Ulysses wins the young scholar many more brownie points than the ability to compare it to the Odyssey,” Professor Marjorie Perloff says. “Joyce himself felt he had to learn Norwegian in order to read Ibsen in the original; Joyce scholars today don’t read Ibsen at all, much less Thomas Aquinas or the Church fathers.”

There is some evidence that extended exposure to this sort of thing is more than the nerves of even a confirmed theoretician can take. Yale’s Harold Bloom is himself a fairly advanced critic, but years of breathing in the rarefied air of the hothouse theoretical atmosphere of his fellow Yale critics has been a bit much even for Bloom. In an interview with a reporter for The New York Times in 1986, Bloom burst forth: “You cannot go anywhere without running into various covens and sects and various new orthodoxies of
a self-righteous kind." There are the purple-haired semioticians, the deconstructionists, the fierce neo-Marxists, the Lacanians, the vicious feminists, and what Bloom bluntly labels the "new Stalinisms" of the modern literature department.60

In the Wilderness

So what is to become of reading? of literature? of the legacy of more than 20 centuries of Western civilization? In the end, the best hope may lie with the remnant huddled in their obscure schools, far enough into the wilderness to escape the notice of marauding bands of theorists who have already laid siege to or sacked all the major centers of learning.

For Phillip Anderson, Central Arkansas is as good a place as any to begin the long process of rebuilding. After leaving Duke, Anderson taught at the University of Rochester and Lafayette College before going to Central Arkansas' department, where he is now chair. There are disadvantages in working in the barrens, of course. Administrators tend to have terrible inferiority complexes and are particularly reluctant to buck the dominant trends, especially if they come with the glittering endorsement of institutions like Yale, Brown, or Harvard. Nor is even Central Arkansas far enough from the mainstream to be safe from occasional sorties of the cognoscenti. A few years ago a committee assigned to evaluate his department included a professor who had once criticized English departments for being "unashamedly departments of literature."61

Anderson recently presented a paper at the South Central MLA convention on the Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov's contribution to Romantic mythology. He did a quick analysis of the other papers presented at the conference and found that fully one-third of the 300 papers "were devoted to pedagogy, or composition, or critical theory—none of which, it seemed, had anything to do with literature." Of the remaining 200, no fewer than 80 were products of specifically feminist criticism. Notable by their absence were any papers about such figures as Pope, Swift, John-


But Anderson is committed to his rebuilding project in the wilderness. "There are some advantages to being in a backwater," he says. "I have found that a backwater can be, not immune, but at least buffered from the nonsense afflicting academia right now."63

Most of the teachers in his department are refugees from major universities, who were "disaffected with reigning orthodoxies." And his curriculum requires a heavy dosage of readings from the discarded canon. In the last 10 years, the number of majors in his department nearly tripled from 70 to more than 200, Anderson says, "oddly enough, by teaching Shakespeare, Milton, Homer, Dante, and Virgil."

But he has no illusions about the professional odds against him. Says Anderson: "It is very much easier to destroy a civilization than to create one."64
The Pseudo-Scientists: The Social Sciences

"There are four chief obstacles to grasping truth, which hinder every man, however learned, and scarcely allow anyone to win a clear title to knowledge; namely submission to faulty and unworthy authority, influence of custom, popular prejudice, and concealment of our own ignorance accompanied by the ostentatious display of our knowledge." — Roger Bacon

BY the mid-1980s, it would have been hard to name a social scientist with higher standing and more illustrious credits than Harvard's Samuel P. Huntington.

The author of a dozen books and 70 scholarly articles, Huntington had been one of the founders of the quarterly Foreign Policy. In 1986 he was the director of Harvard's Center for International Affairs and the newly elected president of the American Political Science Association. Twice he had been judged by his peers to be among the top 10 political scientists in the country. He had previously served as chair of Harvard's highly regarded Government Department, and he was the most cited political scientist in the country in the field of international relations.

Huntington's influence was not merely academic. He had advised the State Department, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council, where he had served a stint during the Carter administration. In the late 1960s, he had chaired a committee advising the State Department on its Vietnam policy. He was one of the three authors of a report for the Trilateral Commission.

He also published a widely discussed article on Third World dictators—bristling with charts and formulas—that said, among other things, that Ferdinand Marcos was likely to die in office—only a few months before Marcos was forced to leave the country. Huntington's eminence was such that when he was nominated for membership in the National Academy of Sciences, his election was considered a foregone conclusion.

The section of the academy that nominated Huntington for membership in the National Academy of Sciences made specific reference to his book, Political Order in Changing Societies, noting that it was "now widely regarded as a classic."

"Huntington sets forth a highly innovative theory explaining instability in modernizing countries in terms of the imbalance between political participation and political institutionalization," his nomination explained. "He supports this theory with comparative quantitative analyses and longitudinal case studies."

For a social scientist, there were few more coveted honors. Founded in 1863 to provide learned advice to the federal government, the National Academy of Sciences ranks second only to the Nobel Prize in prestige. Election to the academy would represent not only a personal triumph for Huntington, but also the apotheosis of the social sciences as a whole.

But it was not to be. Instead, the battle over the nomination would engage many of the brightest luminaries in academia and the national media, and would reopen the chasm between the hard and soft sciences that had been papered over for years.

The Rise of the Social Sciences

The social sciences' rise to respectability had not been without setbacks. The story of the relations between the soft and the hard sciences is a history of slights deeply felt and long remembered. In 1969, for example, the most notorious aspect of Harvard University's collapse in the face of the student demonstrations was the faculty's capitulation to demands to create a new Afro-American Studies program that would largely be run by students. There were many explanations for the cave-in—with fear being among
the most prominent; the Harvard professoriate was no more richly endowed with backbone than their colleagues elsewhere. But another dynamic was also at work in the vote—one that left deep scars in the faculty.

Many of the votes to approve the militant-dictated Black Studies program came not from left-leaning social scientists but from the so-called "hard" scientists, who were more than happy to express their contempt for the intellectual integrity of the social sciences by sticking them with the new program.

Wrote one observer: "Natural scientists, always suspicious of social scientists, were prepared to endorse such academic experimentation precisely because they considered Black Studies to be less than a legitimate field of intellectual endeavor." Their vote was an expression of profound disdain, and it was felt throughout the social sciences.

The decision in 1971 to admit social scientists to the National Academy of Sciences was a watershed for the so-called "soft sciences." After years of struggle, cajoling, and lobbying, they had finally been invited into the sanctum sanctorum of real science. The move seemed to be a vindication for years of effort: The social sciences had labored long under the yoke of their traditional ties to the humanities with their softer, literary traditions that often made for Great Thoughts but lacked the precision, the accuracy, the certitude of real science. Over the preceding decades, the social scientists had worked furiously to adopt not only the methodologies of real science but also the language, the academic structures, and even the mannerisms of their white-coated brethren.

Traditionally, the study of political science had been based on a foundation of the great thinkers on Man and Society: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Burke, Marx, and John Stuart Mill.

But the sneer by Robert A. Dahl, one of political science's new breed, that political theorizing "in the grand manner" can rarely meet the rigorous, demanding criteria for truth set out in the real sciences stung deeply. He argued that unless political science research could achieve the standard of "testability," found in such sciences as biology and physics and biochemistry, politi-

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... would be doomed to remain on par with "literary criticism." This was a cruel jibe, all the more cutting for being aimed at the weak spot in the psyche of every practitioner of the social sciences.

Richard Mitchell, the author of *The Underground Grammarian*, quips that in the company of a genuine scientist, "the psychologists and sociologists and the professors of English feel like touch-football enthusiasts who have wandered by mistake into the locker room of the Pittsburgh Steeler[s]."

Like their counterparts in sociology and economics, political scientists responded eagerly to the call to scientific respectability. Specialization was virulent as scholars looked for their own niche, creating new sub-specialties with dazzling speed. In 1973, the *Biographical Dictionary of the American Political Science Association* listed more than 60.

The fragmentation of the field was matched by the proliferation of new methodologies. Every field felt the need to develop its own argot to distinguish itself, however narrowly, from its neighbors.

By the early 1970s, not even political scientists could feel confident reading the work of political scientists outside their specialties, and sociologists and economists had drifted into linguistically sealed worlds of their own. Where the social sciences had once shared with the humanities an emphasis, if not on elegance, at least on clarity of thought, they now became fields closed off from all but specialists by the sheer numbing opacity of the terminology that increasingly hedged them around.

But not even the most blinding jargon would dazzle the groundlings as effectively as the well-placed mathematical formula. This was not a recent discovery.

The court of Catherine the Great of Russia once held a debate on theology, in which the great Swiss mathematician Euler took the part of the deity against skeptical followers of Voltaire. At a crucial point, Euler leapt toward a blackboard on which he scribbled:

\[(x + y)^2 = x^2 + 2xy + y^2 \ldots \text{therefore God exists.}\]
His listeners were, of course, unable to refute this bold statement, so Euler was left as master of the field. The lesson of the intimidating power of pseudomath was not lost on posterity.

"Hardly a year passes that fails to find a new, oft-times exotic, research method or technique added to the armarium of political inquiry," noted A. James Gregor. "Anyone who cannot negotiate Chi squares, assess randomization, statistical significance, and standard deviations is less than illiterate; he is preconscious."

The average work of the new social science was crisscrossed with graphs, charts, equations, and a language as obscure as it was dense and tangled. A page of a political science essay often was indistinguishable from a study of econometrics, which tended to look like something from a physics text. The political scientists were, of course, eager to take advantage of their new status. At the University of Michigan, for example, professors in the Political Science Department have been holding joint appointments as both professors and "research scientists."

But there were problems with the new science. Much of the new so-called rigor of the social sciences rested on the fundamental assumption that human beings could, in fact, be measured and studied in the same way as inert phenomena.

One critic, sociologist Stanislav Andreski, attacked what he called the "wide acceptance of the dogma that nothing is worth knowing that cannot be counted, and that any information which is tabulated becomes thereby scientific—surely one of the grossest superstitions of our time, whose vogue can only stem from the fact that it enables a large number of people to make a living by indulging in easy pseudo-science." Still, the advantages were considerable. "The more mathematics has been invoked in a particular problem," wrote author Ida Hoos, "the greater the emphasis on technical aspects and the less accessible to scrutiny and understanding by persons outside the fraternal order."

In practice, the new scientism of political science translated into a boom in surveys, despite the basic unreliability of such instruments and the constant temptations of lowly graduate students to generate results in the warm glow of the neighborhood tavern, rather than by ringing hundreds of doorbells in lousy weather.

The new mandarins of the social sciences tended to gloss over this fundamental (and often embarrassing) weakness of the Hart of their enterprise by aggressively marrying the raw data with a new and ever more impressive nomenclature. Political scientist David Ricci discerned a troubling undertow to the changes sweeping his discipline:

"Notwithstanding formal justifications, the primary reason why political science spawns more and more new terms for describing public life has little to do with a calculated desire to transform political studies into an analogue of, say, physics. It is not at all clear, after all, that the accomplishments of the physical sciences can be duplicated in the study of society, because we cannot be sure that social phenomena are unambiguous enough to be labeled briefly and accurately, thenceforth to be studied effectively... Thus the major impetus for ceaselessly creating new terminology in political science has less to do with the substance of science than with the form of organized enterprise."

The summit of that organized enterprise was Harvard. Not only did its professors comprise one of the most influential departments in the nation, but they had cashed in on the new prestige in spades, shuttling between powerful jobs in Washington and jockeying for positions in the administration in between occasional stops on campus. The Harvard Government Department also reflected the "new" political science in its purest form.

The student course guide, The Confidential Guide, described one of the department’s mainstays, its Comparative Government course, as "the epitome of the Ivory Tower in the worst sense of the term. It is frequently a fantasy-land of contrived hypotheses wandering far afield of fact..." Some political scientists, the guide noted, devote themselves to studying government as a quest for better lives, the clash of ideologies, the search for peace and prosperity, or the struggle to transform man’s hopes and dreams into policies. "But not at Harvard. Here, Government means something entirely different. Models, towering structures
of paper and ink... There are abstractions of every human problem—hunger, war, poverty... Nothing is messy, very little is unpleasant, and only occasionally is anything interesting or relevant at Harvard..."\textsuperscript{15}

Anatomy of an Academic Bloodbath

Even so, Samuel Huntington’s election to the National Academy of Sciences would probably have been little more than a formality if it had not been for a graduate student named Ann Koblitz. The dispute that would shake the social sciences to their quantitative foundations, that was featured on the front page of The New York Times, in articles in The New Republic, Science, and Discover, and that would convulse the normally insouciant National Academy of Sciences, can be traced back to a single assignment in a graduate seminar on historical methodology at Boston University in 1977.

The class was assigned an article titled "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development and Politics,\textsuperscript{16}" a paper by Huntington that summarized the major points from his Political Order in Changing Societies (the book later cited in his nomination to the National Academy of Sciences). One of the graduate students, 25-year-old Ann Koblitz, however, was puzzled by the article. It sought to summarize the main points of Huntington’s thesis in a series of three equations relating several sociological and political concepts. Huntington’s formula read:

\[
\frac{\text{social mobilization}}{\text{economic development}} = \text{social frustration} \\
\frac{\text{social frustration}}{\text{mobility opportunities}} = \text{political participation} \\
\frac{\text{political participation}}{\text{political institutionalization}} = \text{political instability}
\]

The presence of equations in an article about political science was not unusual. Actually, Huntington relied on relatively few, but the series of three equations obviously was central to his point.

But applying even elementary rules of algebra to the equations, Ann Koblitz found them absurd. If he was serious in his equations \((A/B = C, C/D = E, E/F = G)\), then they imply:

"Social mobilization is equal to economic development times mobility opportunities times political institutionalization times political stability.\textsuperscript{17}"

When Ann Koblitz pointed out the weakness in the so-called equations, however, neither her professor nor the other graduate students were receptive: They were impressed with both the equations and the eminence of Huntington, and they were unwilling to cut themselves adrift from such anchors of their discipline by agreeing with the recalcitrant Koblitz.

"I was first amused and then indignant at this use of mathematical pseudo-methodology..." she recalls. "But when I brought it up, other people didn’t see what I was trying to say."

"I showed my professor the algebra and he was so blocked out, he just couldn’t deal with math, he couldn’t deal with it. Even my advisor thought what I was saying was interesting, but he couldn’t relate to it. I was a little surprised. But that’s what Huntington was doing... If he hadn’t used equations and terms like 'correlations' and 'coefficient', and he had just made his point clearly, people might have been willing to question it. Because it was presented in that way it was a stopper."

The matter might well have been dropped there, had not Ann Koblitz brought the equation to the attention of her husband. Neal Koblitz was less willing to be impressed than his wife’s classmates and professors had been. In 1977, he was a Benjamin Peirce Instructor in Mathematics at Harvard, where he had received his bachelor’s degree eight years earlier. He had gone on to study algebraic geometry and number theory at Princeton where he received his doctorate in 1974. The next year he spent studying mathematics at Moscow University. Like his wife, Koblitz thought Huntington’s “equations” were nonsensical, and he decided to say so publicly.

In 1981 Neal Koblitz, who was by then an associate professor at the University of Washington, published his analysis in the book Mathematics Tomorrow, under the title “Mathematics as Propa-
of the academy. The academy’s officials ignored Lang’s request for the mailing and informed him that if he wanted to oppose Huntington he would have to follow a carefully spelled-out legal procedure for mounting a formal challenge. 22

That seemed, for the moment, to bring the matter to an end. Lang’s time was occupied with his own research and graduate teaching. He wrote back to the officials that he had “essentially zero time or energy left for still another fight,” and informed them he would not mount the challenge. 23

Unbeknownst to Lang, however, a copy of Koblitz’s article had been sent to one of Huntington’s most avid boosters, Professor Julian Wolpert at Princeton. Wolpert was chairman of the section that had nominated Huntington, and he was outraged when he read Koblitz’s analysis. He dashed off an angry letter to Lang with copies distributed to several people in the social science establishment in which he vociferously attacked Koblitz, who he said “merits censure for this irresponsible piece of scurrilous [sic] ‘journalism’ which somehow got past a peer review process of scientists.” Koblitz, Wolpert charged, “has distorted severely the arguments made by Huntington and himself created a phony semblance of spurious algebra to provide a better ‘strawman’ to support his preconceived bias.” 24

Wolpert’s letter, however, had the opposite effect he might have wished. It incensed Lang, and on April 10, 1986, Lang informed the National Academy of Sciences, simply, “I have changed my mind.” 25

A Charge of Pseudo-Science

The contrast between Lang and Huntington could not have been more sharply drawn. While Huntington was at the very apex of academic prestige, Lang was, for all his credentials in mathematics, something of an outsider, often more tolerated than accepted. His public crusades were regarded by some as intemperate and unseemly and had won him as many enemies as friends.

In the 1970s, he had waged an unrelenting and often acerbic
attack against another social scientist, Seymour Martin Lipset, who was using surveys to measure attitudes among the professoriate. Lang had excoriated Lipset’s surveys as biased and poorly conceived; the fight dragged on for three years, and the correspondence that made up the artillery of the struggle was later issued by Lang in a book, called simply *The File.*

In his critique of Huntington’s work, Lang focused not only on the three equations analyzed by Kobitz but also on Huntington’s related categorization of 26 “satisfied societies” and 36 “dissatisfied” societies and the claim in *Political Order in Changing Societies* that: “The overall correlation between frustration and instability was .50.”

“What is the meaning of the two significant figures [frustration and instability]?” Lang asked.

The issue was a fundamental one. Is it really possible, Lang asked, to measure things like “social frustration” or “political instability” on some sort of absolute scale? Can a single number stand for such a thing as “social frustration”? And would an “8” on the frustration scale mean the same for a Zulu tribesman as an “8” for a Belgian bourgeois? And if so, what are we to make of a measurement that claims—as Huntington did—that both Belgium and South Africa are “satisfied” societies with “high degrees of political instability”?

Behind the impressive-sounding formulas, Lang said, Huntington was really merely saying that “the more people are frustrated, the more they are likely to act up,” but had turned this truism into “a blown up, pompous, pretentious tissue of pseudoscience by dressing such a statement in equations, correlations, tables, decimals, ratios, which make it appear scientific or precise or profound to some people.”

Lang undertook his campaign with his typical zeal. He mailed copies of the relevant page in Kobitz’s article along with related correspondence and documentations to all members of the academy at his own expense. Some of the mailings cost Lang several thousand dollars out of pocket. But Lang kept up the drumbeat. “I object to the NAS certifying as ‘science’ what are merely political opinions and their implementations,” he declared.

At first Huntington seemed to strike a detached, bemused attitude, saying, “I find it difficult to take an attack by Serge Lang very seriously.”

He admitted that it is “perfectly accurate,” that his equations were not mathematically valid. “They were not designed to be. I don’t think anybody except him has taken them to be mathematical equations. They were simply a shorthand way of summing up a complicated argument in the text.”

But in 1986 and again in 1987 Huntington’s nomination failed to receive the required two-thirds vote of approval from the NAS membership. In 1987 he was the only one of the 62 nominees to be turned down.

His defeat only seemed to escalate the fight on all fronts. Huntington’s defeat was somewhat misleading, because the academy is heavily weighted to the hard sciences. Even though he failed to win the two-thirds vote, the social science establishment rallied to his cause along with a good deal of the academic establishment as a whole.

For Lang had violated some of the most sacred unwritten rules of the academic villages. Academic controversies are by no means rare. Nor was the intensity of the squabble out of line. Academic disputations often have their own special quality of brutality. But they are usually among specialists within the same field: The typical feud pits an expert in 15th-century Dutch exchange rates against a scholar specializing in 15th-century Dutch commercial routes.

Lang’s sin was threefold: He had strayed from his own academic ghetto into another; he had gone public through the news media with his allegations; and most important of all, his charges went to the very foundations of the social sciences. Lang recognized that such scholarship was not the result of personal quirks but was really a product of the academic culture. “It is not ‘dishonesty,’ ” he said. “It is a way of life.”

If Samuel Huntington was guilty of pseudoscience, the entire organized enterprise might be at risk.

Within months of his apparent defeat, Huntington’s supporters had brought to bear the full weight of the aroused academic village, with devastating impact. Before the academy’s second
vote on Huntington, eleven political scientists signed an open letter charging that opposition to Huntington was based "in part on political grounds." *36

Now Huntington's supporters wheeled out their biggest gun in the person of Herbert Simon, a Nobel laureate in economics, who offered his own justification of Huntington's use of math. Even so, Simon's defense is notably halfhearted. Even its title, "Some Trivial but Useful Mathematics," is hardly a ringing endorsement. *37

Simon's defense is itself an example of the use of impressive equations and portentous vocabulary, such as: "More precisely the ordering of a set of elements by a variable associated with the ordering is invariant under any positive strictly monotonic transformation of the variable." *38

But in the end, it threw little light on the controversy.

Says Lang: "The verbiage . . . obscures the simple statement in plain English that if one quantity increases, then so does the other . . . ." But this was hardly a major revelation. "It takes no special degree," Lang quipped, "no special certification, no Nobel prize, no special knowledge, no great learning, no great intelligence, to figure out that if people get more frustrated, then they are more likely to act up." *39

Koblitz made a similar point. "Why not use plain English which everyone can understand?" he asked. "In his entire article, Simon fails to give any evidence that the use of mathematical jargon, mathematical notation, theorems about 'sums modulo 2,' and so on, will ever lead to any insight which could not have been arrived at more quickly without all of that." *40

But the main thrust of the campaign on Huntington's behalf was to discredit Lang himself. Some leading academicians even began discussing the possibility of censuring Lang or even removing him from the NAS because of his campaign. One economist from Duke University sent Lang a letter accusing him of putting up a "smokescreen" to cover his true motives, which he said were political. "You are a bigot!" he charged. *41

Jeremy J. Stone, director of the Federation of American Scientists sent Huntington a "Dear Sam" letter in which he said that what he had read about Lang led him to conclude that "your main tormentor seems so ridiculous that the matter seemed minor."

"There is a very unusual, uncivilized, and paranoid quality to the campaign against you." Stone wrote. "There is a chilling effect of this campaign against you which reminds me of the political effects of the McCarthy campaigns." *42

But his main point was to restate the creed of the closed society of the academic village. "Judging scholarship," Stone wrote, "is a very divisive business. Only political scientists can, and should, stand in judgment on the 'scholarship,' of other political scientists." *43

Everyone else, presumably, should accept their conclusions on faith.

A pro-Huntington slant dominated most media coverage of the dispute, as well. An article in The New Republic titled "Bloodlust in Academia" struck a particularly derisive note. "Lang," the story said, "has a history of hounding people," and it accused him both of pursuing a political vendetta and of sloppiness in his research. Not even the crassest Washington politician has come in for the sort of abuse reserved for Lang: "Most of his references are irrelevant, some are nutty . . . ." The article included what purported to be a transcription of a telephone conversation between Lang and the story's author in which Lang acknowledged that he had not read all of Huntington's book.

The article noted with some triumph that the so-called "50 correlation" that Lang had criticized was originally not even Huntington's—he had taken it from a 1969 study. "Huntington didn't write the study—he only cited it," the author insisted. Moreover, The New Republic declared, the original article had won "an award from the American Association for the Advancement of Science." *44

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* Lang was not, however, without some supporters inside political science's academic village. Henry L. Breton, distinguished professor emeritus of the State University of New York, College at Brockport, endorsed Lang's critique of Huntington, saying that the Harvard professor "has, of late, following a crowd, affected jargon intended to convey a sense of scientific rigor regarding subject matter he must know does not lend itself to that treatment. . . . (Letter to Serge Lang, June 26, 1987)
The reader was left to conclude that with such an honor the original article must be beyond reproach. By association, then, Huntington was also absolved.

But that original study provided a startling look inside the world of pseudoscience.

The article in question bore the uninviting but typical title: "Aggressive Behaviors within Polities, 1948-1962: A Cross-National Study" and was published in the September 1966 edition of The Journal of Conflict Resolution by two researchers named Ivo and Rosalind Feierabend. They had gone far beyond anything dreamed of by Huntington in the attempt to quantify social factors. The passage cited by Huntington reads:

"The product-moment correlation between modernity and stability is .625; the correlation between the so-called frustration index and stability is .499. [Huntington rounded it out to .50.] An eta calculated between the modernity index and the stability index, to show curvilinearity of relationship is n = .667, which is not significantly different from the Pearson r of .625."^45

In their study the Feierabends had concluded, among other things, that Lebanon, Morocco, and South Africa should be considered among the satisfied (low frustration) societies. As absurd as that conclusion appears on its face, it was less surprising than the methodology they used to yield their "frustration index."

According to the Feierabends, the "index" was determined by assigning a coded score to six "satisfaction indices"—gross national product, caloric intake, telephones, physicians, newspapers, and radios.46

They then took that number and divided it by a second number created from "either the country's coded literacy or coded urbanization score, whichever was higher." The result was a ratio, which claimed to reflect the "frustration" in each of the 84 countries in their study.

The problem with this sort of thing cuts to the core of the cult of quantification with its desire to measure reality by assigning numbers to anything that moves (and many things that don't). Dividing a number that is claimed to measure newspaper reading or caloric intake by a "coded literacy score" yields another number. But does it mean anything? Is there any valid or meaningful mathematical or social relationship gleaned from dividing the number of physicians by "a coded urbanization score"? Any more than, say, dividing caloric intake by the number of light bulbs in a house multiplied by the earned run average of the local team's starting pitcher would yield a meaningful analysis of social satisfaction?*

This is quantification at its most outrageous: the social sciences not merely as sorcery, but as something close to voodoo. And it was this that was cited by one the nation's most pre-eminent political scientists.

"No doubt," Lang later noted, "one can make a correlation between any two sets of events using arbitrarily defined statistics. So what? Huntington (and Feierabend) merely pile up numbers leading to absurdities."^47

Lang also pointed out the obvious limitations of the approach. "By measuring GNP, caloric intake, telephones, physicians, newspapers and radios, neither Feierabend nor Huntington found out the dissatisfaction among 20 million Blacks in South Africa. . . ."^48

Huntington made an attempt to defend the glowing rating of South Africa as a "satisfied" society during his interview with The New Republic. "The term, 'satisfied,'" Huntington argued, "has to do with whether or not there are measurable signs that people are satisfied or not with their lot. That lot may be good, fair, or awful, what this particular term is describing is the fact that the people for some reason are not protesting it. When this study . . . was done in the early 1960s, there had been no major riots, strikes or disturbances [in South Africa]. . . ."^49

Huntington's comment was remarkable in that it ignored almost two decades of protests and disruptions in South Africa before 1960, culminating in the March 21, 1960, Sharpeville Massacre in which 50 men and women were killed and scores of others wounded. Lang would later compile nearly 50 pages of clippings from The New York Times reporting on strikes, riots, and other disturbances in South Africa before 1960.50

* As far as I know, no one has actually tried this. But I wouldn't be surprised.
The anti-Lang campaign was a model of the way the academic village deals with dissenters. It relied essentially on an appeal to impressive authorities—Nobel laureates and academic prizes. The result was ostracism. No scholarly publication would publish any of Lang’s responses over the next year. (At one low point, Lang was forced to buy a full-page ad—at his own expense—in The Chronicle of Higher Education to state his case.) At Yale, Lang also paid a steep price for his assault on the academic Brahmins. Yale administrators were openly embarrassed by his campaign and he found himself the object of ridicule on his campus. In late 1987, an undergraduate wrote a letter to the Yale Daily News, complaining about the disrespect with which both students and faculty treated the mathematician. “The smirks that I received from some of my fellow students at the mention of Mr. Lang’s name denote disrespect and distaste,” the student wrote.

The National Academy of Sciences itself amended its internal bylaws to prohibit any “remarks and criticism” about nominees from being communicated to “any person who was not a member of the Academy.” If the implied reaction to the Lang-Huntington dispute was not sufficiently clear, the NAS also made the gag-rule retroactive—applying it to past nominations as well as future ones—raising the distinct possibility that Lang himself might face expulsion unless he dropped the Huntington issue.

Meanwhile, Huntington retained his laurels. He served on a blue-ribbon panel of 13 defense experts, including Henry Kissinger and former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. In January 1988, Huntington and the others issued a lengthy report on the future of American defense policy that could influence the development of war and peace into the next century.

The Failed Prophets

The moral here is obvious: Although prosthink is remarkably useful in advancing academic careers and winning grants, and consulting contracts, it is almost invariably worthless outside the

academy itself. The spread of junk scholarship has not, unfortunately, been limited to political science. The result is what one sociologist calls the “stunned helplessness” of academia’s knowledge elite in the face of social problems.

In her book The Knowledge Elite and the Failure of Prophecy, Australian sociologist Eva Etzioni-Halevy bluntly labels social scientists “prophets who have failed.”

“Although no causality can be shown, it is nevertheless worth noting that the years in which the influence of the social scientists on policy has been growing have also been the years in which policy failures have been rife and in which a variety of formidable social problems have been multiplying... Yet intellectuals... continue to act as if nothing had happened.

More than a decade earlier, Stanislav Andreski had written in his book The Social Sciences as Sorcery: “Most of the applications of math to the social sciences outside economics are in the nature of ritual invocations which have created their own brand of magician... If we look at the practical results of the proliferation of social scientists we find more analogies to the role of witch doctors in a primitive tribe than to the part played by the natural scientists and technologists.”

But Andreski could have included economists in his malediction. Some of the most embarrassing—and public—failures have been in economics, where prosthink has turned the dismal science into a discipline focused on the construction of abstract models based on abstract assumptions rather than with economic realities.

The emphasis on abstract “model building,” is captured in the story recounted by Etzioni-Halevy. Three professors are stranded in a desert with an unopened can of beans among them. The physicist suggests that they use his eyeglasses to focus a beam of sunlight on the can to burn a hole in it. The geologist proposes using a sharp rock to punch an opening in the can. And the economist says: “First, let’s assume a can opener...”

And yet economists are adamant in insisting that they are practicing real science.
"The trouble with economics," wrote economist G. Barker, "is essentially that its practitioners and their theories have been elevated to a status which they cannot justify. To be an economist is, to many people, to be a combination of high priest, guru, and soothsayer; it is to possess a passkey to the secrets of the future." 61

Another economist, H. S. Katz, is even more direct, labeling the claim of modern economics to be a science "a sham and a fraud."

"It has all of the outer paraphernalia of science and none of its essence. It ostentatiously flaunts mathematical symbols (such as supply and demand functions) and formulae (MV = PT) without any real understanding of what these things are. When it fails to predict future events (an occurrence of continual embarrassment to modern economists), it does not act like the scientist, disregarding false theories in search of the truth; it acts like the Indian Medicine Man who has failed to make rain. It equivocates, rationalizes and tries to make minor adjustments." 62

Andreski's own field, sociology, probably has been hit the hardest by the spread of profthink. In 1974, there were nearly one million students enrolled in introductory sociology courses; that year the field awarded degrees to more than 33,000 graduates. By 1981, enrollment was down by half, and the number of bachelor's degrees in sociology had dropped to 17,272. 63 Part of that has to be attributed to the growing popularity of sociobabble among the professoriate.

"We prefer to speak in tongues to ourselves about the intricacies of competing theologies, and to celebrate the mysteries of our multiple-paradigmatic discipline, rather than soil our hands by using the discipline to discover much of value about the world," Purdue Professor Reece McGee complained in an article he co-authored with two colleagues. "Or, if we did so, we often speak of it in language so arcane as to be unintelligible, and scorn and occasionally even stone the few among us who try to speak the language of the marketplace, or do something of utility in it." 64

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**Sidebar:**

**CLIOMETRICS, OR WHATEVER HAPPENED TO HISTORY?**

The story of Fritz Stern illustrates the pressures on budding historians.

When he was 17, Stern went to his mentor Albert Einstein for guidance: What career should he choose, medicine or history? To Einstein the choice was simple. Medicine was a science, history was not. Stern, however, chose to pursue his nonscientific historical studies and went on to great eminence in the field. 1 But the jibe by Einstein has reverberated through the nervous system of the academic village, where the scholars have been in a frenzy to retool themselves as psychohistorians, quantitative historians, social historians—anything but the outmoded old nonscientific historians of Einstein's disdain.

Perhaps because it had long been held suspended between the world of the humanities and the social sciences, history has been particularly vulnerable to the onslaught of profthink. The most pronounced shift has been away from the study of the great men and events that had traditionally been the backbone of historical study. To become more scientific, historians have replaced them with numbers and more numbers—statistics that claim to measure any historical trend. With their usual pretentiousness, the professors have labeled the new discipline "cliometrics." (Clio is the muse of history.)

The extent to which history had assumed a new face was brought home to me during a lunch with an old friend. The woman was a recently tenured professor at a distinguished university. In college I had known her as among the brightest young scholars in her department, a woman of catholic tastes and considerable intellectual breadth. But in the years since, she had become a thoroughgoing scholastic of
campaign against the student paper and the racial and political overtones of the case cannot obscure the fundamental issues at stake.

"We suspect," The Wall Street Journal commented aptly, "the students' true crime was presuming to assess scholarship at their college."\(^7\)

In other words, they had dared to attack the academic culture. The treatment of the four students—contrasted with the school's indulgence of Cole's conduct—was an obvious travesty of justice. But it is an example of the academic culture in its purest, most distilled form. The virulence of that culture's reaction to its Dartmouth critics indicates how close they came to the heart of the culture itself. And it provides a clue to the shape that any sort of meaningful reform must take.

What, then, can be done to save our universities?
We must recognize that reform will not be easy, that the system fails because it is set up to fail, and that the professoriate—a profession run amok and without responsibility or accountability to students, society, or learning—will guard its prerogatives fiercely.

But the universities must be saved, and they will be saved, only when they are forced to break away from the academic culture itself.

The key elements of this secession will entail:

- Puncturing the Research Myth. At best, only one academic in ten produces original research of any value, so it is ludicrous to continue to pretend that every professor in every institution is capable of being a researcher. Similarly, the notion that research is essential for good teaching is a discredited fiction, but it continues to distort the priorities of the university. Forcing every faculty member to conform to the same model is not only absurd but mindlessly wasteful of the resources of higher education. The demand that everyone produce published research has merely bloated the university libraries and has contributed massively to the spread of spurious new cults.
methodologies, and bizarre scholastic mutations to justify all this cutting-edge stuff. The elimination of the blanket requirement would in effect cut off the life support systems to the centers of profthink. Dozens of the more outlandish sects would collapse since they are sustained not by any intellectual substance but merely by the demands of academic careerism.

As many as three-fourths of the journals would also be vaporized. Unread, unreadable, and unused except to bulk up academic resumes, the vast majority of the learned journals could disappear tomorrow without the slightest diminution in the world's collective knowledge. Each individual school can strike a small blow by simply dropping the subscriptions they have and spending the money saved on something more valuable, like teaching.

- **Abolishing tenure.** Tenure corrupts, enervates, and dulls higher education. It is, moreover, the academic culture's ultimate control mechanism to weed out the idiosyncratic, the creative, the nonconformist. The replacement of lifetime tenure with fixed-term renewable contracts would, at one stroke, restore accountability, while potentially freeing the vast untapped energies of the academy that have been locked in the petrified grip of a tenured professoriate.

- **Requiring teachers to teach.** No proposal generates more fear and loathing among the professoriate than the occasional suggestion that professors actually be required to spend a certain number of hours a week in the presence of students. But putting professors back into the classroom would be a major first step toward the regeneration of the academy. State legislatures should require all professors (in state universities) to teach at least three courses a semester—or nine hours a week (actually seven and a half, but let's not quibble). Such legislation would be both moderate and reasonable, except to the most myopic academics. The three course limit would immediately cut class size, reduce the universities' costs, eliminate the need for thousands of teaching assistants and would still allow professors ample time for research. But a uniform minimum teaching load would also send a clear and unambiguous message about the revived—and even paramount—importance of teaching in the new university.

Of course, it is one of the central dogmas of the academic culture that good teaching is impossible without a heavy research emphasis. The success of the outstanding liberal arts colleges, however, gives the lie to the teaching/research myth. Schools like Carleton or Alverno, where the focus is solidly on teaching, or St. John's College, where the curriculum is centered on the Great Books, where seminars are focused on ideas, and where undergraduates are trained in clarity of thought and expression, provide a dramatic counterpoint to the drivel that passes for learning at some of the nation's most prestigious universities.

For many professors at larger universities, the return to the classroom would be a form of radical shock therapy. Forcing them to actually communicate with someone other than a fellow specialist would also force them to make a stab at clarity. The refusal of the professoriate to deal with undergraduates is a kind of shorthand for their refusal to deal with the world as a whole or to address real problems. Some of those long lost in the outer reaches of esoterica may find the return traumatic; many will no doubt have a tough time adapting. Some might never make it. But the return of the teacher-professor could also mark the beginning of an academic renaissance, for both students and professors.

But once in the classroom, universities also need to ensure quality teaching. That means a quality control program with some teeth. A good first step would be the creation of teacher-review panels made up of students and professors from other departments, and even other schools, to visit classrooms and monitor performance. In research, such peer review is taken for granted. There is no reason why it cannot be extended to teaching as well.

- **Insisting on truth-in-advertising.** Schools that brag about the quality of their faculty should be required—by trustees and state legislators—to make those faculty members available to students by insisting that university administrators openly
disclose the workloads of their faculty and spell out on a course by course basis in the school's catalog, the degree of the professors' reliance on teaching assistants.

- **Restoring the curriculum and the canon.** Without apology, the undergraduate curriculum should be centered on the intellectual tradition of Western civilization. Quite simply, there are certain books and certain authors that every college graduate should read if he is to be considered truly educated. Whether it is in the form of general education or a core curriculum, its designers should not hesitate to insist on a prescribed curriculum for underclassmen that would ensure that all students are exposed to the basic classics of Western thought.

Change, when it comes, is likely to emanate from below, rather than above. And it is likely to come from small institutions in the hinterlands, voices crying in the wilderness, rather than from one of the bulwarks of the academic establishment. The battle will no doubt be fought one school at a time, perhaps even one department at a time. The shock troops will be:

- **Trustees, who must realize that they are not merely ornamental fixtures of the university.** Much of what is happening in higher education is possible only because of the wholesale abdication of responsibility by trustees, who, either through neglect or timidity or lack of purpose, allowed the very values they were sworn to uphold to be undermined. They acquiesced in a coup d'état by the professoriate almost without a struggle. Many are perhaps so deluded as to imagine they still actually control the university; others are so beaten down by the doubletalk of academic administrators or the recalcitrance and arrogance of the faculty that they have simply given in to defeatism, or what Ronnie Dugger called "surrender with a shrug." It is time for them to return to the trenches. Their first task should be the selection of a new sort of administrator whose agenda is more profound than merely placating the faculty or seeking a consensus on everything from the planting schedules of azaleas on campus to the shape of the curriculum. Trustees should seek out presidents willing to challenge the powers of the professors and the tyranny of the academic culture; and then back them.

- **Legislators, who should demand accountability for the tax dollars they send down the maw of their states' universities.** The lawmakers who have annually increased university budgets only to find that fewer classes are taught, the teaching loads of professors are cut, and the undergraduate program is allowed to go to seed, have been played for fools. The wise among them should recognize this before their constituents do. Despite the opposition it will provoke, they should not hesitate to insist on minimum teaching loads and to guarantee the free flow of scientific information generated by public facilities. Although many legislators have been reluctant to take on their universities, they are in a unique position to assault academic privilege from a vigorously populist perspective—and they can arm that populism with a heavy financial punch.

Every governor has the opportunity to do what Secretary Bennett has done—focus public attention and outrage on the way his state's public universities are being held hostage by the professors. Every legislature has a chance to restore accountability and ensure genuine access to learning. The politics of the situation alone should make such leadership attractive because it is increasingly obvious that the burdens of the failure of academia tend to fall not on the elites, but on the large middle class and on students at the lower end of the economic spectrum for whom a college education is the only hope for upward advancement. To a large extent, the middle class is stuck in the academic gulags created by the professors' culture. It constitutes a potentially irresistible political force for reform.

- **Congress, foundations, and research grantors, all of which have been sugar daddies of the academic culture.** Their lavishness encouraged and funded the professoriate's flight from teaching and succeeded in institutionalizing the academic vil-
lages. Even modest changes in the allocation of the billions of dollars in federal spending would send tremors throughout the academic culture. Why not, for instance, begin emphasizing specific endowments and awards for undergraduate teaching? Why can’t the grantors tie their gifts to specific reforms in undergraduate instruction? And why shouldn’t they withhold their largess if the professors refuse to make such concessions?

* Students, who are under no obligation to tolerate the arrogance or the abject neglect of the professoriate. Because they might see actual professors only in their last two years of their university education, students are at a disadvantage. By the time they are onto the scam, they are conveniently hustled off into the world. But most of them know lousy teaching when they see it, and nowhere is it written that they need suffer in silence in a classroom taught by an utterly incomprehensible teaching assistant. The student press in particular should rediscover the university campus. If the average student publication devoted half as much space to what is happening in its school’s own classrooms as to U.S. foreign policy, the pressure for reform would grow by tenfold. For starters, every campus ought to have its own version of Harvard’s Confidential Guide, a no-holds-barred, uncensored, student-run critique of the classroom performance of the faculty. And if alumni are looking for a place to help out, they could not do better than to fund it.

* Parents, who can assure themselves of the attention of university administrators by threatening to take their tuition money elsewhere.

A new age in academia will dawn the day a full professor is asked (by a parent, donor, trustee, etc.) to sit in his office and explain why his teaching assistants don’t speak English and why his schedule of sabbaticals and leaves is so generous when he is hardly in the classroom anyway.

But parents must remember that there are alternatives to the academic culture. Despite the cost of some of the excellent liberal arts colleges, they offer an education that is worth far more than

than what passes for an education at many major state universities. Parents choosing a school for their child must recognize that the widely published rankings of the “hottest” or the most prestigious schools have no bearing whatsoever on the quality of education their sons or daughters can expect. Those rankings are made up or heavily influenced by professors and they reflect their values and priorities alone.

The savvy parent will ignore them and will instead employ a battery of pointed questions: How many actual professors will my son or daughter have in his or her introductory courses? How big will those courses be? How many papers will he or she have to write? Will they be graded by professors or graduate students? How many courses do tenured professors teach? Are professors available for counseling? (Really.) What are the requirements of the curriculum? What books will he or she be expected to have read by the time of graduation? What is he or she expected to know when he or she graduates? How much of my tuition money goes to subsidize research?

Unfortunately, even the best-armed parent and the feistiest student is at a terrible disadvantage in any face-off with the academic establishment. Arrayed against them is the solid phalanx of the academic villages and all their apparatchiks: the Modern Language Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Association of University Professors, and so on virtually ad infinitum. All of them have, at bottom, the same goal: the defense of the values and mores of the academic culture against all comers.

What is desperately needed is a national association or union for parents and students that will serve as a counterweight to the institutional power of the professors. Ideally, it would be an academic version of groups like the Consumers Union. It would be non-partisan, non-ideological, non-sectarian, and would have as its specific mission the role of watchdog and advocate for quality in American higher education. Such a national organization would recognize that although reform will be local, the issues are essentially the same everywhere; whether the fight is being waged in Vermont or Berkeley, the enemy is the same academic culture.
By being a clearinghouse of information, the academic consumers union would be an invaluable asset to parents mounting an otherwise quixotic assault on the Ivory Tower. Such an association could publish periodic newsletters rating the performance of various schools from a consumer—i.e., parent and student—perspective and provide information and updates on the reform movement. By doing so, it would endeavor to focus the attention of the media on many of the concerns raised in this book.

But, at bottom, the union should be action-oriented. It should provide moral, financial, and public relations support—in short, organizational muscle—to any group of local students and parents working to restore academic standards in their schools.

And finally,

- The Professors, among whose number are those few hardy souls who have kept the spirit of genuine intellectual commitment alive, however muffled and clandestine it may be. Although the villains of this book have been the professors, they have also been, in a sense, the heroes. Teachers like Fred Gottheil at the University of Illinois and Phillip Anderson of the University of Central Arkansas, continue to wage lonely rear-guard actions against the dominant trends of the academic culture. There is no shortage of men and women committed not only to teaching but also to the traditions of taste, reason, and a common intellectual discourse that were once taken for granted, but which are now fugitives from the academy.

These renegade professors know that every genuine idea, every article written in lucid, clear prose, employing logic, reason, insight, and wit is a subversive act within the academic culture—a shot fired across the bow of the obscurantists, sorcerers, and witch doctors of profthink.

These true scholars—and their students—keep the tiny flame of learning alive on their campuses and within their disciplines. They will inevitably form the core of a reborn higher learning. In the meantime, they should keep the candle in the window lighted. Help is on the way.

**Notes**

**Chapter 1: The Indictment**


**Chapter 2: The Rise of the Professors**

1. Sykes, Jay G., “The Sorcerers and the 7½ Hour Week,” *Milwaukee Magazine*, October 1985 (Author's note: I am also indebted to my father for the Shakespeare anecdote that opens this chapter.)